

THE HALLOWED ONES

LAURA BICKLE

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Chapter One

After the end of the Outside world, the Plain folk survived.

At the time, I didn't know that the end of Outside had happened. None of us really did. We knew that something was wrong, of course. That knowledge trickled in slowly, like a leak in a roof. The signs accumulated, and then there was no denying the dark stain spreading over the pale ceiling of our world.

My first inkling was on a day in late September under a cloudless blue sky. The ravens had begun picking at the corn that was drying in the fields, black specks in the gold. I leaned on the wooden fence post, watching the birds scratch and listening to them caw to one another in their inscrutable hoarse language. The wire fence was pierced here by a wooden gate, to move farm equipment and cattle. This was a remote part of our little settlement of Plain people, but it made a good place to get away from chores and parents.

Beside me, Elijah had picked up a rock to scare the birds away.

"Don't throw that," I said, automatically. "It's mean."

Elijah looked at the stone, shrugged, put it down. He was a year older than me, but he would do anything I asked. Tall and lanky and sunburned from working outdoors, he cut a handsome figure: dark hair and hazel eyes that crinkled when he smiled. I wasn't sure what I thought about that yet. We had grown up together. But things were changing. We both could feel it.

He leaned against the fence beside me, staring out at the field. I knew what he was looking at, the same thing I was . . . at what lay beyond the field. At the black ribbon of road just beyond the corn that carried the English to and from their business Outside. They drove their shiny cars down the two-lane highway, intent on going home or to work or school. At this distance, we could barely make out the drivers. Sometimes men or women drove boxy sedans in pressed suits and blouses. Often they would be couples with children strapped into harnesses in the back seat. Other times the drivers would be people around our age, talking on their phones or chatting with friends in the passenger seat. We were too far away to see their expressions. But during the summer, with the windows down, we could sometimes hear snippets of their laughter.

Since the time we were children, Elijah and I had made up stories about the people in the cars. We imagined that they were driving to the movies or going to parties. Once, we spied a sleek black limousine and fancied that it contained men in tuxedos and women in evening dresses. Maybe a group going to prom. It was as far away from our everyday world as we could envision.

"Someday that's going to be us out there," Elijah said, gesturing with his chin toward the road.

"Soon. Three more weeks." I'd been daydreaming about Outside for so long. And it was almost time for *Rumspringa*. Literally, it meant "running around." It was the time for young Amish men and women to go beyond the gate and taste the Outside world. After years of begging and pleading, my parents had finally relented and let me go Outside this year, on two conditions: that I wait until the harvest was completed, and that Elijah go with me. We wouldn't be formally living together, of course. I intended to room with one of the girls I'd grown up with, Hannah Bachman. And one of Elijah's friends, Sam Vergler, would go too. Sam and Hannah had been courting since Hannah had turned sixteen. We'd have a girls' apartment and a boys' apartment. Proper. But for all practical intents, Elijah and I would be going on *Rumspringa* together.

Though he could have gone sooner Elijah had declared that he wouldn't participate in *Rumspringa* without me. He'd been saving money, apprenticing to a master carpenter and helping out with his

father's farm. He seemed content, though, with his day-to-day life, content with the waiting. And I knew that my parents hoped that Elijah and I would someday be married. Indeed, I couldn't picture myself being married to anyone else . . . though I admitted that it would be strange to see him with a beard like the ones worn by all married Amish men, rather than his handsome, clean-shaven face. It was the destiny I'd accepted. I was Amish. I didn't dislike my life and accepted the inevitabilities cheerfully. Still, I wanted the experience of Outside. To know that I'd made the right choice. To be absolutely certain.

There was a difference, I had decided, between knowing and believing. And I wanted both.

"What's the first thing we're going to do Outside, Katie?" Elijah asked, grinning. "Eat sushi?"

"Ugh. No." I wrinkled my nose. This was a game we played often: *When we are Outside* . . . "I am going to buy a pair of britches. Jeans."

He stood back and looked at me, considering. "You? In britches?"

"Ja," I said, lifting my chin defiantly. "And I want to go to the movies."

"The movies?" he echoed. He was still fixated on the jeans; I could tell by how he stared at my rump. "What kind of movie do you want to see?"

"I'm not sure." I smiled slyly. I'd found a newspaper while Outside with my father earlier that day. He occasionally delivered fresh produce to a convenience store that catered to English tourists. If I picked the produce, I could keep the money. I kept mine squirreled away in a wooden box that Elijah had made for me, with the word RUMSPRINGA carved on the top. After we delivered the produce, I found the page of movies in a trash can outside of the store and had tucked it away in my apron pocket. I pulled it out now and smoothed it over the top beam of the fence. "See. There's a lot to choose from."

Elijah leaned over my shoulder, and I could feel his breath disturbing the tie on my bonnet. "Wow." His finger traced over the listings. There was one that showed an explosion and soldiers in uniform. Another depicted a cartoon dragon with wings wrapped around a castle. I was partial to that one. It seemed magical, dangerous, and compelling. Though he was only printed in black-and-white, I imagined that the dragon was blue—blue as the sky at dusk.

"How about this?" Elijah pointed to an advertisement for a film that showed a female spy in a leather suit. Her breasts strained to be released from the zipper that contained them, and she held a gun longer than her impressive legs.

I peered at the woman in leather. "If you want. As long as I can see the dragon film."

Elijah laughed. "I would think you'd object to that. But she *is* wearing britches."

I shrugged. The woman seemed very unreal, as two-dimensional as the paper she appeared on. I wasn't threatened by fantasy. "No. I'd be eager to see if she really looks like that in the film, though."

"So am I." He lifted his eyebrows. I swatted him playfully.

Our gazes gradually settled back to the horizon, at the black ribbon of road. The whine of an engine echoed in the distance, like a mosquito.

"Ooh, a speeder," Elijah said. He stepped up on the lowest rail of the fence for a better look. Sometimes the speeders were followed by policemen with lights blazing and siren howling—a special thrill.

I shaded my eyes with my hand and peered at the faraway road. To my surprise, it was not a sports car that zinged along. This was a square sport-utility vehicle, piled high with luggage and boxes lashed to the roof. The driver, a man, was yelling. His wife was turned around in the passenger's seat, and I could not see her face. Nor could I see the expressions of the children. But I could hear high-pitched crying.

"They must be in a hurry to go camping," Elijah murmured.

"I'm glad I'm not going on that vacation," I said.

The vehicle sped out of sight, and no police car followed it.

I frowned, feeling sorry for the family. That sense of unease was foreign to me. My parents had always given my younger sister and me a happy home. I had never been afraid of my father, nor could I remember him ever having a cross word with my mother. Like Elijah and me, they had grown up together. That familiarity had not bred contempt, and they didn't concern themselves with what lay beyond the gate.

I did. And I wondered if Elijah and I would ever be like them.

"Katie."

I jumped, hearing my father's voice behind me. I whirled, stuffing the newspaper page into my apron pocket.

My father was crossing the meadow to the fence. Under his straw hat and above his gray beard, I could see the glimmer of a smile. Though his voice was stern, he wasn't angry with me. And I had never given him reason to be, never been disobedient . . . that he knew about. He didn't know about the time that I'd spent at the county library when I'd been ostensibly studying to be a teacher. He didn't know that I'd read about dinosaurs and planets and plenty of other things not accepted by the Amish. He may have suspected, but he didn't *know*. And he was a fair-enough man not to punish me just for the simple suspicion of wrongdoing.

"Ja, Father?"

He nodded at Elijah. He never chastised me for spending time with Elijah. "Mrs. Parsall is here to see the puppies."

I smiled, though my stomach churned. "She's at the kennel?"

"Ja. She stopped by the house first, and I told her to go on to meet you there. She's wondering how many puppies to expect for her customers."

"I'll see to her now."

"Good girl."

I gave Elijah an apologetic smile and hurried across the sloping meadow to the weather-silvered barn in the distance.

My father had given me the responsibility of managing the family dogs three years ago. I'd been very proud to have the job—he even allowed me to set the prices and keep a portion of the money. He'd told me that it would help make a businesswoman of me. I'd made a profit every year, tucked it away in my *Rumspringa* box. Maybe it should have gone into the sparsely filled hope chest my mother had given me. But *Rumspringa* was the apple of my eye, my immediate future.

Running the kennel was often a challenge for me—letting go of what I loved. Though we'd always been kind to our dogs, we'd heard stories of others who weren't so humane. Those tales made me very sad. I loved the dogs dearly, and it was hard for me to give them up. Even to Mrs. Parsall, who promised that she found them loving homes and showed me photographs that people had sent her of the puppies as they grew up. She sometimes told me what their new names were, though they were still classified in my head under the nicknames I'd given each and every one.

Mrs. Parsall was waiting for me outside the dilapidated barn, dressed in jeans and a floppy sun hat. She was a plump, middle-aged woman with blond hair and glasses that slid down her nose. I adored her. She extended her arms out for a hug, and her blue eyes crinkled. She often encouraged me to use her first name, Ginger, but that seemed too disrespectful.

"Katie, how are you, dear?"

I grinned against her shoulder. "Good, good. And you?"

Mrs. Parsall smiled. "Wonderful. And how is Sunny? Is she ready to have her babies?"

"Come see for yourself!" I pushed open the creaky sliding door and led her into the barn. "I expect she might go another week, maybe two. But she's huge."

Mrs. Parsall grinned. "That's great. I have a waitlist . . . The more, the merrier."

~~The barn was cool in shadow, and it took a moment for my eyesight to adjust from the brilliance of~~ the day. It was an old gray barn, not for any good use for cows and horses anymore, and more than distant from my house. It sat a stone's throw from the foundations of a house that had once existed decades ago. I'd been told that the house had been struck by lightning. The neighbors who once lived there moved east, and their property had fallen into disrepair. But it was my own little kingdom.

The Hexenmeister had painted a hex sign over the barn door years ago, when I'd started breeding dogs. The symbol he'd picked included sheaves of wheat, for fertility. That part was for the dogs. He also worked in spokes of purple tulips, signifying faith and chastity. That part was for me. I'd smiled when I saw it, but it felt like the Hexenmeister was giving me a lecture every time I saw the contradictory images.

Sunlight streamed into the barn through chinks in the old slats, and I smelled sweet hay. Though I called this place a kennel and there were wire cages, I rarely used them. The golden retrievers I raised were a good bunch and had free run of the farm, except when birthing or when the puppies were very small. It wouldn't do to have one injured or have a bitch give birth in an unknown place.

But Sunny was here, waiting for me. She ran up to me, her bulging body wobbling as she came to greet us. She licked my hands and arms, made an effort to jump on my shoulders, but she was just too heavy with puppies for that kind of horseplay. Mrs. Parsall crouched down at Sunny's level, and the dog vigorously washed her face with her tongue.

Mrs. Parsall ran her hands over Sunny's sides. "Oh my. You look about ready to pop, old girl."

Sunny wagged her tail. This was her third litter. She was a good mama, attentive and loving to her pups.

"Who's the sire?" Mrs. Parsall asked.

"The papa is Copper. He's likely to be around somewhere, maybe chasing chickens."

"Ah. They'll have beautiful pups." She rubbed Sunny's glossy stomach. "Just beautiful."

"I think so," I said modestly. "Copper has the broad chest and that dark gold. I'm hoping that the pups will inherit their mother's desire to stay home, though."

Mrs. Parsall kissed Sunny behind the ear. "A little wanderlust never hurt anyone."

I laughed. "You've not seen Copper being chased by the rooster. He isn't fond of the dog harassing his hens."

Mrs. Parsall looked up at me through her bifocals. "This will be your last litter before you do the *Rumspringa* thing?"

I nodded. As eager as I was to experience Outside, a pain welled in my throat at the idea of leaving the dogs. "It will be. But I've been training my little sister about the dogs. She'll care for them in the meantime."

"How long will you be gone?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. I haven't really thought about how long." The group of us had talked about going north, to the nearest large city, to rent apartments and find some work. We could be gone a week or a year.

Or . . . a small voice in my head prodded. Or you could be gone for always.

But as much as I wanted to experience Outside, the Plain community was all I'd ever known, and I didn't know if I had the desire or the fortitude to leave it permanently.

I suppose that was what *Rumspringa* was for. To test limits and make decisions. Most of the young people in our community came back after only a few weekends Outside, spent at amusement parks or camping. Some made no formal display of leaving. They just wandered to the malls and cities during the day, wearing jeans and makeup and experimenting with cigarettes and fast food in a halfhearted way before being baptized into the Amish faith and giving up those things for good. Very few Amish

“jumped the fence” and stayed Outside. But it still seemed possible. Vague, but possible.

Mrs. Parsall smiled. “You are always welcome at my house. You know that.” Her home was empty now that her son and daughter had gone away to college across the country. Though she was very proud of them, I could tell that she was lonely. But contemplating *Rumspringa* at Mrs. Parsall’s house seemed a bit like a sleepover at a favorite aunt’s . . . not the full experience of Outside that I craved.

I gave her a spontaneous hug and a grin. “Thank you.”

She patted my cheek. “You just have to be careful. There are a lot of dangers out there for a young woman.”

“Don’t you mean for a naive young woman?” I didn’t bristle; my tone was teasing.

“For anyone.” Mrs. Parsall’s pretty moon face darkened. “It’s not like it used to be.”

“My parents went Outside for their *Rumspringa*,” I said. “They told me to be wary of the intentions of strange men. And smoking and drinking and staying out late.” My parents had raised me to be a so-called nice girl; they wanted me to return as one.

“Not only that. Things have become more violent.” She frowned. “There was a mass murder, not too far from here, last week. A whole family slaughtered in their sleep.”

I shuddered, though the idea seemed unreal as the movie advertisements. “I will have Elijah.”

“Just be very, very careful,” the older woman said. “It’s a dangerous world.”

“You sound like my parents.”

“All parents love their children. You should have heard the lecture I gave my kids before they left the house.” She grinned. “Though they were well-armed with cell phones, checking accounts, laundry soap, and condoms, I still worried.”

“Mrs. Parsall!” I could feel the blush spreading beneath my pale cheeks. Though I had seen the dog breed many times and knew perfectly well what caused children, I was still uncomfortable with the idea of myself having babies. Or experiencing sex, for that matter. And love . . . love was a mysterious thing. I saw a lot of couples marrying out of a sense of acceptance, of duty. That was a kind of love, but not the passionate love that I saw people emphasize Outside.

“These are the facts of life, m’dear.” Mrs. Parsall chuckled. “Love and lust and laundry soap. Just ask Sunny.”

Sunny grinned her inscrutable canine grin, her pink tongue protruding beyond her teeth. She was a dog and already more wise than I was about such things.

I walked Mrs. Parsall outside the barn, through the golden field back to my house. No one but she and I and the dogs ever came back here, and there was no path worn in the grass. The sun had lowered on the horizon, shining through the leaves of sugar maple trees just beginning to yellow with the coming of fall. I could still feel the warmth of the day through the dark brown cotton of my dress. If I didn’t look up at the trees, I could almost convince myself that it was still summer. Almost.

But our community was bustling with the work of autumn and the activities of harvest: younger children gathered apples from a small orchard; men drove horses with carts containing bales of hay to the barns; a group of women was busy gathering grapevines to make wreaths to sell in the English shops for Christmas.

We were a good-size settlement of Plain folk, about seventy families, spread over half a county. We had heard rumors of other Plain communities that were shrinking, owing to the youth and the spell of *Rumspringa*. And there were tales of other communities that grew so fast, there was no farmland for young families. But not ours. Ours had remained the same size and shape as far back as anyone could remember. There always seemed to be enough land for everyone to have at least forty acres to farm, if they wanted it.

And everyone seemed happy, unaffected by the schisms that seemed so common in other Amish settlements. The Bishop said that was because we stuck to the old ways. Everyone knew what was

expected of us. There was no renegotiation of rules every time some new technology flew up a bonnet. The *Ordnung* was the *Ordnung*. Period. And we had been rewarded for following the *Ordnung*: there was always enough work and food and spouses and land for everyone. God provided for his people.

The pumpkin patch that my little sister tended was nearly as ripe as Sunny with distended gourds. There was one particularly large monster of a pumpkin that Sarah had a special fondness for. Twice daily she squatted beside it, whispering to it and petting it. Whatever she was doing seemed to be working—the pumpkin was easily over a hundred pounds, with another month to go before it would be severed from the vine.

Mrs. Parsall leaned against the bumper of her old blue station wagon. She pulled her keys from her pocket, gave me a one-armed hug. “You take care of yourself, kiddo.”

I grinned against her shoulder. But something dark against the blue sky caught my attention. I squinted at it, first thinking it to be a bird. But it wasn’t a bird at all.

I stepped back from Mrs. Parsall, pointing at the sky. “Look!”

A dark dot buzzed overhead, growing larger. It was a helicopter, flying so low that I could hear the *whump-whump-whump* of its blades. It was painted green with a white cross on the side, seeming to wobble in the blue.

Mrs. Parsall shaded her eyes with her hands, shouting to be heard above the roar. “It’s Life Flight!”

“It’s a what?”

“It’s a medical helicopter. From a hospital.”

“It shouldn’t be doing that, should it?”

“Hell, no. It—”

The helicopter veered right and left, as if it were a toy buffered by a nonexistent tornado. The breeze today was calm, stirred by the helicopter blades and the roar. I thought I saw people inside, fighting, their silhouettes stark through a flash of window, then lost in the sun. The helicopter made a shrieking sound, the *whump-whump-whump* plowing through the air as it bumped and bucked. It howled over us, so close that I could have reached out and touched it if I’d been standing on the roof of our house.

Mrs. Parsall grabbed me and flung me to the ground. I shoved my bonnet back from my brow in enough time to see the helicopter spiral out of control, spinning nose over tail into a field. It vanished above tall tassels of corn.

For a couple of heartbeats, I saw nothing, heard nothing.

Then I felt the impact through my hands and the front of my ribs, bit my tongue so hard I could taste blood. Black smoke rose over the horizon.

“Oh no,” Mrs. Parsall gasped.

I scrambled to my feet, began to run. I heard Mrs. Parsall behind me, the jingle of her purse strap. dimly registered her voice shouting into her cell phone. I ran toward the fire, across the grass. I swung myself up and over the barbed-wire fence, mindless of the scratching on my hands and in my skirt.

I plunged into the stalks of corn, taller than me, following the smell of smoke and the distant crackle of fire. I was conscious of the brittle yellow stalks tearing at me as I passed and realized that they were too flammable this far into the season. If the fire got loose in the corn, we’d have no way to stop it.

But my immediate concern was the people on the helicopter.

I ripped through the field and shoved aside blackened stalks of corn to view the site of the crash. The heat shimmered in the air, causing my eyes to tear up. I lifted my apron to cover my nose against the smell of oily smoke.

Fire seethed above me in a black and orange plume, curling around the husk of the dead helicopter. The bent and broken tail jutted out from the ground at an odd angle. The cockpit had broken open,

flames streaming through the broken glass.

And I swore I saw something moving inside.

Chapter Two

I squinted into the sizzle of the heat, sucking in my breath. A hand slapped against the cracked glass the window, slithered out the broken edges. Something alive.

Instinctively, I stepped toward it. I clambered over a smoking piece of metal and climbed up on the bent nose of the helicopter. I cried out when I braced my hands against the metal—it was hot as an iron. Tears streaming down my face from the smoke and the fumes, I reached out to the bloody hand and clasped it in mine.

It ceased twitching and writhing at my touch, and for an instant all was still. I didn't feel the searing heat of the metal through my apron and dress. I even ceased to hear the crackle of fire. I only sought to give some bit of comfort to the person in the wreckage. For that moment, we connected. The hand felt still in mine, as if soothed by my presence. I could see that it was a man's burly hand. I saw a green sleeve of a jacket pulled past his wrist, slick polyester from a manufactured uniform. I thought that he must be the pilot. He gripped my hand tightly. I could feel the fear pulsing in his palm. I did not know what I intended to do, only that I could sense the desperation clasped in my fingers.

Suddenly, his arm jerked, and sound came rushing back to me. I heard him scream, and he clutched my hand tighter, so hard that I cried out. He pulled against me, and I felt myself sliding against the hot metal, into the wreckage.

But it wasn't the pilot pulling me. He was still screaming as he was dragged back into the wreckage . . . by something else. I peered into the smoke-encrusted glass and saw a pair of red eyes, glowing with reflected light like a cat's in the smoky darkness.

My heart lurched into my mouth. Whimpering, I struggled against the urge to extricate myself from the viselike grip—I wasn't sure if I was trying to pull him free, or *me* free of *him*. But his fingers spasmed around mine, and I was lifted off my precarious balancing point on the helicopter nose.

"No!" I cried, yanking back with all my might. I might be small, but I was strong from years of hard work. I braced my shoe against a crease in the metal . . .

. . . and a splash of blood struck me in the face like a slap.

I gasped. The blood and sweat in my palm slipped against the pilot's, and his hand slid free. His arm lashed back into the cockpit, like a fish on the end of a line, and I landed hard on my backside on the scorched ground.

My spine ached from the impact, and I stared up at the glass, dazed. I heard another short scream, then nothing. My fingers wound in the burnt grass, and my heart hammered. I knew, deep in the core of my being, that there was something terrible in there . . .

"*Katie!*" I felt arms around my waist, hauling me to my feet. I blinked stupidly at Elijah, who gaped open-mouthed at my face.

I looked down. My chest and apron were spattered with blood, as if I'd slaughtered a pig. My stunned gaze slid back to the wreckage. I could hear popping noises inside the metal shell, like popcorn in a kettle. "The pilot is in there," I whispered. "We have to help the pilot . . ."

"*Get back!*"

A familiar voice thundered over us. It was a voice from Sunday church service. The voice of the Bishop. He stood yards from us, holding a shovel, his salt-and-pepper beard damp with perspiration. Other Elders had materialized from the corn, sparks bright against their black clothes.

"Get back!" he shouted again, brandishing the shovel. "Get away from it!"

The others backed away, receding into the corn. Plain folk were supposed to be obedient; they did

not question an order from the Bishop.

But I paused, as I always did. I never followed commands as a reflex. The Bishop had remarked on my lack of submission before, had said that was a failing in my character. I stared at the fire with my breath rattling in my throat, trying to understand why he would order us away when someone needed our help. God charged us to help those in need, and I had never seen anyone more in need of—

“Katie!” Elijah dragged me back into the tall stalks with the others. I struggled against him, transfixed by the fire and still hearing the echo of the pilot’s scream in my head. I felt the shadow of the corn closing over me, my shoes scraping in the dirt . . .

And a *boom* thundered through the wreckage, shaking the leaves around us. I threw my hand over my eyes as I fell back against Elijah, tangled in his limbs and mine. He covered my head as bits of shrapnel rained down on the field. I heard him hiss and wince, slapping at an ember threatening to ignite his shirt.

On hands and knees, I crawled to the edge of the blackened corn, watched as an orange fireball raced to the sky, turned black, and dissipated.

I swallowed hard. The Bishop must have known that the helicopter would explode again. I should have listened to him.

But that was not my nature. I always questioned.

I stared helplessly at the wreckage. There was nothing left but a split-open, flattened bit of metal that burned, like a tin can in a campfire. I could see nothing in it. No glass, no pilot. No bodies.

Just a fire that burned black at the seams.

Our community fell upon the wreckage like ants.

We had to.

Above any other thing aside from God, Plain folk feared fire. We had no fire departments, no running water from bottomless city lines. We had no telephones to summon help from Outside. If a fire caught and fanned itself to life, it could devour a field, houses, barns. We were defenseless against it.

Except for the earth the Lord gave us. We had plenty of dirt, and we used it.

Unbidden, men and women streamed to the field with shovels. Someone handed me one, and I worked in silent fellowship beside them. We heard the sound of the flames crackling behind us, the slice and cut of the shovels in the skin of the earth, the hiss of dirt raining down upon sparks. When we ran out of shovels, women went into the corn and crushed down the smoldering stalks with their shoes, stamping out the leaves.

We worked the fire line for hours, interrupted only by the Bishop’s orders to advance and retreat. A child brought me water, and that was the first time I paused to look back at the shell of the helicopter. It stunk of plastic and something like kerosene, but there was nothing in it anymore except for a fine gray ash that made me cough. The ash shimmered dreamily in the setting sun, like the haze of mosquitoes at a river at dusk. I smeared the foul-tasting ash across my face when I wiped my lips with the back of my hand.

And I realized that we were alone. There were no English among us. My brow creased at that. Surely they would have sent someone for their helicopter. Surely they would have responded to Mrs. Parsall’s call by now?

“Enough,” the Bishop called out. He leaned heavily on his shovel. Sweat stained the front of his shirt, dripped from his beard. “The fire is out.”

I stretched, my back aching from the hard work. We gathered around the Bishop, smelling of dirt

and sweat and that synthetic burning stink. This corner of the field was destroyed, but it seemed that most of the crop was salvageable.

“Let us pray.”

I lowered my head, clasped my hands. Our voices murmured in the gloaming, merging into one, lifting beyond the stalks of corn into the darkening sky. This was the Lord’s Prayer that the English knew, but it was our prayer for all purposes and all seasons, spoken in our own Deutsch tongue:

*Unser Vadder im Himmel,
Dei Naame loss heilich sei,
Dei Reich loss komme.
Dei Wille loss gedu sei,
Uff die Erd wie im Himmel.
Unser deeglich Brot gebb uns heit,
Un vergebb unser Schulde,
Wie mir die vergewwe wu uns schuldich sinn.
Un fiehr uns net in die Versuchung,
Awwer hald uns vum Ewile.
Fer dei is es Reich, die Graft,
Un die Hallichkeit in Ewichkeit.
Amen.*

As we finished, silence seemed to press down eerily upon our gathering. After the explosions, perhaps it was only my ears ringing. Or the soft shock of the death of the pilot.

I only knew that the weight of the sky had changed, that something was indelibly wrong. I could feel it on the walk back to my house. I couldn’t articulate it, not even to Elijah, but I think that he felt it too. He walked beside me, head bowed, shovel slung over his shoulder. Our shadows stretched long in the sunset.

I opened my mouth to speak several times, but no sound came out. This was too far out of my everyday experience to understand, but I wanted to get home. Home to my parents and the familiar rhythm of what I knew. A lump rose in my throat. *My mother will know what to do*, I told myself as I approached the house.

She was waiting for us on the back step. Though in her forties, my mother could easily have passed for my grandmother: she had the same gray eyes and straight, light brown hair streaked with wiry strands of silver. Years of sun and laughter had freckled her face and etched a spider web of lines around her eyes and mouth. Looking at her was sometimes like looking into my own future.

When she saw us, my mother rose to her feet and ran toward me. She thrust the hair that had come loose from my bonnet off my face, eyes wide at the dried blood on my cheek and clothing. “Are you all right, *liewe*?”

Plain folk were discouraged from using terms of endearment on the grounds that they were superficial. But the rules were loosened for mothers communicating with their children. My mother often called Sarah and me *liewe*—“dear.”

“*Ja*, Mother,” I said.

Her gaze wasn’t fixed on me, but on my stained apron.

“It isn’t mine, Mother,” I whispered.

She nodded, wiping some dampness that had fallen on my cheek with the heel of her palm. “Are there any survivors? Your father went to find Frau Gerlach—”

I shook my head, unable to speak. I noticed that there were no red ambulances or paramedics even

here. Frau Gerlach was our midwife, and the closest thing we had to a doctor, but saving the pilot in the helicopter probably would have been beyond the scope of her skills.

Mrs. Parsall paced down the driveway, staring at her cell phone, stabbing at the buttons.

“Did you reach the fire department?” Elijah asked.

“I called them. Ten times.” She sighed in frustration. “And the sheriff and the highway patrol.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Why didn’t . . . Why didn’t they come? These are their people.” My fingers curled into fists. How could the English leave their people here to die, how they could not come to help their own?

Mrs. Parsall frowned at the device. “I don’t know. I got a dispatcher the first three times I called. They said that they would send someone. After that, I just got a busy signal. I’ve been waiting by the road to flag them down, but . . . nothing.” Her shoulders slumped.

My mother reached out, patted my sleeve. “Katie, go wash up. Mrs. Parsall, it’s almost time for *Nachtesse*. Will you stay for a meal?”

The Plain reaction to any crisis is always to feed everyone in sight. My mother was no exception. She knew what Mrs. Parsall’s answer would be on an ordinary day. She had spent many an evening at our table in the last months.

I often felt a bit sorry for Mrs. Parsall, returning to an empty house with her children and her husband gone. He was in the military, stationed somewhere in Europe. The Amish didn’t believe in military service, so the idea was utterly foreign to me. Though I wasn’t sure I wanted my mother’s life as an adult woman, I wasn’t certain that I wanted Mrs. Parsall’s, either.

Mrs. Parsall hesitated. “I—”

“Please stay,” I said, reaching for her hand with my filthy one.

“*Ja*, Mrs. Parsall, you must stay,” my mother decided. “We’ll have a table full in minutes, as soon as everyone comes in from the field.” She gestured with her chin to the corn beyond. Some figures were already beginning to disperse to their own homes, but she knew that she had a duty to feed anyone who stopped by.

“Okay. Thanks. But let me help you set the table.”

My mother nodded in satisfaction, and the women disappeared into the house with the screen door swishing shut behind them. Elijah and I gathered around the backyard water pump. Elijah primed it, pushing against the squeaking lever until spring water rushed out into a bucket below.

I untied my bonnet and thrust my hands into the soft, summer-warm water. I splashed it up over my face, scrubbed my grimy hands and neck. I felt a sudden surge of nausea and braced my hands against my knees. I had never been squeamish about blood before, but the only blood I dealt with belonged to animals. I gripped the edge of the bucket with sweaty palms.

The pump stopped squeaking. “Katie? Are you all right?”

“*Ja*.” I nodded. “Just . . . more water, please.”

Elijah resumed pumping, and I thrust my head under the flow of water. It felt warm against the back of my neck, sluicing through my hair and dribbling underneath the collar of my dress. I let it wash over me until the water ran clear beneath my chin into the overflowing bucket and my dress was all wet.

“Thank you,” I said, breathlessly.

Elijah looked at me oddly. I was soaked, with my hair unbound. Plain girls did not make a display of themselves in front of men this way. A woman’s hair was considered to be her glory, and it was vain to display it uncovered outside of her home. I watched his Adam’s apple move up and down, and then he turned his back to me to wash himself.

I squeezed the water out of my hair, coiled it back. I pulled my apron off, shoved it in the rubbish heap. It was beyond the help of soap or bleach.

My mother had the laundry hung out to dry. I plucked a clean dress from the clothesline and headed inside to change. I knew that I would feel better now that I was clean, surrounded by the familiar scents and bustle of home.

The bottom floor of our house was a large room with a staircase in the middle. Our back door led directly into the kitchen area. Propane-powered appliances lined the wall: a refrigerator and stove, separated by counters and a sink, where my mother was chopping vegetables.

Mrs. Parsall set the long table in the center of the floor. She glanced up when I came in, her smile wan. My little sister trailed behind her, humming and folding the napkins, blissfully unaware of what had happened.

I would not be the one to tell her.

I headed up the stair, to the room I shared with Sarah. Our twin beds, swaddled in quilts, were set parallel to each other with a window between them. I changed quickly, hiding my dirty dress in the bottom of the laundry heap. I didn't want to see it, wanted to pretend that all was normal. I tied on a clean apron, stuffed my wet hair up loosely under a fresh bonnet. My hands shook as I tied the strings and I stabbed myself more than once with the pins that closed my dress.

I took a deep breath before descending the stairs. I hoped that my mother wouldn't coddle me, that she'd give me a chore to do to keep my mind from the awful black stain in the corner of the cornfield.

Downstairs, the table was filling up. My father had returned to the house. He was speaking with the Bishop, Elijah, and Elijah's father in low tones. Our next-door neighbors, Elijah's family, often joined us for meals. His mother had died when we were children, and my mother had often filled that role for Elijah and his brothers, Joseph and Seth. Their father always saw to it that our kitchen was well supplied in exchange for feeding his children.

"What are we going to do?" I heard Elijah say.

The Bishop sighed, looked at all of us. His beard was damp from the outside spigot, but his clothes still smelled like ash. He lifted his voice, and it was clear that he meant for all of us to hear. "The English will come when they are ready. They will come with their policemen. They will no doubt want to see the field, investigate the crash. Ask what we saw. But that is their task."

He spread open his deeply lined hands. "We have done all that we can do. We shall simply . . . go on as we usually do. *Ja*, there is nothing to be done for it but pray and go on."

The men nodded, and the nods spread to my mother and even Sarah, who bobbed her head to watch her bonnet strings bounce. Mrs. Parsall looked down at her shoes and sighed. Maybe she wanted to talk about the tragedy, but rumination on such things was not our way. We Plain folk did not obsess over things beyond our own control. From the Bishop's perspective, we had done the work we needed to: We came to help; we stopped the fire. And it was done. We would surrender the rest to God's will.

But I still had something to say. I bit my lip. "Herr Bishop . . . I saw something inside the helicopter. I went to help the pilot, but . . ." My gaze slid to Sarah, and my mother immediately distracted her with an early piece of pie.

I squirmed as the Bishop watched me. My voice lowered to a squeak. "It looked as if . . . it seemed that he was attacked, dragged back into the wreckage by . . . another person. A strange-looking person." I struggled to articulate what I saw, even now doubting those red eyes burning in my memory. The Bishop was a good man, but his authority made me nervous. I knew he noticed that I was often the last one to follow his orders. I always did follow them—but I needed to think on them first. This was not a trait that was encouraged, and it bothered my parents.

The Bishop patted my arm. "It's all right, Katie. When the police come, you can tell them what you saw. But you're safe now. There's nothing left."

I swallowed and nodded slowly.

"There is nothing to be done for this," he repeated. "It is done. And we go on, as we always have. I

is a tragedy, but it does not have anything to do with us.”

~~An awkward silence stretched, and I could feel the weight of the Bishop’s pale stare on me.~~

My mother, more noisily than necessary, brought a bowl of mashed potatoes to the table. “Herr Miller has brought us more potatoes.”

“Thank you, Herr Miller,” I said politely. We were up to our eyeballs in potatoes, and Mother was getting creative with them, turning them into potato salad, mashing them, and shredding them into hash browns. I glanced sidelong at the bushel of potatoes that had materialized by the door.

“You’re welcome, Katie.” Herr Miller perched in a chair beside my father. He was a tall, thin man with a beard white as a chicken’s breast. Somewhat sad, I suppose on account of his wife. I remember that his beard had gone white shortly after his wife died. He seemed much older than my father, but they were the same age.

When all the food had been served, we automatically looked to the foot of the table, at the Bishop. I lowered my gaze to my folded hands in my lap as we recited the Lord’s Prayer. Mrs. Parsall didn’t translate she didn’t know Deitsch. But I imagined her following along in English. We always spoke in English around Outsiders, to be polite, but we lapsed into Deitsch when we prayed. That old habit seemed soothing now. I let myself fall into the familiar rhythm of the words. The Bishop’s “Amen” and the sudden silence after caught me a bit by surprise.

But my father filled in that empty space with a veneer of normalcy. “How are the boys?” he asked Herr Miller, passing the mashed potatoes.

“Good, *ja*. Good,” Herr Miller replied. “Seth and Joseph are working now at the furniture store in town.”

Mrs. Parsall nodded. “Ah. They are turning table legs?” She seemed to be game to play along in the forced routine. I noticed that her hand shook on the serving spoon.

“Joseph is going to be a master carpenter, like his uncle.” Herr Miller nodded to himself. Joseph was two years older than Elijah and had been carving since he was old enough to pick up a knife. I still had a doll made with one of Joseph’s carved heads. “Seth is learning. I suspect that he will be a farmer, like his papa, though.”

Elijah shrugged. “Joseph always wanted to be a carpenter. When he’s not otherwise busy chasing Ruth Hersberger.”

My father’s eyes crinkled. “Joseph has been chasing Ruth for years.”

“I know.” Herr Miller sighed. Ruth had just turned sixteen. She was gorgeous: blond curly hair, blue eyes, and a singing voice that could make angels weep. “Hopefully, he will marry her and be done with all the pining.”

“Ruth is a nice girl,” the Bishop said. “Good family. They would be a good match.”

Herr Miller held his head in his hands, though I could see his smile behind his fingers at the Bishop’s approval. “I only hope he is successful in his courting. If she chooses another young man . . . he’ll hang around the house until he’s an old man. Like me.”

The Bishop’s expression was enigmatic as he tucked into the gravy. “These things will sort out on their own.” I wondered if he had already mentioned this to Ruth’s family.

“You’re not old. Yet.” Elijah grinned at his father.

Herr Miller gave him a sour look. “Wait until you have children. You’ll feel old immediately.”

I glanced at the empty places that Joseph and Seth usually occupied. “Are the boys coming?”

Herr Miller squinted at the long sun’s rays through the window. “They should be here by now, but I told your mother not to wait on them. They know what time *Nachtessen* is.”

“There will be plenty of leftovers,” my mother assured him.

And she was right. She had baked a chicken and cooked a roast, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, noodles, and spiced apple pie for dessert. By the time we finished, the sun had sunk below the horizon.

and we had lit the oil lamps. The Bishop took his leave, admitting that he still had not finished his chores on account of the afternoon's excitement, and I walked Mrs. Parsall out to her car.

The sky was streaked with a slightly paler violet and pink in the west. The evening star had burned through the veil of color, and somewhere in the distant countryside, I heard dogs barking at a sliver of moon that tangled in the treetops. Lanterns were glowing warmly in the faraway windows of other houses in our settlement. The light was comforting. All looked to be well.

Mrs. Parsall slid behind the wheel of her station wagon and rolled down the window to release the heat that had accumulated during the day. It hit me in the face like a warm breath. She cranked the engine to life.

"I'll come by next week. If you need me, for Sunny or anything else . . ." Her gaze flickered to the dark field, the site of the crash hidden by the corn.

I nodded. "I'll send someone to the gas station to call you."

Mrs. Parsall rolled her eyes at the inefficiency of it all. Someone would have to go by buggy or horse into town and then return with a message. The Englisher who ran Schmidt's General Store and gas station kept a bulletin board of messages for Plain folk to gather and leave. Mrs. Parsall opened her mouth to speak, but then fell silent.

The radio had buzzed to life when she turned on the engine. Mrs. Parsall listened to what she called "classic rock-and-roll." I would sneak a listen every once in a while. Though I didn't make out all the lyrics all the time, I enjoyed the music. Once, Father had caught me humming "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" while milking the cows. He may not have known what the tune was, but he knew it was secular music, which was disapproved of by the Amish.

But the radio wasn't playing music today. It was just a voice, broken up by static:

" . . . curfew has been imposed. Local law enforcement officers have instructions to arrest anyone found out on the streets after sunset . . ."

I leaned on the car window, and Mrs. Parsall turned up the volume.

" . . . again, the sheriff's office and the highway patrol is requiring people to stay in their homes until . . ."

The station faded. Mrs. Parsall played with the dial, couldn't find the station again. Her brow knit above her glasses. "I wonder if there was another accident? Maybe that's why no one came for the helicopter."

"What kind of accident?"

"I don't know." She chewed her lip. "I hope that it's not terrorism."

I knew about terrorism, in the broadest terms. I remembered when Elijah came running up the dirt road to tell us about 9/11. I'd been milking cows with my father. Well, I'd been too small to milk, so had just held the bucket while my father did it. Elijah breathlessly announced that planes had killed a bunch of people in New York City. It seemed very remote and far away. Though our lives went on as they always had, I noticed that the English were afraid. Very afraid. Somehow, though, I couldn't imagine anything like that happening here. Not to us. Our sect of Plain folk had not changed for hundreds of years. It would take more than a handful of men with hijacked planes to affect our way of life.

Back then my father had looked at Elijah and me and told us not to be afraid. That God would protect us, that nothing would change.

I believed him. He was my father. And he was right. He was always right.

I leaned into Mrs. Parsall's window, watching her face wrinkle in the unnatural green light of the car instruments. I felt some of that same fear emanating from her now.

"Stay here tonight with us," I pleaded. "You can sleep with Sarah and me."

Mrs. Parsall nodded. She slowly turned the key to silence the engine. "I'm sure that they'll

straighten this out by morning. But . . ." She reached into her purse and dug out her cell phone. I walked back to the house to give her some privacy. I never really understood the attachment that some of the English had to their devices. But then again, everyone I needed to speak to was within walking distance. Maybe I would feel differently if they were far away.

"Can Mrs. Parsall stay tonight?" I asked my father.

"Of course. What's wrong?" he asked, reading my expression.

"On the radio . . . it says that there's a curfew. Police will arrest anyone on the roads. But they don't say why."

Herr Miller rose partly out of his chair. "Seth and Joseph are at the furniture store."

"I can call them, see if they're all right." Mrs. Parsall had come inside. Her nervous fingers knit in her pink purse strap.

"Did you speak with your family?" I asked her.

She nodded. "I couldn't get ahold of my husband. But I spoke with my son. He's at school, hasn't heard anything strange. He says he's at the library." She rolled her eyes in skepticism. "But he says the Internet is down. He couldn't find any information on what's going on." She blew out her breath. "So maybe it's minor."

"I'm sure that everything is fine," my father said.

Mrs. Parsall held out her cell phone to Herr Miller. "I don't know if this qualifies as an emergency but . . . do you want to talk to whoever picks up at the furniture store?"

The restrictions on phone use by Amish were complicated. We weren't allowed to have phone lines in homes. But we could use the telephone for business purposes and to summon help in an emergency.

"I think . . . that I would," Herr Miller said. "But I don't know the telephone number."

"I do," Elijah announced. His father looked at him sharply.

"Bishop's gone." Elijah shrugged.

"*Elijah*," Herr Miller said. "The Bishop may be gone. But God is everywhere."

Mrs. Parsall gave the phone to Elijah, and he punched in the number, then handed it to his father.

Herr Miller cradled the receiver to his ear. I could hear the phone ringing. It rang for what seemed like a long time before someone picked up.

"Hello? Joseph?" A grin of relief spread across Herr Miller's face. "Are you all right?" He nodded to himself. "*Ja, ja . . . ja*. Stay there . . . I will see you then. Goodbye."

He handed the phone back to Mrs. Parsall. "They are safe at the store. A deputy came by and told them about the curfew."

"A deputy?" Elijah echoed. "What did the deputy say?"

"He said that there had been rioting last night the next town over. Many people were hurt and taken to the hospital."

We all looked at Mrs. Parsall. She was our conduit to Outside.

"I don't know. I haven't had the television on." She spread her hands helplessly. "I wonder if that's what happened to the helicopter. Some unhappy rioter . . ."

"There's no use in speculating," Herr Miller said. "The boys are staying at the furniture store tonight. Better that they stay there than spend the night in English jail. The curfew will be lifted in the morning. They'll come home then, and we'll hear all about the excitement."

My father turned up the wick on the lamp. "Everything will be all right," he said.

And I believed him.

Chapter Three

That night I lay in bed and stared out the window.

Night and I were old friends.

The soft darkness wrapped around me, and I heard the familiar sounds in the stillness: the creak of the house settling as the temperature cooled, my sister's breathing beside me, the crickets that had not yet succumbed to the frost. Night was a time for rest, for reflection. Sometimes it was the only time I truly had to myself. In fall and winter, the sun stayed hidden for longer and longer. Rather than burn the oil lamps out, we simply went to bed earlier. And that left time to think. Maybe too much time.

Tonight felt subtly different. It wasn't just being crowded together with Sarah in her bed. It wasn't just Mrs. Parsall snoring softly from my bed. Part of it was the shock from the afternoon wearing off.

I looked out the window, at the dark hills and the slightly lighter sky. The stars shone down as they always did. But I heard no engines of cars on the highway. And it seemed that there were fewer lights in the distance than there usually were.

I pulled the quilt up close to my neck and shuddered, remembering what I had seen in the helicopter. I did not sleep at all, feeling those glowing red eyes burning into my mind. Even working prayer on my lips did nothing to drive them from my thoughts.

I rose in the dim gray light before dawn, dressed, and padded down to the kitchen. I needed to see for myself that there was nothing there, that my stressed imagination had conjured something from nothing.

I grabbed my shoes, arranged in a neat line beside my family's shoes near the back door. I slipped outside . . .

. . . and into the realm of the ravens.

They were everywhere: perched on our gutters, in the trees, walking along the ground, swarming in the sky. I heard them calling to one another in their raspy language, a sound that swelled the farther I walked from the house toward the field. They swirled like vultures over the corn, cawing. They swept through the sky in large black swaths.

I stared up at them. This was wrong. Ravens were not migratory birds. They stayed throughout the winter. While they formed loose affiliations with others, they did not flock. Not like this. Not in the hundreds. Not in the thousands of black specks that I could see on the lightening horizon. As the light grew, so did the cacophony of their voices.

They were smart birds. I gathered this from years of watching them. They remembered faces, and gave Elijah a wide berth because they knew he'd throw stones at them. They avoided Herr Miller's fields because he'd shot one of them, and one dead was all that it took to keep them away. When the bird had been shot, there was a terrible cawing the next dawn, as if they mourned. My father called them "gossip birds."

I never hated them, not the way Elijah and the farmers seemed to. To my way of thinking, they were God's creatures, same as cows and dogs. I never shooed them away from the grain. And they never avoided me the way they did Elijah.

But something had gotten them riled, some contagious thought that had them on the wing, sweeping south. I frowned as I entered the cornfield, pushing aside the stalks bent from yesterday's activity. What did the ravens know that I didn't?

One raven hopped on a bowing stalk before me. I looked up at him.

"What's wrong?"

He stared at me intently, then cawed three times. I honestly felt as if he were trying to tell me something. ~~He flapped his wings and disappeared into the sky with his fellows, the stalk he'd perched on bobbing in the gloom.~~

I bit my lip and kept pressing forward. I smelled the location of the crash before I saw it, smelled that dew-damp artificial burn stink that clung close to the ground. I peered into the battered clearing, anticipating seeing only the scorch mark pressed into the earth.

But I was not alone.

Ravens hopped through the broken bits of debris, puffing up their wings. In the center of the flock stood a man dressed in black, the hems of his trousers stained gray by the ash. He was turned away from me, and I could tell that he had been here for some time: a white circle was circumscribed around the crash site in something that looked like whitewash paint.

My palms began to sweat. I rubbed them against my skirt.

The man muttered to himself, and it seemed that the ravens understood some of what he said. They cawed urgently when he paused to take a breath. He was bowed in prayer, and one bird lit on his shoulder.

I was torn between asking him what he was doing here and looking on in silence. I watched him for some moments, before the wind kicked up and the ash blew toward me. I pressed both hands over my nose and sneezed.

The man turned around. I recognized him as the bent old Hexenmeister. He looked at me with glazed, cataract-covered eyes. "Katie."

"Herr Stoltz," I said, my cheeks flaming red at having been caught out for spying. "I didn't mean ___"

"Go home, Katie."

"Herr Stoltz, I—"

"Go home, Katie. And do not speak of this. There is nothing here. Not anymore."

That phrase sank deep into my bones, seemed to chase away a bit of the memory of yesterday. Dawn began to spill over the horizon, in brilliant gold, and the ravens took wing in a furious flutter of black, like rotten leaves stirred up in the bottom of a bucket.

I shuddered.

But I obeyed.

Seth and Joseph didn't return by midmorning.

And the English didn't come for their helicopter.

I said nothing about the Hexenmeister's visit to the field, heeding his order. I felt that I had intruded on something sacred, fearsome, and intimate. I was ashamed and curious, both at once. No one noticed that the ravens had all gone.

Herr Miller had come to our house to use Mrs. Parsall's phone. His hands were pale and fidgeted nervously. "They said that they'd be back this morning," he murmured. And he kept saying it, over and over.

Mrs. Parsall redialed the number to the furniture store, then shook her head. "No answer." Her brow was creased with worry. "Do you want to come with me in the car to go looking for them?"

"Has the curfew been lifted?" my father asked.

"I assume so," Mrs. Parsall said. "I turned on the car radio this morning. All it was playing was music." I'd sat with her in the passenger's seat, listening. Everything sounded normal.

"Maybe they're just being poky," my mother suggested. It was almost five miles to town. By bugg that could take a bit over an hour. If the boys were on foot, it would take up to two hours.

I squinted at the window. It had been daylight for three hours. They should be here by now.

“I’d be grateful to go check on them,” Herr Miller said. “Elijah’s doing the morning chores.”

“~~Maybe we’ll find them walking by the side of the road,~~” Mrs. Parsall said hopefully.

I followed them out to the car. Mrs. Parsall started the station wagon up, and the Rolling Stones’ “Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” was playing.

I bit my lip. I didn’t believe in omens.

My father’s hand clamped down on my shoulder as I moved to sidle into the back seat. He shook his head. “Not you, Katie. There are chores to be done.”

I stepped back and stared after the station wagon as it bounced down the rutted drive to the road, the music sounding tinny in the distance.

I’d helped my father milk the cows and was feeding and watering the dogs by the time Elijah located me in the kennel.

“They didn’t find Seth and Joseph.” Elijah sat down heavily on an upturned bucket. His hands were slack in his lap, and his eyes were dark with worry.

“They checked the furniture store?” I patted Sunny’s belly, full of babies and meat scraps. I’d snuck her some canned hamburger, and she was still licking the gravy from her chops. I thought that gravy was good for the pups, but no one else shared my philosophy.

“*Ja.* The door was open, but no one was inside.” Elijah’s mouth thinned. “Father won’t say anything else. He came back white as a ghost, and he and Mrs. Parsall went straight to the Elders.”

I frowned. “Mrs. Parsall went with him?” They must have seen something very strange for Herr Miller to take an Englisher to the Elders.

“*Ja.*” Elijah blew out his breath. “Either my brothers are in trouble, or . . .”

“ . . . or they’re going to *get* in trouble with the Elders.” A certain amount of drift was expected, even tolerated among young Plain folk. But not the kind of disobedience that caused parents to worry so much they needed to go to the Elders.

“They didn’t check Schmidt’s?” I asked. The boys liked to visit the general store whenever they could slip away. It was the same place we swapped messages on the bulletin board with the Outside world. Schmidt’s had chewing gum, soda pop, cigarettes, beer, and, most enticingly for Joseph and Seth, comic books. The boys kept a secret stash in their shared bedroom.

Elijah shook his head. “No. I didn’t know that my father and Mrs. Parsall had left.”

And he would have been reluctant to tell his father the secret. I understood. Though we loved our parents, we often kept secrets from them. The older we got, it seemed like the secrets multiplied.

Elijah stood up, nearly knocking the bucket over and startling Sunny. “I’m going to go look for them.”

“I’ll go with you.” My morning chores were finished.

“You just want to visit Schmidt’s,” he teased as I followed him out of the barn.

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “I *would* like a Coca-Cola. And maybe a magazine.”

“What kind of magazine?”

“Maybe *Cosmopolitan.*” I said it only to shock him, to test boundaries.

Elijah raised a brow. He’d seen the scantily clad women on the glossy pages and the covers that announced new sex tips—probably incomprehensible to both of us—every month. I’d shown him one the other week. His mouth had fallen open. He dropped the magazine three times before getting it back on the rack. It was a scandalous thing, that magazine. The women in it seemed obsessed with expensive clothing and makeup and horoscopes and sex. There rarely seemed to be much mention of the other parts of a woman’s life: of work, of families, of being part of a community.

I smiled innocently. "I would like to smell the perfume samples."

"Ah. Naturally."

We walked the mile to the Millers' barn, where Elijah readied his favorite horse, Star. She was a Haflinger female, all golden with white socks and a white star on her forehead. Star was too old to breed now, but she'd been around long enough to be unfazed by traffic. I rubbed the gray flecks on her nose and murmured at her while Elijah hitched her up to his buggy.

Elijah had his own buggy, which he'd saved for with his carpentry and produce money since he was twelve. It was an open buggy, glossy black, that seated two people. It was what many called a "courting buggy"—there was no privacy whatsoever, which ensured that its occupants behaved themselves. It was terrible in rain. Elijah bought it used, and the wheels needed to be reset at least three times. But he worked on it himself, kept it as clean as any young man on the Outside would with his own vehicle.

"What if we find them?" I asked, as Elijah offered me a hand up into the seat beside him. There was no room for the boys in this buggy. I thought for a moment about suggesting that we take Herr Miller's surrey buggy, which could seat up to five, but stopped myself. That would be too much like stealing.

"Then we'll make them walk and follow along behind them," Elijah said with a grin.

"What if they're hurt?"

His grin faded. "Then we are the ones who walk."

Star pulled the buggy out onto a rutted dirt lane, and Elijah shook the reins gently. The horse cantered out into the morning, the buggy bumping behind her for a good two miles until we got to the paved roads.

Paved roads were smoother on the metal wheels, but almost as noisy, as the buggy squeaked along the blacktop two-lane highway. Sometimes the English had issues with the horse droppings left behind as we traveled. There were always some who would honk their horns or try to spook the horses.

I remember when I was a little girl and one of the boys from school was driving a buggy down the road. He was twelve at the time. His horse was frightened by a swerving vehicle, and the boy was thrown into a ditch and killed. My mother used it as a cautionary tale, and I still had some fear of the road each time I set out upon it. Cars often whizzed past so quickly that they shook the buggy.

But there was no traffic today. A breeze moved briskly, stirring the yellowing tassels of grass by the side of the road. There was a lot to be said for traveling by buggy. One could miss so much when riding in a car—I knew from the few times I'd ridden with Mrs. Parsall. Cars went too fast, and the details blurred away. I watched for more ravens but saw none. Only a groundhog chewing gravel by the side of the road and a solitary heron fishing at the edge of a pond. My brow furrowed. The ravens sensed something that escaped the notice of the other animals.

My gaze fastened on something by the side of the road. A piece of red glass. My eyes followed over a rise in the road, seeing that a car had gone off into a ditch and struck a fence post.

Elijah slowed. "We should see if anyone needs help."

I hopped off the seat before Star had come to a complete halt. Elijah continued forward a few yards to find a level place to pull the buggy off the road and activate the flashers.

I stepped down the grassy slope into the ditch. The windshield of the car was broken, but the headlights still gleamed. The engine was silent. I leaned into the car, peered inside.

I saw no people. Just a woman's handbag and some children's toys in the back seat. I swallowed when I saw a rusty stain that looked like blood smeared on the back of a baby's car seat. The passenger's side door was open.

"Looks like they got out," Elijah said behind me. "Whoever they were."

I reached into the back seat and picked up a pink plush rabbit with red plastic eyes. I held it to my

chest as I studied the car seat. One of the seat belts securing it had been torn. I pointed at it.

~~“Maybe . . . maybe the police came and cut them out,”~~ Elijah suggested.

My eyes fell on the handbag. Plain women carried what they needed in their aprons and dress pockets. But English women were inseparable from these bags, in which they seemed to keep everything from medicine to money to makeup.

The breeze plucked strands of my hair from my white prayer bonnet, and I picked the tendrils out of my mouth when I spoke. I voiced what we were both afraid of on the empty, eerie road. “There was mention of violence on the radio last night. Rioting.”

Elijah’s mouth flattened, and he looked at the northern horizon. “Seth and Joseph will be all right. They would not have gotten mixed up in that.”

“I know.” Seth and Joseph were pacifists, like the rest of the Plain folk. I knew that they wouldn’t be caught up in perpetrating a random spree of violence.

But it didn’t mean that they couldn’t fall victim to one.

We climbed back into the buggy and drove into town without another word passing between us. When we reached a sign that reduced the speed limit from fifty-five miles per hour to thirty-five, I knew that we had arrived in Torch. I said a prayer under my breath that we would find Seth and Joseph in short order and return home before our parents even realized that we were gone.

But my heart dropped as the buggy jingled down the road.

Torch had never been a large town. It contained less than five hundred full-time residents. During the weekends, it often appeared that there were more, since Torch catered to the tourist trade in this rural part of the state. The Olde Deutsche Restaurant served hearty Amish fare; as we passed, we noted that there were no cars in the parking lot, and the windows were dark.

We passed English houses, which seemed normal enough, with cars parked in the driveways. But more than one still had the porch lights shining in the day. And I noticed that the mailboxes perched by the side of the road were full of yesterday’s mail.

Schmidt’s General Store and gas station was positioned at a crossroads where the highway intersected the main street in Torch. Lights shone within, including a neon sign advertising beer. A car was parked in the fire lane in front, but there were none at the gas pumps.

We parked the buggy behind the store and hitched Star to a telephone pole that many Amish used for that purpose. The owner, Schmidt, sold anything his store carried to Amish youth with a wink and a nod. We often thought that he kept the alley behind the store clear specifically so that young men and women would have a place to smoke out of sight. I half expected to see Seth and Joseph loitering in the back, eating potato chips, but no one was there. Not even pigeons.

The back door to Schmidt’s was always open. We stepped around the ashtray on the back stoop and into the bright light of the store.

Music played overhead, something wordless and inoffensive. The English called it “elevator music,” but I was never quite certain where the term came from. I’d been on a handful of elevators, and none of them was ever musical.

The cases containing dairy products, pop, and beer were all lit and humming. Everything from the buzzing fluorescent lights to the drip of a toilet running in the bathroom seemed to intrude on my thoughts. The English probably considered noises like this to be part of the background, but I found them distracting. Mrs. Parsall even told me that she sometimes fell asleep to the flickering television which I couldn’t imagine.

We wandered down the aisles. I paused beside the racks of comic books. I’d read many of the Miller boys’ comic books over the years. Joseph had a preference for *Superman*.

But I had a different favorite. I squatted down at the bottom of the rack, my fingers flipping through the curling pages. I plucked up an issue of *Wonder Woman*. The cover showed a magnificent woman

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