

AN AMISH MOTHER'S  
SECRET PAST

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## Chapter One



*Evergreen Corners, Vermont*

*The day couldn't get any worse, ain't so?*

Rachel Yoder prayed the answer was “no” as she pushed the stroller with her two sick *kinder* along the sidewalk edging the village green. She was supposed to be helping at the day-care center today to offset the fees for her daughters' care, but instead was taking Loribeth and Eva to the *doktor* because both were running a low-grade fever.

The little girls had been fussy from the time they'd awakened an hour before dawn. Loribeth, who was almost three years old and had hair as black as Rachel's, had her thumb in her mouth, a habit she'd given up six months ago. Rachel hadn't said anything to the toddler, because she knew sucking her thumb was giving her some comfort while she was feeling lousy. Eva, a year younger and with eyes the same warm blue as her *mamm's*, was hunched into a pitiful ball on her side

of the stroller. The September morning wasn't chilly, but the two-year-old shivered as if it was the middle of January and clutched her stuffed bear close to her. She wrapped her finger in a string from her bright blue bonnet.

Looking at them, suffering and sick, broke Rachel's heart. The pace of her steps increased as she walked across the village green. She watched for holes in the grass so the stroller didn't bounce and make the girls feel worse.

"We're almost there," she said, though she doubted the girls were paying any attention to her. They were too lost in their misery.

A few cars moved along the steep street flanking the green. The trees cast long shadows toward the western mountains, and a few leaves crunched under her black sneakers. She tilted the stroller over the curb and hurried along the sidewalk toward the center of Evergreen Corners.

The *doktor's* office was new, having opened in mid-August. It was staffed two days a week and was affiliated with the hospital in Rutland, which was more than an hour and a half north of Evergreen Corners. The office was sandwiched between the village's diner and an antique shop on the far side of the bridge spanning Washboard Brook. The brook, which had become a torrent during the hurricane last October, was now so low that only the flattest stones were covered with water.

Traffic was busier across the bridge, so she waited for the walk light before she crossed the route that ran north and south. Hearing a moan from the stroller, Ra-

chel paused and bent to check on her girls. They were holding hands as if trying to comfort each other. Tears filled her eyes. Their family was a small one—her and the girls since her husband’s death. The tragedy had changed their lives, though she doubted the toddlers were aware of the depth of their loss yet. They simply knew their *daed* wasn’t at home.

After tucking the blanket around them, she straightened. Her eyes widened when she saw someone else crossing the road. He was tall—so tall she doubted her head would top his shoulder. He wore a straw hat atop his sun-streaked caramel hair that fluttered in the breeze. She knew his eyes were the dark brown of muddy soil, though she couldn’t discern that because the brim of his hat shadowed his face.

He walked toward her with his purposeful stride. It always suggested he was in the midst of something important, and everyone should get out of his way.

Isaac Kauffman was the unofficial leader of the Amish volunteers in the village. He worked under the auspices of Amish Helping Hands, the group that coordinated with plain communities to assist at disaster sites, and he had found many of the volunteers himself. She’d heard some *Englisch* volunteers call him “Mr. It’s Gotta,” a shortened version of “Mr. It’s Gotta Be Perfectly Square.” Apparently *it’s gotta be perfectly square* was a phrase he used often while laying out the forms for concrete cellars. Despite their teasing, it appeared the volunteers appreciated his dedication, and he inspired everyone to make their own work match his expert foundations.

He displayed an air of arrogance few Amish men did. Her *daed* had conveyed the same silent message of believing he was better than the people around him. For his older daughter, he'd made it clear she could never meet his expectations, no matter how hard she tried. She'd struggled year after year, desperate for his approval. She'd given up and run away several times. The last time she'd jumped the fence and moved into the *Englisch* world with a vengeance.

Now...

She didn't have time to complete the thought before Isaac's path intersected hers.

"*Gute mariye.*" His deep voice resonated like the sound of heavy machinery.

She replied to his good-morning, but other words dried in her mouth. Isaac Kauffman intimidated her, though she'd long ago vowed she wouldn't let anyone daunt her. She'd made the pledge while surrounded by loud, powerful men and women. Isaac was not loud. In the four months since his younger sister, Abby, had introduced them after Rachel's arrival in Evergreen Corners, Rachel had never once heard him raise his voice. He didn't need to. When Isaac Kauffman had something to say, everyone paused to listen. He was a man who didn't demand respect, but he received it.

In that important way, he was unlike *Daed*. She wished she could stop comparing her *daed*, Manasas Yoder, to Isaac Kauffman. She couldn't, because the aura Isaac projected raised her hackles before he said a single word. Like a *mamm* hawk, she bristled at his approach, determined to protect her young daugh-

ters from what she'd endured for too many years. She wasn't being fair to him, but she didn't care. Loribeth and Eva were too precious to her to risk them being hurt, as she'd been.

So she continued to be tongue-tied whenever she was around him. She'd found ways to avoid him or would just say a few words in passing, because she could manage a greeting, but nothing more.

Why couldn't he be more like his sister, Abby? Abby was outgoing, approachable and open, though she was as dedicated to helping as her brother was. It was difficult sometimes to remember the two were siblings. Isaac was almost ten years older than his sister. That made him about five years younger than Rachel.

"Are you heading to the community center?" Isaac asked when she didn't say anything else.

"No."

His eyebrows lowered at her terse answer, but he recovered and gave her a cool smile. "I thought you could take a message to my sister for me, but if you're not headed that way, I can—"

Loribeth threw up, spewing in Isaac's direction.

"Oh, no!" Rachel cried.

She reached to turn Loribeth away from him, but Eva began to vomit, too. The *kinder* sobbed, and their faces twisted with pain. Pulling tissues from her purse she dabbed at their gray faces. She jumped, unable to halt herself, when another round of sickness erupted from the girls. She leaned both of her *kinder* back so their lolling heads rested against the supporting wall of the stroller.

"Are they all right?" Isaac asked from behind her.

"They woke up sick this morning." Why did his simple question make her feel inadequate? "We're going to the *doktor's* office."

"Is there anything I can do?"

She gasped when she saw his boots were covered with what had been in her daughter's stomach. *God, why did You let her throw up on Isaac Kauffman?*

It'd been accidental, she reminded herself. Isaac was being gracious, though she wondered if he'd ever had to deal with such a thing before. She couldn't imagine him—even as a little boy—getting sick on someone else. He was too exacting, never seemed to make a mistake.

Or so she'd heard the other volunteers say when they came in for meals.

She shuddered as she recalled how strict her parents had been. Any mistake she'd made—even the simplest, most innocent one—had been deemed as dire as the most vile sin. Each was punished with lashings from a belt or by being denied meals, and each had led to her becoming more rebellious.

*Don't question the reasons behind someone else's kindness*, she warned herself. *Be grateful God sent help.*

*Ja*, that was how she must look at Isaac's unexpected assistance. As a gift from God at the moment she needed it most. Would Isaac have been solicitous if he'd known the truth about her *kinder's* parents? How would he have reacted if he'd known that four years ago, Rachel and her late husband had been serving with the United States Army in Afghanistan?

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Hearing Rachel's dismayed apology, Isaac looked at his splattered boots. "Don't worry. I can assure you they've been covered in worse."

He'd hoped Rachel would laugh at his jest, but she kept saying how sorry she was. Never before had he heard her string so many words together. Abby had assured him Rachel wasn't shy around everyone, and that she chattered like an eager squirrel while working in the community center where the volunteers took their meals. She'd always been quiet in his company.

He wanted to put his hands on her shoulders and urge her to calm herself. Her *bopplin* were screwing up their adorable, pudgy faces, and he didn't want three females crying in front of him. He knew too well how *kinder* could be, because he'd raised his younger brothers and sister after their *mamm* died and *Daed* had sought consolation in the bottom of a bottle he thought Isaac didn't know he kept hidden in the barn.

Isaac had met Rachel several times at the community center's kitchen. She had the blackest hair he'd ever seen, without a hint of silver, though she looked to be in her middle thirties, around his age. The color was as if the night sky had been stripped of its stars, but their glow had been left behind. When she glanced at him as she tried to clean her *kinder*, he realized her eyes were almost the same vivid blue as the sheen of September sunlight on the hair in front of her pleated, box-shaped *kapp*.

Her face, however, was almost as colorless as her *kinder*'s. Was she ill, too?



"Can I help?" he asked.

"No!" She sounded as appalled at the idea as she had when her little girl had thrown up on his boots. She squared her shoulders, then added, "*Danki*, Isaac, but that's not necessary. I know you're busy. Like I said, we're on our way to the *doktor*, and he'll give them something to settle their stomachs."

"I'll pray for quick healing for them."

"I'm sure it's some twenty-four-hour bug, but their fevers worry me. *Danki* for offering. Again, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay, Rachel." He bent toward the stroller to tuck in an end of the blanket covering the *kinder*.

He froze when he looked into eyes as deep a brown as his own. The words he'd been about to say, that he wished Rachel and her little ones well, disappeared when he saw the entreaty in the older girl's eyes. Why was the *kind* looking at him like that? She didn't know him.

Sorrow pinched him as he remembered hearing the *kinder's daed* was dead, leaving his pretty widow with two *bopplin*. Did the little girl long for a man to comfort her when she was ill? Did the *kind* remember her *daed*?

He sighed. Though there had been many years when he'd wished his *daed* had been different, he wouldn't have traded a single day with him. *Daed* had remarried and given up drinking. The jovial man Isaac recalled from his youth was back. It was a treasured gift, one these little girls would never experience because their *daed* wouldn't return.

"Is there something else, Isaac?"

At Rachel's question, he realized he'd been lost too

long in his thoughts. Standing straighter, he said, "Let me walk with you to the *doktor's* office."

"That's not necessary."

"If they start throwing up, you may need help."

When she hesitated, he couldn't help wondering if he'd done something to offend her.

*Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.* The verse from the first chapter of Isaiah rang through his mind. It was one he'd learned from his mentor, Clyde Felter, when he was a boy and had followed Clyde around while the wizened mason taught him how to work with stone and concrete. Clyde had liked to quote Scripture, and his favorite verses had to do with helping those who were in need.

If Clyde had been standing beside him, the old man would have insisted Isaac do what was right. What was right, Isaac knew, was overruling Rachel's polite refusal for his assistance.

Isaac took the stroller's handle and motioned for Rachel to lead the way to the *doktor's* office. She didn't move for a long moment, then nodded. *Gut!* She could be sensible. He chided himself for his impatience. She was anxious about her *kinder's* health. What a *gut mamm* she was!

The type of *mamm* he hoped to have for his *kinder* when he was able to purchase a farm and settle down with a wife and family. He pushed aside that thought. His family still needed his assistance at their farm in northeast Vermont. His youngest brother, Herman,