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To
longtime friends
Martha, Charity, and Johnnie,
dear sisters three.

Blessed are all those who
put their trust in Him.

Psalm 2:12 NKJV

My mouth shall speak wisdom,
and the meditation of my heart
shall give understanding.

Psalm 49:3 NKJV

Prologue

JUNE 1994

Mamma always said we should never waste a speck of time, “since that’s what life’s made up of.” So with that in mind, I finally sat down at her oak desk. *Dat* had made it back when they were first married, and after Mamma’s passing a year ago, he gave it to me. He’d also asked me to discard its contents for him as I saw fit, urging me not to spend too much time on the task.

Now there in my sunny upstairs bedroom, I ran my hand across the desk’s smooth surface. I’d purposely delayed this effort, thinking reading Mamma’s personal mail and all would only make me sadder. Yet I cherished having anything of hers, dear as she’d been to me.

Jah, life’s made up of segments of time,

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but no matter how long or short our lifespan, wasn't it what we did with our years that counted? Surely Dat must have felt the same way. After all, he'd gotten himself married to the widow Eva Graber two months earlier . . . a mere ten months after Mamma went to Glory.

I'd grown closer to my father after Mamma's passing, but when Eva entered his life, everything changed. *Nee*, I didn't deny that my step-*Mamm* should hold a special place in Dat's heart, but while continuing to grieve the loss of precious Mamma, I was still getting used to Eva's presence. And although I understood the necessity of such change in my father's life, I recognized I'd have to leave home at some point to have a fulfilling life of my own.

I just didn't know when . . . or how.

Opening the top left drawer of the desk, I stared at the cards, notes, and letters neatly stacked all the way to the back.

"If I could just have one more day with Mamma," I whispered, recalling how I'd tried to be strong right up till the end. But after my mother drew her last breath, the realization that she was gone had felt ever so weighty.

Turning my attention back to the correspondence bundled in every drawer, I refused to get bogged down with memories. I quickly

scanned the missives from friends and family and then dropped most of them in my wastepaper basket.

But I couldn't help noticing one person's name and address turned up more frequently than all the others—Ella Mae Zook from Hickory Hollow, Pennsylvania. I shouldn't have been surprised, I guess. Mamma had often talked about her aunt by marriage—nearly like a big sister to her. Ella Mae was her uncle Joseph's wife. He'd died a few months after Mamma.

Out of curiosity, I set aside all the letters from Ella Mae. Then, nearly finished with my task, I started reading the one she'd written six weeks before Mamma died.

My dear Lillian,

I'm thinking of you as I sit here with your recent letter in my lap. How I wish we could speak face-to-face.

My heart is so heavy. Your suffering is mine to bear, too, because in our hearts we carry closest those we love most dearly. I pray each and every day that the Lord himself will minister His healing and comfort as you try to rest.

And, my oh my, your youngest daughter, Clara, must surely be the hands and feet of Jesus to you. What a

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compassionate young woman she sounds like, and I thank God for her every time I think of you. She is in my near-constant prayers, as well.

I had to stop reading for a moment, the words stirring up a longing for Mamma. And gratitude, too, for this most wonderful relationship she'd enjoyed with her aunt.

Through the window, I could see Dat outside hitching up Mack, one of our two road horses, the slump in my father's posture gone since marrying Eva. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd known how close Mamma and Ella Mae had been—a godsend for my dear mother not just while she suffered with her illness but through all the years she'd lived here in Indiana.

As it turned out, I ended up reading all of Ella Mae's letters, riveted by her thoughtful words of friendship and caring. By the time I'd finished, I simply could not throw away this collection of treasures connecting two hearts across the miles. Just by reading them, I, too, was deeply touched and felt uplifted in spirit.

I bundled up the dozens of letters, placed them on my dresser at the other end of the room, and then returned to wipe out each of the drawers with the cloth I'd brought up

from the kitchen. Glad to have completed this task for Dat, I was also thankful I'd stumbled upon Great-*Aendi* Ella Mae's letters of tenderest care.

I must meet this woman someday!



The following day, after I'd gathered the quilted oven mitts and pot holders I'd made for Saturday market, I invited my *Schtiefmamma* to go along, just as I had each week since Dat married her and moved her into the house.

Eva shook her head. "Need to bake a batch of pies," she replied.

There was always an excuse not to go.

"All right," I said, not pressing her. Still, I wondered if my father had any idea how hard I'd tried to make even the smallest connection with Eva. *And she takes no interest in quilting*, I mused, missing the close bond I'd had with Mamma and our shared love of quilt-making. *What do Eva and I have in common besides Dat?*

"I'll be gone most of the day," I told her. Not that Eva needed to know, but I wanted to be considerate.

"Have yourself a nice time." She turned from the gas range, looking rather bright in her turquoise dress, cape, and matching apron. For a woman in her fifties, Eva seemed

drawn to wearing loud colors. “Supper’ll be ready at five-thirty,” she said in a reminding tone. “You’ll be hungry by then.”

“*Fah*, I’m always hungrier on market day. Must be all the goodies there,” I said, smoothing the gray dress and black apron I still wore in mourning. With that, I picked up my purse and headed out to the horse and carriage, where Dat had already placed my box of wares to sell this beautiful day.



After my father and Eva retired that evening, I sat out on the back porch, newly painted white with a dark gray ceiling. Mamma’s two wind chimes still hung in the far corner.

Feeling underfoot in my father’s house, I stared at the deepening sky, knowing I wasn’t really needed here. Eva was the one cooking and keeping house for Dat now, like I’d done after Mamma passed. I had to get on with my own life somehow, so I considered what opportunities a young, single, baptized woman had here in First Light, Indiana.

All my friends were seriously courting or engaged, but unfortunately, finding a new beau for myself wouldn’t be easy. Not in this small community with no suitable fellows my age available. And the recent calamity with Wollie Lehman, my first-ever serious beau,

had set me back. Sure, I'd enjoyed the time we spent together, but our friendship and eventual courting had only led to a sudden tearing apart I never saw coming. One day we were planning our future and sharing our dreams, and the next day, those dreams lay shattered around us.

Had she been alive, Mamma would have comforted me, helped see me through the pain and disappointment somehow.

I thought again of the letters from her aunt Ella Mae and all the appealing descriptions of Hickory Hollow in Lancaster County. Mamma had lived there till age thirteen, when her parents and most of their siblings and families moved out here.

At that moment, an idea began to flit around in my head. What if I could visit there, see where Mamma grew up—and get to know Ella Mae?

I fairly leaped out of my wicker chair, then quietly hurried into the house and up the stairs to my room at the far end of the hall. I lit the gas lamp and sat down at Mamma's gleaming desk to compose a letter, the small circle of light my companion as I wrote to the woman who'd devotedly carried my dying mother in her heart.

And who'd cared enough to pray for me.

CHAPTER

One

Ella Mae carried her round yellow teapot with its padded tea cozy to the trestle table in her sunny kitchen and placed it in the center. She'd just finished steeping her favorite peppermint tea this lovely Wednesday, the eighth day of June, expecting a visit from her eldest daughter. Last Sunday, Mattie had made a point of telling her she planned to drop by today. Mattie's husband, David, was the older brother of their newly ordained young bishop, John Beiler, but Ella Mae doubted this visit had anything to do with church.

No, she was quite sure of Mattie's reason for coming. *There's a bee in her bonnet.*

Eyeing her placemats, where two small yellow-and-white plates matched the teacups and saucers, Ella Mae was ready to hear Mattie

out and then politely set her straight. And the freshly baked maple-syrup-and-sour-cream muffins might just help her cause.

She'd risen early to redd up the house, mopping all the floors on the main level as well as sweeping the long and deep back porch adorned by hanging baskets of Boston ferns. But now she was glad for a rest. Since her husband's passing five months earlier, she hadn't felt nearly as peppy. Yet according to her widowed cousins and other womenfolk, this was to be expected.

Still, she yearned for her departed husband. Despite her advanced age of seventy-seven, she'd been his caretaker. Joseph's smile and gentle spirit, no matter his ailing, had brightened her days. Devoted to him since their marriage over five decades ago, she was still attempting to create new daily patterns. But it was as hard as trying to change the design of a finished quilt.

Near impossible.

Just this morning, she'd caught her breath at the sight of the oval rug she'd braided specifically for Joseph's side of the bed, so his bare feet wouldn't touch the cold floor if his slippers weren't handy. It was that way with other insignificant things, too, nearly every time she turned around—so many reminders of their shared past. Yet she kept this to

herself, not wanting her family and others to fret over her.

Truth be known, she still slid her hand across the bedsheet at night, missing Joseph, whose weakened heart had simply given out. Sometimes she even called to him while making breakfast, for the moment forgetting he wasn't over in the corner of the kitchen reading *Die Botschaft*. Or sitting out on the porch to watch the lively hummingbirds at the feeders or their young great-grandsons swinging double on the tire swing in the side yard, not far from the rustic rose arbor.

She sighed, tears welling up. *How long before I feel a smidgen normal, O Father?*



Sunshine spilled across the kitchen floor as Ella Mae poured tea into her daughter's teacup, then into her own. "Muffins are right out of the oven," she told Mattie, who sat across the table from her. Uncovering a small basket, Ella Mae sniffed the familiar aroma. She knew how moist and delicious these muffins were because she'd pinched off a piece before Mattie arrived—and then another before wrapping that muffin for later.

"Smells *wunnerbaar-gut*, but ya didn't have to bother making these." Mattie set a

muffin on her plate, then sipped from her cup before setting it down with a faint clink.

“Ain’t a bother a’tall. Be sure an’ take home what we don’t eat, dear.”

Mattie smiled. “David’ll be happy ’bout that.”

Ella Mae broke her muffin in half and spread butter on it, the warmth melting it quickly. Mattie did the same, glancing at her a couple of times without speaking, like she wasn’t sure how to start.

“Somethin’ on your mind, dear?” Ella Mae asked.

Mattie finished chewing, then swallowed before pushing her white *Kapp* strings over her shoulders and noticeably drawing a breath. “*Mamm*, I’ve been thinkin’—well, we *all* have, really.”

“*We?*”

Giving a little nod, Mattie replied, “The family.” She looked suddenly serious, hesitating a bit, like she was expecting an argument. “We think it’s time to move ya in with David and me . . . till we can build a *Dawdi Haus* for ya.”

Thought this was coming. It was expected of a widow her age to move in with family.

Ella Mae took her time drinking her tea, then said, “That’s considerate, but this is still my home, Mattie.” She glanced around the

large kitchen. “Everything I built with your Dat is here,” she added more softly. “Right here.”

Her daughter’s face collapsed. “I didn’t want to be the one to tell ya, but at some point, you’ll have to make some changes. It’s unavoidable.”

Ella Mae offered to pour more tea, but Mattie shook her head. So she poured more for herself. “I can take care of myself, as you can see,” she said.

“Well, Dat was worried ’bout ya keepin’ up this big house after he passed, remember? It was a big concern of his. He was thinkin’ of ya, Mamm.”

“Honestly, I do a little cleanin’ every day . . . ain’t a problem. And yous have already taken the care of the livestock and the farm off me, which I appreciate.” Ella Mae shook her head emphatically. “Surely you can understand. This here house is a comfort to me—all the memories.”

Mattie frowned. “But ya can’t stay here forever.”

Ella Mae wrapped her hand around her teacup, comforted by its warmth. “I wouldn’t mind that, really.”

Mattie sighed. “You don’t know it, but Jake promised Dat we’d get ya moved in with one of us.”

Ella Mae groaned at hearing this.

“Dat was adamant, Mamm. He worried ’bout your future without him.”

“He needn’t have.”

“*Ach*, you’re makin’ this harder than necessary,” Mattie said, concern on her pretty face. “You know how determined Jake can be. So maybe you could start packin’ in a couple of weeks. We’ll all help, ya know.”

Ella Mae’s heart sank. Her eldest son *could* be mighty stubborn. “*Ach*, that’s awful short notice, for pity’s sake!”

“Well, Dat would turn over in his grave if he knew you were livin’ here alone.”

Ella Mae drew a breath. Joseph had been in the process of dying, yet apparently, he’d been thinking more of her than of himself.

“We want to honor Dat’s wishes, Mamm. He wanted this for you more than you’re willing to admit.”

“Truth be told, I’m just not ready.” *Not ready to say good-bye.*

“The family cares ’bout your wishes, too. We really do, but . . .”

After an awkward pause, during which Mattie finished her muffin, leaving only a few crumbs on her plate, she perked up a little. “I have somethin’ else to tell ya—more pleasant.”

“I should hope so,” Ella Mae said.

“Rebecca has the wedding quilt that belonged to your parents, an’ she wonders if you might like to have it. It’s threadbare in places, though. How’d ya feel ’bout tryin’ to restore it? After all, ’tis an heirloom by now.”

“I’ll have a look-see. I’ve wondered where that quilt disappeared to.”

“It was in a batch of things from Aendi Essie. Rebecca said she could try an’ repair it, but she doesn’t think she can do it justice.”

Ella Mae should have assumed the quilt to be in her now-deceased twin’s possession, then in her niece Rebecca’s. Essie had passed well before Joseph. *Another hard loss.* “Maybe I can work on it little by little.”

Mattie lifted her teacup. “Rebecca says that quilt has a unique story behind it.”

“Indeed it does.” Ella Mae’s mother had talked fondly of the wedding quilt back when her twin daughters were only young teens, not even courting age yet.

Mattie glanced toward the kitchen window. “Whenever you’re ready for it, I can bring it over. Or once you’ve moved over to our place.”

“*Absehatt.* I’ll see what I can do with it . . . before or after my family forces me out of *mei Haus.*”

“Mamm, for goodness’ sake.” Mattie rolled her eyes and said no more as she finished her

tea. When she was ready to leave, she excused herself from the table to head for home.

So I have only a few weeks, Ella Mae thought miserably. If Jake's behind this, I'll have no further say.

That afternoon, following a noon meal of leftover meatloaf, half a baked potato, and green beans with ham bits, Ella Mae bowed her head and beseeched God to make it possible for her to remain in her beloved farmhouse awhile longer.

Please, dear Lord. Whatever it takes.



Still stewing about her circumstances two days later, Ella Mae stepped out on her front porch and found her mailbox brimming with letters. Most envelopes were thick with circle letters from her grown children in Big Valley's Belleville, Pennsylvania—her younger son Abe and married daughters Emmie and Faye—and from cousins in Sugarcreek, Ohio. A flatter letter was postmarked First Light, Indiana.

How about that. A letter from Lillian Bender's youngest daughter.

Glancing down the lane, she squinted into the sunlight at the picturesque rose arbor with its trailing pink roses. How she missed hearing from her lovely niece Lillian—and

such a shame for her to be struck down by cancer at only fifty-five. The silent kind that surprised everyone.

Back in the house, Ella Mae closed the screen door behind her and sat herself down in the front room rocker nearby, enjoying the breeze coming through. She placed all the other mail on the small table next to her and reached for her reading glasses, then opened the letter from Clara. She'd never met her, but she certainly knew a lot about the young woman from Lillian's thoughtful letters throughout the years.



Clara was delighted when her older sister, Bertha, dropped by with a quart of fresh strawberries from her berry patch. Bertie offered to wash and stem them for Eva, but their stepmother insisted on doing it herself.

“We could make quick work of it together,” Clara spoke up.

“Ah, you just enjoy your visit,” Eva said with a smile.

“If you're sure,” Bertie said, then motioned Clara toward the back door.

As they walked along the road near Dat's cornfield, Clara expressed her frustration. “When I offer to help, like I did with Mamm, Eva sorta shoos me away.”

“S’pose she’s just independent,” Bertie said, walking briskly.

“But not around Dat.”

Bertie laughed softly. “Well, she’s obviously in *love* with him. And still prob’ly getting adjusted to being married again—and havin’ a stepfamily.”

“And a stepdaughter she leaves at home alone when she and Dat go to visit her children and grandchildren.”

“No wonder ya feel left out. I’m sorry to hear this, Clara. But these things do take time.”

Clara tried to put herself in Eva’s shoes, but she couldn’t imagine stepping into a home where another woman had loved and cared for a man and his family the way Mamma had.

“Say, I’ve been mullin’ something for a while now,” Bertie said. “What would ya think about goin’ to the youth conference in Lancaster County come fall? Would that interest you?”

“Hadn’t thought ’bout it.”

“Well, if you’d like to go, Peter and I’d be happy to help with the cost.”

Clara smiled. “Are ya hopin’ I’ll meet a new fella there?”

“It’s crossed my mind.” Bertie glanced at Clara. “Our community is so small . . . as you know all too well.”

“That’s nice of ya to offer, but I might have some plans of my own. I’m waitin’ to hear back from Mamma’s aunt Ella Mae in Hickory Hollow.”

“You wrote her?”

“*Jah*, about a week and a half ago.” She would explain about the letters she’d found another time. “Dat said it was okay. The mail can be slow sometimes, but surely it won’t be much longer before I get a letter in return.”

Bertie’s blue eyes widened as she swept a stray wisp of dark hair, a deeper brown than Clara’s, behind her ear. “Do ya hope to visit there?”

“Lord willin’. Just a week.” Clara walked faster to keep up with Bertie, who was taller and had longer legs. *Tall like Mamma was*. Clara recalled her mother’s eagerness to take walks, as well. “Mamma loved growin’ up there, and I thought I might feel closer to her, maybe.”

“That was a long time ago, though.” The hem of Bertie’s dark green skirt swooshed as they walked. “I’m sure a lot’s changed since then.”

“Well, a lot’s changed *here* since Mamma died . . . and in a short time, too.”

Bertie slowed her pace. “I’m sure you’ve noticed it more than the rest of us . . . livin’ at home an’ all.”

“*Ach*, I didn’t say it for sympathy.” Clara shook her head.

“But it has to be harder for you, sister.” Bertie wiped her brow with the back of her hand. “Goodness, it’s so hot and sticky for only mid-June.”

The sultry air’s getting to her, Clara thought briefly before her mind returned to Ella Mae and the hope of visiting Hickory Hollow.