

A woman with long, flowing blonde hair is seen from behind, wearing a black dress. She is holding a white, heart-shaped object in her hands. The background is a lush green field with tall grass, and the scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, with trees visible in the distance.

Anything but Plain

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *MENDING FENCES*

Anything but Plain



SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2022 by Suzanne Woods Fisher

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fisher, Suzanne Woods, author.

Title: Anything but plain / Suzanne Woods Fisher.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021061038 | ISBN 9780800739515 (paperback) | ISBN

9780800742232 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493438822 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3606.I78 A85 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20211217

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021061038>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“Walking the beans” is an old-fashioned farming term for weeding by hand. Walking the beans isn’t just meant for the fields. It’s a way of saying that a man, or a woman, should pay close attention to all that the Lord has given them. Their family, their children. The work of their hands.

—Bishop David Stoltzfus

Meet the Cast

Lydie Stoltzfus—Single Amish female, age nineteen, daughter of the bishop. Has trouble holding down a job.

Nathan Yoder—Single Amish male, age nineteen. Boy next door to Lydie Stoltzfus. Nathan lives at Black Gold Farm, land that has been in his family for five generations. Has a keen interest in organic farming. Encouraged by the bishop, he steps into the role of market manager for the first Stoney Ridge Farmers' Market.

David Stoltzfus—Amish bishop to the little church in Stoney Ridge. Father of Lydie Stoltzfus, husband to Birdy, son to Tillie Yoder Stoltzfus.

Tillie Yoder Stoltzfus—Known by her grandchildren as Mammi die Nasiche. *Mammi the Meddler*. Mother to the bishop (a role she takes very seriously), grandmother to Lydie. She's come from Ohio to help her son better manage his work, church, and family. Never mind that he did not ask for help.

Birdy Stoltzfus—Wife to David, stepmother to Lydie, mother to two little boys.

Dok (Ruth) Stoltzfus—The only doctor in Stoney Ridge. Sister to David, daughter (estranged) to Tillie, wife to police officer Matt Lehman. While in her teens, Dok left her Amish upbringing to pursue higher education. Her mother has never forgiven her.

Walt Yoder—Father to Nathan and Mick, husband to Sarah. Has managed his wife's family farm, Black Gold Farm, since his father-in-law passed away. Has absolutely no interest in his son Nathan's keen interest in organic farming. Just the opposite.

Mick Yoder—Single Amish male, age twenty-one, older brother to Nathan. Leans toward his father's methods of agriculture and far, far away from his brother's methods. Has no interest in organic farming whatsoever.

Sarah Yoder—Walt's wife, Nathan and Mick's mother. Inherited Black Gold Farm from her parents.

Patsy Glick—Single Amish female, age eighteen. Known to others as Perfect Patsy. Also known as Sie hat's Garaiss. She is very much sought after.

Owen Miller—Not Amish. (Not anything.) Young adult male, works with his father, Frank Miller, as a chemical rep to aid farmers with man-made treatments of pesticides, insecticides, and fertilizers.

Fern Lapp—Older Amish widow. First introduced in *The Keeper*. She has a knack for setting straight the younger generation.

Hank Lapp—Needs no introduction. You'll hear him coming.

Edith Fisher Lapp—Hank's wife. Best to stay out of her way.

1



Something was always happening to Lydie.

She was never quite sure how such mundane moments, such tiny and insignificant choices, could snowball into circumstances that could go so terribly wrong.

Take today. Lydie had been late to work this afternoon, which was unfortunate because today was her first day on the job and Edith Fisher Lapp was not a terribly understanding employer. Edith had hired Lydie to do some sewing and mending for her because, she explained, her eyes weren't what they used to be. As Lydie smoothed out Edith's new dress that needed a shortened hem, her husband, Hank, burst in the room on a desperate hunt for scissors. Lydie set aside Edith's dress to give Hank the scissors. While she waited for him to return, she picked up another dress that needed its hem let down. She put that one down to find Hank and get the scissors. Long story short, when she finally returned to her task, she mixed up the two dresses. When Edith tried on one dress, the hemline hung just above her knees.

Hank burst out with laughter at the sight. Laughing so hard

he lost his hat, slapping his hands on his knees, punctuated by big, loud guffaws. “My EDDY has a MINI-skirt!”

Lydie smiled. Hank Lapp’s normal talking voice sounded like he was shouting into the bottom of a well. She looked at Edith to find her frowning. Edith was always frowning. Lydie’s smile faded.

Edith pointed to the other dress. “And I suppose that hem will drag the floor.”

“Well, um . . . you see . . .” Lydie’s mouth suddenly went dry. It wasn’t easy to keep her thoughts together when Edith Fisher Lapp was giving her a beady-eyed look through large, smudged glasses. She wondered if this was how a field mouse felt when spotted by a raptor. Her mind was wandering again. She bit her lip, trying to remember what Edith had just said.

“Do you think this is funny?”

Looking at Edith’s face, Lydie rather thought not. Even Hank tried to settle down, though his shoulders were still shaking with laughter.

“Never mind.” Angry red stains began to trickle up Edith’s round cheeks. “I only hired you as a favor to Birdy. Everyone says you’re an accident waiting to happen. I should have listened.”

Lydie cringed. Such a small thing! But no doubt the whole town would know about the incident before long. She shuddered to think of how the story would fly and grow with each of Edith’s retellings.

On the walk home, she pondered how to tell her dad. This was her fastest dismissal yet. She couldn’t bear seeing the look of disappointment on his face. Such soul-wrenching sadness.

“Lydie.”

Startled, Lydie had been so preoccupied that she hadn’t realized she was passing by Black Gold Farm. Passing by Nathan Yoder.

“What’s wrong?” He closed the door on the phone shanty to

approach her, peering down at her with his warm, concerned blue eyes. As blue as a bluebird. As blue as the ocean.

She had to look away from those beautiful blue eyes. “Oh, I just had a tiny sewing mishap with Edith Lapp.”

“Can it get straightened out?”

An interesting choice of words! She hadn’t dared tell Edith, but the way-too-short hem in the back of the dress was also crooked. Lydie had to swallow a smile. “I don’t think so.” Other than having to tell her dad and Birdy about the mishap, Lydie wasn’t terribly disappointed. “I like to sew, but not *that* much.”

A laugh burst out of Nathan. “You just say whatever pops into your head, don’t you?”

Oh, yes, she did. Regrettably, yes.

Nathan didn’t speak unless he had something important to say—something Lydie had a hard time understanding, because it was the opposite of the way she was. Often she didn’t know what she was saying until it was said.

The fondness in his eyes as he looked at her reminded her of the way things used to be, before everything had changed. He took a deep breath as he pushed his hat up his forehead. “I’ve sure missed you, Lydie.”

And just like that, the comfortable feeling between them slipped away. Under his steady gaze, she could feel the color building in her cheeks, so she pulled her eyes away from his again. *Just friends, just friends, just friends.*

“I was hoping that maybe I could take you home from Sunday’s Singing.”

Her eyes came back to his, and something queer started happening to her stomach. She backed away a step or two. Away from those blue, blue eyes. “I’m sorry, Nathan.” This was one of the reasons she had to leave. “I should go. I’m . . . late. I’m always late. I should have been gone by now.” Long gone. A few months ago, she had realized that she needed to leave Stoney

Ridge, leave her family, her church, but she wasn't quite sure where she would go or what she would do. Nor did she have any money saved up. So here she was, early April, still in Stoney Ridge. Soon, though, she would leave.

Nathan looked away. "Mick, I suppose, will be taking you home." There was something a little tight about the way he said it.

She opened her mouth to tell him a lie, to spare him the truth, but she was the daughter of a bishop, after all. She couldn't tell a lie. "It's best if we just stay friends, Nathan." Her words came out shaky.

They stood there a moment, a weird heaviness between them. He rested his hands on his hips.

A stillness came over him, though a trace of color rose under his fair skin. "But it's different with Mick?" He clamped his lips together after he'd asked the question, like he wasn't sure he should've said what he was thinking.

Mick was Nathan's brother, older by two years. They were neighbors and schoolmates, she and Nathan and Mick, and there'd hardly been a day without one or the other finding a reason to run through the hedge. It seemed strange, now, that they could've been so close, because the brothers were so very different. Mick, quick to laugh and just as quick to anger, reckless to a fault. Nathan, careful and cautious, and maybe just a little too restrained.

He waited for her to give him an answer. The silence between them took on a prickly tension, the very air seemed to crackle and snap around them.

"Ja. It's different with Mick." That was the truth, though she knew that Nathan would hear it in a different way than how she meant it.

The look he sent her was one of pure frustration, but then he swept his hand over his face, and when he was done, he looked like his normal self again. His gaze wandered past Lydie to his

family's farm, beyond the small creek lined with weeping willows, beyond the sheep grazing with their lambs in the low-lying pasture. It was as if Black Gold Farm was beckoning to him, reminding him of where he belonged. He tipped his hat and headed toward his driveway. Back to his father who couldn't forgive Lydie for a mistake she'd made.

Watching Nathan go, her heart hurt. There was a time when they would stand at the hole in the hedge that bordered their families' properties and talk until the dinner bell rang. They used to be *friends*. She missed him terribly. She let out a puff of air. This was why she had to leave soon. She didn't want him to love her only to have her leave. She wasn't worth all that.

The sound of an approaching horse at full gallop made her spin around and bolt out of the way. Dashing past was a horse and driverless buggy. *Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no!* She knew that horse! It was Old Jim. Her dad had let her take him to the Lapps' because she'd been running so late this afternoon. And in the upset with Edith, she'd left the Lapp house, completely forgetting Old Jim.



All winter, Nathan had fought a building desperation. The longing he felt for Lydie was becoming all-consuming. He couldn't make sense of the distance she'd put between them, and any time he tried to get her to talk about it, she clammed up. He had a hard time believing that she had chosen Mick over him.

Nathan loved his brother. But he also knew him. And Lydie knew Mick just as well. He was always running after what he couldn't have. He chased a new girl each week, tiring of them quickly when they returned his interest. It was impossible to believe that Lydie would be drawn to Mick when she had always

disparaged his dallying. And yet, that's what she'd been telling him.

So maybe he was the fool. He was the one who couldn't bear to accept the truth.

But was it the truth? Wouldn't he feel it, deep in his bones, if Lydie were truly in love with Mick? Nathan knew in his soul that he and Lydie were supposed to be together, but he didn't know how to make her know it too. He clenched and unclenched his hands, then took off, heading up to the orchard, his favorite place on the farm to go to quiet his soul.

In the center of the orchard, he turned in a circle to study the trees. Apricots always bloomed first, blossoms appearing in April, with cherries right behind them. They were cold-hardy trees, prolific bloomers, the first to waken the honeybees with much-needed nourishment.

The delicate pink blossoms were here, right on schedule, but there was a noticeable lack of buzzing. The bees had gone missing. Hardly any birds in the trees. The entire orchard just didn't radiate a vitality, not the way it should or could or once did. Then again, as his dad would say with a sneer, they weren't living in the garden of Eden.

No, they weren't. But Black Gold Farm had once been a thriving, robust farm. Its very name came from its rich, dark soil; prime land that had been passed down through five generations of his mother's family. Yet now it seemed to be dying and he had to do something to save it.

He heard the dinner bell clang and left the orchard to walk to the farmhouse. Up on the porch, he sat on the top step to pull off his boots before heading into the kitchen. His mother was a stickler for "leaving the barn in the barn." Inside the kitchen, he heard Mom struggle with another coughing fit. "Just allergies," she would say whenever Nathan, or Dad, or Mick tried to get her to see Dok Stoltzfus.

When he saw his father's buggy roll in, he paused from un-

lacing his boots and walked over to meet his dad. “The bees, Dad.”

Climbing down from the buggy, Walt Yoder handed Nathan the reins to tie to the hitching post. “What about them?”

“There’s hardly any bees in the orchard. This morning, I checked the hives and the queens are gone again.” Last month, Nathan had realized the beehive boxes were missing their queens. He resupplied them with new mail-order queen bees, but they’d flown off.

His father grunted, which could have meant anything, and walked to the house.

Fewer bees, fewer birds. It grieved Nathan that his father didn’t seem to understand the significance of their absence. His father couldn’t change, couldn’t pivot, even when the need was right in front of him.

If it were up to Nathan, he would’ve had a cover crop planted by now throughout the orchard, with hopes to attract pollinators. If it were up to him, he would’ve rotated crops to disrupt the life cycle of pests—something his dad should’ve been doing for years now. And if it were up to him, he would’ve canceled the chemical treatment contract Black Gold Farm had with Frank Miller and his son Owen.

This farm had once been considered some of the best real estate in all of Stoney Ridge. Eighty acres that were abundant with natural resources, slopes and ridges in just the right places, a creek winding through the farm that ran with clear water all year long. It was hard to explain the feelings Nathan had about the land and the farm. They were part of him and he was part of them.

As a small boy, Nathan remembered walking through the fields with his grandfather, his mother’s father. Grossvati had made him stop to breathe in the smell of the farm. “Know that scent,” he had told Nathan. “It smells of new life.” Now

a young man, Nathan had learned enough to know there truly was an aroma that healthy plants gave off.

In January, Nathan had attended an organic farming conference in Lancaster and heard a speaker describe a breakthrough belief that plants have an immune system similar to people. The plants produced compounds to defend themselves from insects and disease attacks. But each time the plants were sprayed with a fungicide or pesticide, it actually weakened the plants, affecting their immune system, in much the same way as a human being's immune system could be weakened, making the plant susceptible to more diseases. When he came home from the conference and tried to explain to his father all he had learned, Walt Yoder shut him down. "Dummes Zeug," he called it. *Stupid stuff*.

Eight years ago, Grossvati passed suddenly, and Black Gold Farm fell entirely under his son-in-law's management. Immediately, Nathan's father made sweeping changes, reducing livestock and converting pastures into fields. Simplifying the process, he called it. He turned the entire eighty acres into primarily a one-crop farm of feed corn, with plans to sell excess grain to other farmers.

Walt Yoder had been influenced by Frank Miller, a chemical sales rep who was expanding his territory into Stoney Ridge and had taken a special interest in Black Gold Farm. Frank had talked Walt into trying no-till farming for just one year and watching the results.

That first year brought in a higher yield than ever before on Black Gold Farm. So did the second year, third, and fourth. But the fifth year was flat. The insects that had survived the assault of chemicals now had a resistance to pesticides. For the last three years, the crops on Black Gold Farm were riddled with fungi and pests that chemical treatments did little to reduce.

Over the last year or two, Nathan had searched fervently for solutions. After studying the principles of organic farming, he

was sure he'd found it. It would mean not only returning the farm back to his grandfather's traditional methods but taking it a step further by completely eliminating the use of chemicals. The need for them. He wanted to replace lost nutrients to the soil, to restore health to the land. But Walt Yoder refused to make any changes.

Tonight, as Nathan entered the house, he slipped into his seat at the table across from Mick, and paused, waiting for the moment when his dad's gray head bent in silent prayer. He followed suit, along with his mother and brother, and offered thanks to the Lord for the blessing of this meal.

Nathan waited until his father had eaten most of his meal before he repeated his worry over the missing bees again. "We've got to do something. Soon."

"Call the chemical rep," Dad said. "Get him back here with something."

That was Walt Yoder's answer to everything. Nathan's name for Frank Miller, under his breath, was Mr. Chemicals. His dad believed everything Frank Miller told him, hook, line, and sinker. So did Mick. Nathan wasn't buying the chem rep's song and dance, not any longer. "Dad, I keep telling you. I think the chemicals *are* the problem."

"And here goes the professor again," Mick said, his brown eyes full of mockery. "Immer das alte Leid singing." *The same old song and dance.*

Nathan slanted a look in his brother's direction. "I think there's a better way. Frank Miller wants you to dump more and more chemicals on the plants, but I'm convinced they're doing more harm than good."

Dad's fork made a soft clink in the quiet. "We've just had a streak of bad luck, that's all."

Nathan shook his head. "We've created that bad luck. The soil is depleted. There's nothing left for the plants. They can't defend themselves."

Mick burst out with a laugh. “Like they’re soldiers.”

“In a way they are,” Nathan said. “Like soldiers without weapons. The natural predators of pests can’t flourish when the plants are weak. And the plants are weakened when the soil is deficient.”

“Right,” Mick said, an edge to his voice, “and you know the soil is bad because . . .”

“Through analysis,” Nathan said. “I sent a sample off to the county.” Out of his pocket, he pulled an envelope and set it on the tabletop. “It’s missing important trace minerals.”

“You did that without letting me know? Without my permission?” Dad’s eyes drilled into him. “You think organic farming doesn’t have risks? It does. It’s costly. And yields are lower.”

“Lower, yes,” Nathan said, “but more substantial. More beneficial in the long term.”

Dad tossed his napkin on the table. “Nathan, I’ve heard enough of this nonsense.”

“Why?” Mom was pouring coffee into Dad’s cup from a battered, blue-speckled pot. “Walt, why can’t you give him a chance?”

Dad looked up at her, startled. “Sarah, you think there’s something to this . . . Quatsch?” *Foolishness?*

Mom set the coffee pot on a metal stand on the table. “All I know is that for the last three years, you’ve been having more and more problems with the crops. Why not try it Nathan’s way? Look what he did last summer with my garden. Best garden I’ve had in years.”

Dad picked up his coffee, then set it down again. He stared at his wife, his face settling into deep lines. Mom didn’t push back at Dad very often, but when she did, she held her ground. A silence drew out between them, until a coughing jag started up and Mom hurried off to the other room. Dad watched her go, a worried look on his face.

“Don’t you ever wonder if the chemicals are making her

sick?” As soon as Nathan voiced his concern aloud, he regretted it.

His father’s thick eyebrows met in the middle with a deep furrow. “You’re saying I’m making my own wife sick?”

“Not that you mean to, nothing like that. But last week, it seemed like right after spraying that new fungicide, Mom’s coughing got worse.”

Dad pointed his fork at Nathan’s plate. “Why don’t you stop your jabbering and finish your meal.”

In the other room, Mom kept coughing, a dry hack that hurt Nathan to hear it. For a long moment Dad said nothing, did nothing. Then he set down his fork with a sigh. “All right. Here’s what I’m going to do. Split the farm in two for this year’s harvest. Each boy takes forty acres.”

Nathan was stunned silent. This was the closest his father had ever come to admitting that something was wrong with Black Gold Farm. The closest he’d ever come to admitting *he* might be wrong. Pride ran deep in Walt Yoder.

“Fine with me,” Mick said. “I choose the southern forty. Nathan gets the north.”

“Nein!” No. Nathan snapped into action. “I need those southern acres. I need the elevation.”

“Why?” Mick said. “It’s more of a slope than much of an elevation.”

“It’s enough elevation for pesticides to run off or drift on the wind.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Mick rolled his eyes. “Hold on.” He cocked his head, eyes narrowed. “The south side gives you the greenhouse.”

“I need the greenhouse. It provides a buffer zone.”

Mick shook his head. “Not fair.” His voice was serious for once.

“Mick, you’ve hardly ever stepped a foot into the greenhouse.”

“Maybe I will now.”

Nathan lifted his palms in the air. “Mick, I want that greenhouse. It’s the one place where I can control the entire environment. Nothing but dirt and water and seedlings. No chemicals.” He turned back to his father. “I’m going to need three years.”

“For what?”

“Three years to get rid of the chemicals so I can get Black Gold Farm certified organically.”

Dad’s gaze went back and forth between Mick and Nathan. He let out a deep sigh, like he was tired of the topic, tired of the farm, tired of the bleak and discouraging situation. “One harvest. That’s all you get. By year’s end, whoever ends up with the best yield on their crops gets the whole kit and caboodle.”

Nathan and Mick exchanged a shocked look. “You can’t be serious,” Nathan said. “You’re turning this into a contest to win the farm?”

Dad turned toward him, all stiff and stern again. “Das ist das Ende vom Lied.” *That’s the end of the matter.*

His father’s patience had a short limit these days. Nathan lowered his head. The rest of the meal was eaten in silence.



The rattle of the buggy wheels over the metal grate sent off an unnerving sound. Or maybe it was just how he heard it. All day, David Stoltzfus couldn’t shake an odd sense of uneasiness, as if stuck in the moment between a lightning strike and the thunderclap. But he couldn’t put his finger on the cause of his anxious feelings. Maybe it was the visit today from Roman and Barbara Fisher—another young family planning to leave Stoney Ridge because they couldn’t make a living here. Rome loved to farm, yet had to travel long distances to sell his produce at farmers’ markets. Their departure troubled David because it seemed to be a developing trend. The church had lost two other young farming families over the last year. The Fishers made three. But it wasn’t unexpected news to him.

His daughter Lydie's face suddenly swam into view. Maybe she was the reason he felt as if something dreadful was about to happen. She often was, but this felt different.

David's sister, Ruth, known to everyone in Stoney Ridge as Dok Stoltzfus, had come to see David at the Bent N' Dent yesterday to ask if Lydie could fill in while her receptionist was away for a month or more. "Birdy happened to mention," Dok had said, "that Lydie is between jobs right now."

That was one way of putting it. David thought his wife, Birdy, had been kind. She hadn't wanted to admit that Lydie had yet to hold on to a job longer than a few weeks. A few days ago, she'd managed to do some sewing for Edith Lapp only for a few hours before she was sent home.

"I need a friendly face to sit at the receptionist desk and I thought of Lydie. I've never had much time alone with her—whenever I've been with your family, Lydie, Emily, and Molly were together. Now that Emily and Molly are married, it occurred to me that Lydie must be missing her sisters, and I thought working for me would give us a chance to get to know each other better. Look how well it worked out with Ruthie."

Dok had a demanding job, and she and her husband, Matt, were in the middle of remodeling a fixer-upper. David worried that working with Lydie might not . . . work. "I think Lydie would be delighted to work for you—"

"Excellent," Dok said. "Have Lydie drop by the office tomorrow at closing time, around five o'clock, and I'll go over her responsibilities."

"But—"

Dok was already at the store's door. "Remember to let her know it's just a fill-in position. Temporary. Just a month or two." She rocked her hand back and forth in the air. "Maybe three." And she was gone.

But—David had been trying to say—Lydie wasn't anything like her sister Ruthie.

Now, he glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes after five and there was no sign of Lydie. He'd stayed at the Bent N' Dent until five o'clock, hoping he could have seen her scooter down the lane to Dok's office. It wasn't far from the store.

At ten minutes after five, he'd left for home, hoping to see Lydie on the way. So far, no sign of her.

Frustrated, he snapped the horse's reins and it lurched forward.

Well, this was just a temporary position. A friendly face to sit at the desk was all Dok said she needed. Low expectations. What could go wrong in a month or two?

Plenty.

David worried about Lydie. Despite the fact that her sisters and most of her friends had joined the church last fall, she had chosen not to be baptized along with them. He hadn't put any pressure on her to do so. Unlike many other ministers, David felt strongly that no one should join the church unless their heart and soul were wholly settled on the matter. The church didn't need half-Amish members. So he respected Lydie's choice in the matter, though he prayed she would have a change of heart. Sooner rather than later. What parent wouldn't have a similar prayer?

He wondered if it was a mistake to have Lydie work so closely with Dok. Putting aside his concern for Dok, he worried that it might not be wise for his daughter to spend so much time with an aunt who'd left home when she was Lydie's age. Not just any aunt, but one who was greatly admired and respected, by Amish and Englisch alike.

Lydie didn't have an understanding of how difficult it had been for David's sister to leave. All she knew was that Dok had chosen to leave the church to pursue a medical career. There was much more to her abrupt departure than higher education—something their mother, Tillie Yoder Stoltzfus, had yet to accept.

He shook off troubling thoughts of his mother and turned back to troubling thoughts about Lydie. He hadn't felt worried when Ruthie started working for Dok, but she was so very different from Lydie.

Ruthie had a strong sense of herself, a keen enthusiasm to face whatever was set before her, and the determination to see things through. Lydie could be impulsive, easily distracted, always eager to move on to the next thing. Act first and think later. Lydie's life in a nutshell.

How many times had Birdy tried to tell him that Lydie needed something . . . more. More what? Even Birdy, who loved her stepchildren and had a way of making each one feel important, had no answer to that. They'd encouraged Lydie to try different jobs in the community. Helping Izzy at the Stitch in Time shop, working as a maid at the Inn at Eagle Hill, hiring out as a mother's helper. She'd start strong, then her interest would fizzle out, or something would go terribly wrong. And David knew it wouldn't be long until she'd be let go.

That's why Lydie was in between jobs right now. There were no jobs left among the Amish for a young woman like her. She always expressed regret and a determination to do better next time, but things never changed. Everyone loved Lydie, felt as if she lit up a room with her lighthearted personality, but no one wanted her to work for them. At least not for very long.

He hoped Lydie wouldn't disappoint Dok. He also hoped she wouldn't be swayed to leave the Amish by working for his sister. He reminded himself that it could be a chance to examine the world beyond the Amish while under the protection of Dok.

And he felt encouraged when he remembered that Nathan Yoder was an important person to Lydie. David had always been especially fond of Nathan. There was just something special about him, even as a boy. Solid as an oak tree.

Last week, Nathan had come into the Bent N’ Dent to pick up a few things for his mother, and somehow, in what started as just a passing “What have you been up to lately?” conversation, he started telling David all about a plant’s nutritional needs. David wasn’t inclined toward the farming life, wasn’t even particularly interested in how a plant grew, but he found himself fascinated, drawn in by the young man’s enthusiasm.

“You see,” Nathan started, as if David had asked, “plants have an immune system much like you and me. Their immune system is dependent on well-balanced nutrition, the same way as our own is. When plants are given what they need to defend themselves, pesticides can be avoided. Natural predators of pests are able to flourish.”

The more David pondered that curious thought, the more he realized the same could be said of people too. When church members prioritized their spiritual nutrition, when they ate and drank deeply of God’s Word, when they prayed and worshiped, then they were better able to defend themselves against enemy attacks. Pesticides—as detrimental as a visit from the deacon, as uncomfortable as sitting on the sinner’s bench, as unnerving as being put under the ban—all those could be avoided. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if his church members understood that their souls were as needy as their stomachs?

The Lord never gave up on his people, and neither should David give up on Lydie, his dearly loved, thoroughly frustrating daughter. His spirits lifted at the thought. He looked out the buggy window, at the blue sky, and offered a thank-you for the reminder of God’s steadfast love.

He let Old Jim slow to a walk as the horse pulled the buggy up the long, steep driveway that led to his home. Usually, at this time of day, there were signs of life spilling out all over the little house. His two boys were often on the swing set, toys littered the yard, the enticing scent of supper would be cooking in the air. Today, there was nothing. As if something had happened

to blow out a candle's light. Stifle the life. Back flooded the uneasy feelings he'd fought against all day.

There was only one reason his entire household ever went into hiding.

"David! There you are!"

Automatically, David threw his shoulders back and sat up straight. *Oh no. Please no.* He searched the yard for signs of her. *Please, please, please, no.*

From an upstairs window, his mother's capped gray head appeared.