

PROLOGUE



The memory of laughter mixed with the sound of the horse's hooves on the asphalt lulled him into a half-sleep. They still had thirty minutes until they reached home. Thankfully, the horse knew the way.

His wife nestled at his side with their son Levi, three years old, on her lap—well, as much on her lap as the little one could fit. Their next son or daughter would be joining the family in a matter of months, and the thought of it brought a smile to his face. He'd always wanted a big family, a good wife, a small piece of land to call his own. Yes, for a time he'd considered not joining the church, but it was the thought of a family and nights like this that had helped him decide to join. He cracked his eyes open, gazing up to the stars with a heart of thankfulness. And checking the road ahead.

Only one part of the ride home required he stay awake. It was a stretch of highway that split their country road in two. Sometimes, especially during the daytime, he had to wait minutes and minutes to cross because the traffic flowed so fast and heavy. Yet on nights like this he didn't expect a problem. He glanced at

the highway ahead. *Almost there.* Once across, he could close his eyes and let the horse finish the trek.

His wife's breathing fell soft beside him, as did the sweet breaths of his two girls. They lay on the back platform of the buggy, snuggled in heavy blankets like a warm cocoon.

Many of his friends had wished for sons first, to carry on the family name and to help with chores—but he was overjoyed with his daughters. His love for them grew by the day, expanding from the moment he first held Marilyn's tiny hand in his. Expanding when he brushed Joanna's blonde curls. Or showed them how to make a necklace of dandelions. They were six and four years old now, impossible to believe. It seemed yesterday his eldest was born, and now two others followed. *Soon to be four.* He glanced at his wife's hard, round stomach.

His own stomach felt full of too much ice cream, and the buggy's gentle sway lulled him once more. The snores of his daughters brought a smile, and he looked to the stop sign up ahead, a gray shadow under the night sky. He leaned over to rest his head on the back of the seat. His eyes fluttered closed.

It was the blare of the horn that startled him first. Loud, deep, close. The horn of a big truck. Then bright, white light. *Headlights.* The jolting of the horse. An overwhelming screech of brakes.

A terrified child's cry pierced the air. The semitruck hit the back wheels. The buggy crumbled into pieces. His body propelled forward. Pain filled him. Fear stabbed. *My wife. My children!*

He heard his son's cries. Listened to his wife's moans. *The baby . . .*

He slammed against the hard, jagged gravel with bone-crushing force, but adrenaline pushed him up from the ground.

Standing, his eyes darted from side to side as he tried to make sense of what had happened. The sight of the truck shuddering to a stop filled his vision. The scent of burning rubber from the truck's tires overpowered him. Up ahead the horse raced down the road. The buggy lay around him in pieces.

Staggering toward his wife's cries and the cries of his son, he sunk onto the ground next to them and embraced them, thankful they were safe. His whole body trembled. He looked back over his shoulders to his daughters—

His daughters.



Red and blue lights swirled in the peaceful night sky, and Abe told himself to turn and walk away. There was nothing he could do for his daughters now. He reached down and took his daughter, Joanna's, tiny hand in his. It was cold. Limp.

Footsteps sounded on the gravel. A cold air picked up, and Abe thought he smelled rain.

"Sir, can I ask you a few questions?"

Abe swallowed hard and lowered his head. "*Ja*. I—" The words grew in his throat and he pushed them out. "I fell asleep."

He could hear the Englisch officer writing something in his small notepad.

"It is the Lord's will . . ." A guttural cry escaped Abe's lips. It didn't sound like his own voice.

"Abe!" Ruth's cry carried through the night. His wife called his name again. "*Abe!*"

He rose, hurried toward the ambulance. When the paramedics had arrived, they checked Levi and Ruth first. Seeing Ruth's

pregnancy, they forced her to lie down in the back of the vehicle. Abe thought for certain she'd protest, but with a hand on her stomach she nodded.

Now her pale face reflected horror, disbelief, heartbreak. Abe looked away.

"We should take you to the hospital for observation." The paramedic's voice was gentle.

"No." Ruth shook her head. "No."

She wouldn't leave. Not yet. A mother doesn't leave her daughters behind.

Now Abe looked to his wife, frail, pale, tucked under a white sheet. Levi stood beside her, eyes wide. He was dirty but only had a few scratches. Levi had insisted on putting his hat back on even though the rim was crushed. It sat on his head crooked.

Two paramedics tended to Ruth now, and there wasn't room for him inside. Abe stretched his hand for his wife. Tears streaked her cheeks and her neck was flush.

"Did you see them?" The words came out in a moan.

"Our girls stand before their Creator now." It was the only assurance he could give her. He'd told her the same thing fifteen minutes ago, before the ambulance arrived. She'd been curled in a crumbled heap on the ground, rocking Levi, and he'd told her they were gone. Ruth hadn't wanted to believe him then, and from the look on her face she still wouldn't do so.

Her lips pressed tight and the smallest moan escaped. Her hands clenched her abdomen and he realized these tears weren't only for their daughters, but for the child to come.

"The baby comes now, Abe." Her hazel eyes, the color of a backlit storm cloud, widened.

"No," he whispered. "It is too soon."

The paramedic's large hand touched Abe's arm. "We have to get her to a hospital now, sir."

"There is not time, Abe. Tell them there is not time! The baby comes." Ruth panted the words.

The pain of losing his daughters magnified—they would lose another this night. *Two months yet.* Ruth birthed small babies anyhow. This one . . . how could it make it so soon?

Abe looked to her face. Ruth's jaw clenched.

One of the paramedics jumped down from the vehicle, preparing to shut the doors.

Abe stretched out a hand, stopping him. "There is no time."

He watched his wife draw back her legs and only then did the workers understand. Abe reached inside the ambulance and pulled Levi into his arms, hurrying to the side of the vehicle.

He leaned against the cold steel frame of the ambulance. His shoulders trembled. His fingers twitched as he clenched Levi to his chest. His knees softened like butter melting in the sun. A pain clenched his side as more fire trucks and police cars arrived. A clomping of horse hooves filled the air too. Their Amish neighbors were beginning to gather. And then came Ruth's cries—a sound that chilled his soul. She never cried when birthing her babies. Few Amish women did. Perhaps her moans came from the knowledge of another child to be lost.

Dear Lord, isn't our pain great enough? Save this child. Please, Lord.

His wife's cries quieted, and Levi's hands clutched around his neck. Abe nestled his cheek against his son's ear, and the boy pulled back from the scratchiness of his father's beard. Abe knew he should do something, anything. He should pray. He should seek strength from his neighbors. He should be by Ruth's side to

carry the burden. Instead, his heart crumbled like freshly tilled soil. His legs rooted, unmoving.

“Dat?” Levi’s hand wiped his face, and the sensation of tears on his cheeks made its way through the fog of Abe’s brain.

And then he heard it. Over the blaring siren of yet another vehicle approaching.

A baby’s cry.

He expected it to be weak, but the cry grew louder. Abe hurried to the back of the ambulance. Ruth held the tiny bundle to her chest. The baby’s red body wiggled. The paramedic’s surprised laughter met Abe’s ears.

“A boy?” Abe looked to the paramedic.

“A girl. Small but healthy.”

My daughters.

Abe looked behind him where police officers were carrying away two bundles in sheets.

Marilyn. Joanna.

He looked back to his wife. Instead of looking at the baby, her eyes stared into the dark night. The baby cried again.

My daughter.

“Marianna. We will name her, Marianna.” He climbed in the back of the ambulance, clambering to get to his wife’s side. “We will name her after our gir—our girls.”

His wife nodded, but she did not respond. Then she looked to him, and her gaze said it all . . .

How could one ever take the place of two?



Dear June-Sevensies,

Can you keep a secret yet? One I haven't told my mom or even my best friend, Rebecca? Aaron Zook has asked me on a date. Yes, the Aaron I always talk about. The one who cleans my fish for me at the river and who sat next to me at the last youth gathering. He wants to wait until fall, I'm not sure why. Have you ever heard of having to wait four months for someone to take you for a buggy ride and a picnic? His eyes were bright as he asked me. As clear of blue as any bright, spring morning sky. Listen to me. I sound like a woman in love. Not quite, but I could see it happening. When I look to the rows of corn stalks low and green in the fields, I think of them tall, golden, and swaying in the wind as I ride in Aaron's buggy.

If the truth be known, I couldn't have dreamed of anything better. Dat always tells me I have my head in the clouds when I'm working around the house. What would he think if he knew all my daydreams centered on having a house of my own with a special man? With the very same special man who confessed he thinks I'm special, too. That dream is only followed by imaginings of our children, ach, what pretty little tykes they'll be.

I'm glad I can tell all of you and know it won't get back to Mem. I've told my older brother Levi, too. He's the only one. He hasn't spoke to Dat in months. Hasn't even shown his face round the farm. A few of you have

met my father and you might wonder what Levi fears. I don't think my brother fears my father's words or his wrath. I think it's the disappointment in Dat's gaze, and knowing the hurt he's caused. Some people carry their heart around in pieces. A bit in this pocket, a few pieces in that satchel. Even during their happiest days my folks protect their fragile load.

Lena, congratulations on the new member of your family! Do your sisters number five now? Finally, more than the boys!

The evening light is fading, I best be going yet. This will be a short letter, but I want to get the envelope moving along. Oh, one more thing, Clara, you can be sure I'll find a ride to your wedding in September. I have no plans except tending to my siblings and the neighbor's children. And waiting for that promised date, of course.

Marianna

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