

## Chapter One

*April*

*Kent County, Delaware*

Heart thumping, Hannah Yoder awoke with a start in her bed, barely catching her Bible before it tumbled off her lap to the floor. Still foggy with sleep, she placed the Good Book safely on the nightstand beside her bed and retrieved the reading glasses that must have fallen when she dozed off. *What time was it?* Glancing at the clock on the mantel over the fireplace, she saw that it was eleven-thirty.

*I'm getting old and foolish*, she thought, *falling asleep with the propane lamp on*. She never did that. A mother with a houseful of children had to be vigilant against accidental fires...especially when they lived in a two-hundred-year-old house.

And then she remembered that five of her girls were grown and married and the sixth was promised to the community's new preacher. *Where has the time gone? Only yesterday, I was a young woman with a husband and seven beautiful children, and today, I'm widowed and nearly fifty*. In another month, there would be only her youngest daughter, Susanna, and her foster son, Irwin, left to share the big farmhouse.

Nearly midnight and she had to be up by five-thirty...She'd never been one to have trouble sleeping, but maybe the stress of preparing for Rebecca's wedding was affecting her more than she realized. She reached up to turn off the lamp, but then a nagging uneasiness tugged at her and drew her from the bed. The floorboards were cold and she slid her bare feet into a pair of her late husband Jonas's old fleece-lined slippers and reached for her flannel robe.

Something didn't feel right. What had awakened her? Had she had a bad dream? One of her windows was open a crack, letting in a cool, damp breeze, but that wasn't what had raised goose bumps on her arms. No, something was amiss.

She went to the window and stared out into the night. All was quiet in the farmyard. Common sense struggled with maternal instinct. Neither of the dogs had raised the alarm. True, their old sheepdog was somewhat hard of hearing, but Irwin's terrier could hear a mouse squeak in the next county. There was certainly no intruder. What troubled her?

Hannah had always considered herself a calm, rational woman. One couldn't remain sane raising a houseful of children and be prone to nervous fancies. She looked back at her bed, wanting nothing more than to crawl back under the covers and get a good night's sleep. But she knew that she wouldn't get a wink until she'd reassured herself that all was well.

Taking a flashlight from the nightstand, she switched it on. Nothing. Not even a faint glow. The batteries were dead. Again. Hannah sighed, guessing that Susanna had been playing with it.

The propane lamp was attached to the wall, so she took an old-fashioned kerosene lantern from the top of a dresser, lit it and, holding it high, padded into the hall. Quietly, feeling silly, she opened first one door and then the next. There was nothing out of place in the spare bedroom across from hers. No one in the downstairs bathroom. Green eyes peered back at Hannah from the settee in the parlor, and

her heart skipped a beat.

*Meow!*

“Oscar.” She let out the breath she’d been unconsciously holding. “Sorry.” The glowing green orbs blinked and the tomcat flattened his single remaining ear against his gray head and flicked his long tail back and forth, obviously annoyed at being disturbed when he was on duty.

The landing at the bottom of the main staircase was still, every item in place, the wood gleaming and free of dust. And no wonder, Susanna—the same careless daughter who’d used up the flashlight batteries—had spent all afternoon waxing the floor and furniture, polishing the oak balusters and steps, and sweeping away cobwebs.

A smile curved Hannah’s lips. Dear, precious Susanna, born with Down syndrome. Twenty-one and forever a child. Whatever Susanna did, she threw her whole heart and soul into it. That daughter, at least, would remain home with her. In spite of the challenges of mothering a special child, Hannah had always thought of Susanna as God’s gift, much more of a blessing than a worry.

The kitchen, warm and cozy from the fire in the woodstove, was as tidy as Hannah had left it when she’d gone up to bed at nine. Irwin’s shoes stood on the steps that led to the back stairway. Hannah opened the door to the staircase and smiled again. From the second floor came the loud, regular buzz of Irwin’s snoring. Hannah held the lantern up higher and called softly. “Jeremiah!”

She heard the patter of small feet, and the face of a scruffy terrier appeared at the top of the stairs. “It’s all right, Jeremiah,” she said, closing the door. If Jeremiah was on guard, no one had come unbidden into the house. She checked the back door, found it locked and retraced her steps to the front room. She’d found nothing to cause her concern, but she still wasn’t satisfied.

*I’m being ridiculous.* “I should just go back to bed,” she said, her voice louder than she intended. But she wouldn’t be able to sleep until she’d fully investigated the house. She started up to the second floor where Rebecca and Susanna slept. Susanna’s room first. Empty, as expected. Susanna had wanted her own bedroom because—in her own words—she was a woman grown. But, usually, she grew lonely at night and crawled into her sister’s bed.

The bathroom door stood open, the interior dark. The unused bedrooms presented a wall of closed doors, all latched from the hall side. No problem there. There was only Rebecca’s chamber left, where Hannah expected to find both of her girls fast asleep. It was a shame, really, to disturb them by opening the door and shining lamplight into their eyes. She did it anyway.

“Mam?” Rebecca stirred and raised a hand to shield her eyes. “What time is it? Did I oversleep?”

Hannah stepped into the room. Rebecca was alone in the four-poster bed. No Susanna. “Where’s your sister?” she asked, trying to keep the alarm out of her voice. “Where’s Susanna?”

“In her bed, I suppose.” Rebecca rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands. “She never came in. I thought—”

“Are you sure?” Hannah raised the lamp to see into the far corners of the room. “She’s not in her room.”

“Downstairs, maybe? Sometimes she gets hungry and—”

“Not in the bathroom. Not in the kitchen.” Hannah suppressed a shiver. “She’s not anywhere in the house.”

Rebecca scrambled out of bed and found her robe. “I don’t think she’d go outside. She’s afraid of

the dark. She's got to be here. Remember the time we thought she was lost and we found her asleep in the pantry?"

Hannah grimaced. "She was eight years old, and she was only missing for a little while. I went to bed at nine. I don't know how long she's—"

"We'll find her." Rebecca pulled on a pair of black wool stockings and took her sneakers out of a chifforobe. "You check the house again. I'll look in the yard and barns." She turned on a high-powered flashlight. Hannah was glad to know that Rebecca's still had batteries.

Another search of the house, including the rooms over the kitchen, where Irwin slept, proved futile. Anxiously, Hannah stepped out onto the back porch. Rebecca, identified by the bobbing flashlight beam, was just coming out of the barn. "Is she there?" Hannah called.

"*Ne.*" Not Rebecca's normal tone. Her voice was flat.

Hannah's fear flared. Rebecca might not have found Susanna, but she'd discovered something she didn't like. "What is it?" Hannah demanded, coming down the steps to the back walk. She hurried to the gate, gripping the gatepost to keep her balance. "What's out there?"

"It's what's *not* there, Mam. The pony's gone. And Dat's courting buggy."

Hannah stared at her. It was too dark to make out the expression on Rebecca's face, but what she could make out from her tone confirmed Hannah's alarm. Sensible Rebecca was as frightened as she was. "Susanna took the pony and cart," Hannah said.

Rebecca gripped her mother's arm. "Where would she go in the middle of the night?"

Hannah didn't have to think twice. "David's."

David King—the only other Downs person Susanna had ever met—was the apple of her eye. For months, Susanna had insisted that she *loved* King David, as she called him, and that she was going to marry him.

The Kings didn't live far away, only a quarter of a mile from the end of the lane and to the right, on the opposite side of the county road. But Susanna wasn't allowed to leave the farm alone, and she'd never driven a horse and buggy. Hannah hadn't thought that Susanna could even hitch the pony to the cart. And to be out at night, going down a road that carried trucks and cars? Hannah shuddered, and prayed that God would watch over her.

"We'll find her," Rebecca said. "She's fine. I'm sure of it. We haven't heard any ambulances. You know how the dogs bark when a siren goes off. Wherever she is, Susanna is fine."

"She won't be when I catch up with her," Hannah pronounced. Of all of her girls, Susanna was the last one that she had ever suspected would sneak out at night to see a boy. Johanna, maybe Miriam, or even Leah, but not Susanna. Susanna was an obedient daughter who always followed the rules. It had never been her youngest daughter that had given Hannah her few gray hairs...until now.

"Do you want me to hitch up Blackie?" Rebecca asked. "I'm not dressed, but—"

Hannah set her jaw. "I'm going to walk to the King's house."

"In your bathrobe?"

"We have to find her." Hannah tightened the tie on her robe. "Every minute counts, and I trust the Lord will forgive me for my state of undress. Give me your flashlight."

"I should go with you."

"No, you stay here," Hannah told her, taking the flashlight. "Just in case she comes back and I miss her."

"I'll light the lamps in the kitchen." Rebecca went one way. Hannah another.

The dirt farm lane was a long one, and usually Hannah was grateful that her late husband had picked a place where the house was set far back off the road. Tonight, however, she wished it were a shorter driveway. *Oh, Jonas*, she thought. *Why aren't you here with me?* In the five years since a sudden heart attack had taken him from her, she often wished he was still here by her side, but never more so than tonight. She wasn't a weepy woman, but if she had been, she'd be inclined to sit down in the dirt and have a good cry.

She walked quickly, not bothering to call Susanna's name. If she was coming up this lane, with or without the pony and cart, Hannah would have heard her. Instead, all she heard was the far-off wail of a freight train and the high chirping and deep bass croaks of early spring frogs.

The lights of a car whizzed past Hannah's mailbox. Not far now. The Kings' farm was dark. As with all the Old Order Amish in their community, David's parents didn't have electricity. Hannah had been hoping for the gleam of a kerosene lamp through an uncurtained window, but not a single glimmer showed.

Hannah's anxiety increased with every step. "Susanna," she murmured. "Where are you?" If she wasn't at the Kings' house and she wasn't on the road between here and there, Hannah would have to wake her sons-in-law and maybe send Irwin to the chair shop to use the business phone. Calling the English authorities wasn't a decision to be taken lightly. If an eight-year-old Amish child had been missing at night, it would be considered acceptable. Though Susanna might technically be twenty-one, her maturity level was closer to that of a second-grader.

At the end of the lane, a grove of cedar trees blocked her line of vision on the right. There was no moon tonight, and even with the flashlight, it was difficult to see. Hannah had just turned onto the shoulder of the road when she saw a bobbling light a few hundred feet away. "Susanna?" she called. No answer. Hannah called again. "Susanna!" *Please, God*, she prayed silently. *Let it be her. Let her be safe.*

Whoever it was, they were coming slowly, and Hannah couldn't hear hoof beats or the grate of buggy wheels on the pavement. She hurried toward the light. "Susanna?"

"Mam?"

Relief jolted through Hannah with a physical impact. She broke into a run. "Susanna, are you all right?"

"She's fine!" came a reply in a deep male voice.

"I'm fine."

That was Susanna's voice, but who was with her? Hannah stopped short and aimed the flashlight toward the approaching group: Susanna, short and round, bouncing along in her flat-footed, side-to-side stride and a larger, lumbering figure behind her.

A pickup truck approached, slowed and passed. In the glow of the headlight, Hannah saw a third person, a tall Englisher in a baseball cap leading Hannah's black and white pony. No, she decided, not just any Englisher. She recognized that voice. "Albert Hartman? Is that you?" She started toward them again, not running this time, but walking fast.

In another moment, she had her arms around a sobbing Susanna. Her daughter was trying to tell her something, but she quickly dissolved into hysterics. Because Susanna's speech was never clear to begin with, Hannah had trouble understanding what her daughter was trying to tell her.

"Crash," David supplied. He was a young man of few words. "Bam," he said. "In a ditch."

Hannah gazed over Susanna's head. "Are you hurt, David?" she asked. "What about Taffy? Is the pony—"

"Not a scratch, so far as I can tell. It could have been a lot worse."

Hannah accepted Albert's opinion without hesitation. Not only was he a longtime family friend, but he was a local veterinarian. She turned her attention back to her daughter. "Why did you go out at night?" Hannah demanded. "And what made you take Taffy?"

"Pizza," David said. "We wanted pizza." He shook his head. "Mam gonna be mad at me. *Ya*." He nodded his head. "Really mad."

"I was so worried. Come on," Hannah urged. "Let's get off this road before we're all killed." She held tight to Susanna, unwilling to let her go now that she'd found her. Adrenaline still pumped through Hannah's veins, and she felt vaguely sick to her stomach.

"Good idea," Albert said.

Together, they walked back to Hannah's lane. Once away from the blacktop, she loosened her grip on Susanna's arm and merely held her hand. "Albert," Hannah said. "How did you find them? *Where* did you find them?"

"Half a mile on the other side of the Kings' place," he said. "I was coming back from a call. A cow having twins was in a bit of trouble. Two pretty little heifers, both right as rain once we got their legs untangled and got them delivered. Anyway, I was just on my way home when I saw Jonas's courting buggy in the ditch and these two standing there beside it."

"A car came," Susanna wailed. "It scared Taffy. She jumped in the ditch."

"The buggy rolled over on its side," Albert explained. "A wheel broken, but the carriage seemed okay. I was more concerned for Susanna and David."

"Not David's fault," Susanna stoutly defended. "He drove good. The car beeped and scared Taffy."

Hannah rolled her eyes. "David drove?"

Susanna nodded.

They continued to walk up the long drive. "But, Daughter, you snuck out of the house."

Susanna shook her head. "*Ne*. I didn't."

"You did," Hannah said. "Did David come to the farm and hitch Taffy to the buggy?"

"*Ya*," Susanna said, but David was shaking his head. "Hush," Susanna ordered, shaking her finger at him. "You *said!*"

Confused, Hannah glanced at Albert, who shrugged. "I couldn't get a straight story out of them, either. They were both crying when I got there. The pony was tangled in the traces."

"It was God's mercy that you found them," Hannah said. The pony belonged to her daughter

Miriam, but she stabled it at the home barn so that Rebecca and Hannah had the use of it. They were all very fond of Taffy, and the thought that the animal could have been badly injured or killed by Susanna's carelessness made Hannah angry. "I'm disappointed in you, Susanna," she said sharply. "Very, very disappointed."

Susanna hung her head. Tears ran down her cheeks and she wiped at them with dirty hands, but Hannah wasn't feeling sympathetic.

"What you did was wrong and dangerous," Hannah chided. "You, David or Taffy could have been killed."

"We...we wanted pizza," Susanna mumbled. "You never...never let us go get...get pizza."

"I like pizza," David declared.

The sound of an approaching horse and buggy caught Hannah's attention. "That's got to be Rebecca," she explained to Albert. "Where's your truck?"

"I left it on the side of the road by the buggy."

Hannah nodded. "I can send Charley and Eli to get the buggy in the morning."

"No worry," Albert said. "I called Tony's Towing."

"But that will cost dearly," Hannah said. *Did she even have the money for a tow truck?*

"Don't worry about it." Albert gave her a reassuring grin. "Tony owes me for stitching up his Labrador's hind leg last week when he got it caught in the screen door. There won't be a charge. He'll have the buggy back in your barn within the hour."

Rebecca reined in Blackie, and Susanna pulled away from Hannah to run and tell her sister about her adventure. David stood patiently where he was, waiting for Susanna or someone to tell him what to do.

Hannah glanced back at Albert. "You walked right past David's house. Why didn't you leave him there?"

Albert tugged off his ball cap and looked sheepish. "He wouldn't go. Susanna wanted him with her, and I thought maybe you'd be uneasy about me bringing her home alone. You know, how it would look to the community..."

"How it would look? When you saved both of them from who knows what? Albert, you may not be Amish, but we trust you. You'll never know how grateful I am that it was you who came along when I needed you most."

"I suppose it was meant to be," Albert offered slowly. "His plan. I'm just glad I could help."

Rebecca climbed down out of the buggy, and Hannah quickly filled her in on what had happened. "We'll tie Taffy to the back and take her to the barn, and put Susanna to bed," she continued. "Albert and I are going to walk David home—"

"No need for you to put yourself out." Albert started to lead the pony around to the back of the buggy. "I can take David home."

"*Ne*, Albert," Hannah replied. She gave Susanna a gentle push in Rebecca's direction. "I need to come. David's mother has to know what he was up to. I don't think she'll be any more pleased with this night's mischief than I am."

