

toward the book, so I opened it up and flipped through it, angling it so that she could see the pages.

“All of those tiny drawings at the tops and bottoms...” Her voice trailed off.

“These nifty little doodles?” Glancing down, I tilted the heavy tome my way. “It’s funny, but they kind of remind me of icons. You know, like for a phone app?”

She stared at me blankly. Of course she didn’t know what a phone app was.

“They’re symbols,” she said. “Each one represents something.”

“Oh, yeah?”

I flipped through more pages and saw that the various icons weren’t just random—they were repeated the exact same way in different places. She was right. Symbols.

“What are they for?”

“I’m not sure. But there’s more.”

She again gestured with her hand, so I tilted the book back toward her and continued to flip through it.

“There.” She placed a pointed finger on the page to stop me.

Glancing down, I saw that she was indicating the middle part of the book, the pages of weird squiggly lines. They reminded me of letters or numbers but were completely unreadable, like a foreign language that used a completely different alphabet.

“What is this?”

She sat back and clasped her hands in her lap. “It’s a code.”

My eyes widened. “A code?”

She nodded. “My mother didn’t want just anyone reading her journal. So she invented a code to keep parts of it private.”

“Cool.” I was really starting to like my great-grandmother Sarah.

I was studying the squiggles more closely when I realized *Mammi* was leaning toward me in her chair, her expression intense.

“Ella, I need you to decipher that code. Figure out how to make sense of it. The symbols too. I want you to translate the code and the symbols into words. I need to know what it says.”

My first reaction was to giggle, but her face was so serious I held it in. What was this, the CIA or something?

"I'm not exactly good at this sort of thing. I mean, Zed's way smarter than I am. Why don't you ask him?"

Mammi placed a hand on my arm and gave it a firm squeeze. "Never mind him. I'm asking *you*, Ella. You can do this. You *have* to do this."

"But why?" I looked into her eyes and was surprised to see pain there. Deep pain. "What is it, *Mammi*? Why is this so important to you?"

Without responding, she broke our gaze, released my arm, and let herself fall back against the chair. Then she gave an elaborate shrug and spoke in an odd, singsongy voice. "Oh, I've just wondered over the years what she wrote, that's all."

I stared at her. An actress she was not.

"I'm not *that* dumb, *Mammi*. I can tell there's way more to it than mere curiosity."

My grandmother's eyes brimmed with sadness. She turned her face away and spoke in a soft voice. "Just let me know when you figure it out, will you? It's important to me." Clearly, she wasn't going to elaborate.

I sat there for a long moment, trying to decide whether to insist she explain or just let it go for now. It was no big surprise that she wouldn't tell me, nor that she'd asked me not to tell anyone else. Our family was known for its secrets. I hadn't imagined there were any left, but it looked as though I was wrong.

"I...I'll give it a shot, *Mammi*, but I'm not making any promises."

She nodded. "If it would help, maybe you could even go visit the Home Place. It's still in the family. One of your distant cousins lives there now, and I'm sure she'd be happy for you to come out."

Visit the Home Place? In Indiana? It was a neat idea, but there was no way I could take a trip like that any time soon. There were other things in my life that were much more pressing.

"My mother grew up there, you know," she said dreamily, not catching the reluctance in my expression. "Lived there on and off as an adult. Ended up raising a family there. Died there."

The Home Place was legendary in our family, built by Sarah's parents in the late 1800s when they emigrated from Switzerland to Indiana. *Mammi* had grown up there, and though she moved out when she married, she and her husband had lived on a farm nearby. Once he died, *Mammi* and her three daughters moved away from Indiana entirely to

start life anew here in Lancaster County, but it wasn't hard to see she'd left a piece of her heart behind. I'd heard her stories of home. I even had a very special wooden box with an image of the Home Place carved onto the lid.

"You'll see she drew it in the book a lot. Sometimes the whole farm, sometimes just a particular tree or piece of furniture or view from a certain window. I don't know the significance of those drawings, but they are obviously tied in with the symbols and the code somehow. Maybe if you went there yourself, it would be easier to figure it all out."

I looked down at the book in my hands, feeling the weight of my grandmother's request—and her memories—pressing down on me.

"Let's take this one step at a time, okay? I'll see what I can do here first. You never know. I might just crack this baby wide open without having to go anywhere at all."

Mammi's eyes met mine. "Thank you, Ella" she whispered.

"No problem."

My cell phone buzzed in my pocket with a text. Poor Ezra had to be going stir-crazy by now. I closed the book—which was taller and slightly wider than even my biggest school textbook—and wiggled it into my backpack for safekeeping. Then I stood and gave *Mammi* a quick kiss on the cheek. As I turned to go, she wrapped a hand around my wrist, her fingers cold, her grip surprisingly strong. I paused and looked down at her.

"Do whatever it takes, Ella," she said, her voice tinged with desperation. "I'm an old woman, and the Lord has numbered my days, but before it's too late, I simply must know what my mother wrote in that book."



ONE

Once I was out of sight of the house, I rolled down the cuffs of my jeans—which I already had on under my clothes—and removed my skirt. Folding it quickly, I shoved it into my backpack and zipped it shut. I tucked my shirt into my jeans.

At the end of the long driveway, waiting for me, sat Ezra on his motorcycle. I gave him a small wave, and just the sight of his smile in return made my heart flutter.

“There you are.” He handed me a jacket and an extra helmet.

With a quick “Thanks” I pulled off my *kapp*, stuffed it in my pocket, and strapped on the helmet instead. Then I climbed on behind him and wrapped my arms around his broad chest, ready to zoom through Lancaster County on his motorcycle.

Holding on tightly, I leaned with Ezra as he steered his bike around a sharp curve toward the covered bridge, and then I braced myself against the jolt as we jumped onto the wooden slats. A moment later he brought the bike to a stop next to the railing. We both climbed off, removing our helmets and holding them in our hands.

It was unusually warm for January—no snow or ice, which was why Ezra wanted to be out on his motorcycle. However, it was still crisp and

cold, and even more so on the bridge, with the creek rushing below us. He grasped the railing with his free hand and leaned over, dangling his helmet above the water.

It was our special place. Over the past two years we'd stood side by side in the same spot many times, but tonight was different. I'd taken the last of my high school finals yesterday, finishing my senior year a semester early so I would be able to work and save money until next fall, when I planned to start taking college-level classes. In three months I would be eighteen. Our lives were no longer on hold. Finally, we could make decisions about what lay ahead.

"Can we talk?"

Ezra leaned a little farther over the creek, his brown eyes sparkling, his red hair pushed up at his hairline. "About?"

"Our future."

"How about if we take off for Florida?" He grinned.

"I'm serious."

He stood upright, his hands resting on the railing, his eyes connecting with mine.

"I know what I want to do," I said. "Go to baking school and then open my own business."

"I know," he said. "You've told me a dozen—make that a baker's dozen—times."

I wrinkled my nose. I probably had. "So what about us?"

He shrugged. "Time will tell, *ya*?" He reached up and touched my hair. "I like it when your *kapp* is off," he said. "You're so pretty." I was used to compliments from him. I stepped closer. As he leaned over to kiss me, I pulled my hand from my pocket, accidentally pulling out my *kapp* too. As I reached for him, it fell to the railing, and before I could snatch it back, it went over the side.

We both leaned forward, watching it float downstream for a few seconds, a white vessel bobbing along in the darkness.

"Will you get in trouble?"

I shrugged. "Not much. I have another at home."

"Want me to jump in after it anyway?"

"And make it miss the adventure of a lifetime? Who knows where that *kapp* might go?"

Before Ezra could reach for me again, my phone rang. It was Mom. I knew if I ignored it, she would grill me later.

“I need you to come on home,” she said.

I assured her I was on my way and hit “End.”

“Your mom?” He stepped back.

I nodded.

“Let’s go.”

I followed him to the bike, put on my helmet, and climbed on behind him, wrapping my arms around him again. Even through his coat I was aware of his muscular shoulders and back. He was everything I’d ever wanted—handsome, adventurous, and strong.

In no time we were back on the pavement, rolling through the hollow and then up the hill to the driveway to my house. As he turned, we both leaned in unison again and came to a stop in front of my cottage.

I climbed from the bike, pulled off the helmet and then the jacket, and gave both back to him. “Thanks.” I leaned toward him just as the front door opened. My brother, Zed, stepped onto the porch. The fringe of his blond bangs nearly hid an odd, befuddled look on his face, but as he flicked his hair from his eyes, I could tell something was troubling him.

“Give me a minute, would you?” I called to him, though I consciously kept my voice kind. In the past I’d been a bit of a brat, but lately I’d really been working on being nice to everyone, even my little brother. Make that younger brother, by three years. I still couldn’t get over the fact that he was now taller than me.

In spite of my effort, a hurt expression passed over Zed’s face, and he stepped back inside and shut the door.

I felt a twinge of regret that I’d put my brother off, but still I turned my attention back to Ezra. Before I could say anything the front door opened a second time. I spun around, expecting Zed again, but it was my mother.

“Hello, Marta,” Ezra quickly said, his back stiffening.

“Ezra.” She nodded, and then her eyes fell on me. “Come on in, Ella.” She stood, sure and solid, with her arms crossed over her chest. She wore a kerchief over her graying hair instead of her customary prayer covering, which meant she was tired, stressed, or had been cleaning. Maybe all three.

No matter. I knew not to argue with her. I gave Ezra a wink. “See you soon.”

His deep brown eyes flickered in agreement, but he didn't say anything more to me. He called out a goodnight to my mother, secured the extra helmet, and by the time I reached the open doorway, he'd swung the motorcycle around and was gunning it toward the highway.

Mom appeared more serious than usual as she directed me to sit in the wingback chair next to the woodstove. Zed sat on the couch, and she sat down beside him.

She didn't ask me where my head covering was or tell me to change out of my jeans. Instead, she launched right in with, "I need to tell you something."

I could see that it was something big. Eyes wide, I glanced at my brother.

"Zed already knows. He overheard me on the phone the day before yesterday."

"And you're just bringing me into the loop now?" I knew my voice sounded petulant, but I hated it when people kept secrets from me.

My mother nodded. "I wanted to tell you, but not during finals, and then last night, with me being out on a birth and all, I didn't have a chance."

I leaned forward, wondering what in the world she was talking about.

"I had a call—"

I nodded my head impatiently.

"From your father."

I fell back against the chair. No one ever talked about him. Especially not my mom. Never, ever.

"He's ill." My mother turned her head to the side, profiling her tired face. She took a deep breath. "He wants to come back to Lancaster County."

Zed had known this since Thursday and hadn't told me? I shot him a disapproving look and turned back toward Mom. Her gaze was fixed on the darkened windowpanes below the half-closed shade.

"You told him not to, right?" My voice was raw. So much for trying to be nice.

She didn't respond, but the look on Zed's face told me she hadn't. And that he hadn't asked her to.

“Why do you care?” I blurted out to Zed. “He’s not your real father.”

Zed flicked his bangs out of his brown eyes and stared me down. I’d never seen such a challenging look on his face—at least not directed toward me. Me, he had deferred to his entire life.

“Actually . . .” Mom’s head turned toward me as she spoke. Her features looked more weathered than usual. And sadder. “It’s time for you to know the truth, Ella. I told Zed Thursday night. I’m telling you now. Freddy Bayer *is* Zed’s father, as much as he is yours.” She leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees.

“Yeah, of course, legally and all,” I replied with a wave of my hand. “But he’s not his *birth* father.” Mom and Dad had adopted Zed when he was just an infant.

“Actually, he is. Freddy is Zed’s *biological* father. By a woman other than me.”

I barked out a frustrated laugh, but neither of them smiled. Closing my mouth, I stared at her for a long time as her words tried to make their way into my brain.

Freddy is Zed’s biological father.

By a woman other than me.

I shook my head. None of it made sense. “How could a father adopt his own child?”

“He didn’t, Ella. We let others believe we were *both* adopting. But the truth is that the only one in our marriage who actually adopted Zed was me. Freddy was already Zed’s father, so there was nothing else he needed to do.”

Again, all I could manage was to stare. What was she saying? That my father had a child outside of my parents’ marriage, a baby boy, and then he took that boy from his own mother and forced his wife to raise him? All while pretending the child wasn’t even really his in the first place?

I ran a hand over my face, telling myself to breathe. Zed and I shared the same biological father. *Breathe*. He wasn’t just my brother legally; he was my half brother biologically. *Breathe*.

This was insane.

“What about his birth mother?” I managed. “Who was she?”

“An unwed young woman, as I’ve always said. No need to know more than that.”

“But how could Freddy make her give up the baby? Even if he was the father, she was the *mother*. Don’t the courts favor—”

“Ella, he didn’t make her do anything. She loved her baby. She loved him enough to want to give him a better life, one with two parents, where he wouldn’t have to endure her shame and grow up under the scorn of the community.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to understand. “What about you? How could he make you raise that baby, the result of his”— I spat out the word—“*affair*?”

“Ella, he didn’t make me do anything either. I *wanted* the child, desperately so, regardless of how he came to be.”

I opened my eyes to narrow slits. “So you weren’t forced to do this?”

“Absolutely not.”

“And the birth mother really wasn’t either?”

Mom shook her head. “No. She loved the babe enough to give him up. And I will always be grateful. I loved him enough to make him my own. It’s that simple, Ella.”

As her words finally began to sink in, I found myself curling up in a ball, my hands grasping my knees. I tried to breathe normally, but instead gulped for air.

I felt more deceived than I ever had in my life.

Not that I’d ever had any big delusions about the kind of person my father was. After all, he’d abandoned us when I was just three years old. But now, to learn that not only had he done that, but he had also had an affair, taken in the result of that affair, and created a lie about it for the world to believe, was a shock.

I looked at Mom and then at Zed. Both suddenly appeared as strangers, sitting before me. Calmly.

Where was their outrage?

I concentrated on my brother, whom I’d coddled and bossed and nagged and loved the last fifteen years. I looked at his blond hair, so different from my dark auburn waves. Sometimes, people who didn’t know he was adopted said we looked alike, but I knew it was just coincidence. All these years I thought my baby brother and I didn’t share a single genetic cell, and yet we did. I felt as if I’d been kicked in the stomach.

“I’m sorry,” Mom said, rising and stepping toward me. “I know this is a surprise, but—”

I found my voice. “You told him none of us would see him, right?”

She leaned forward as if to reach out to me, but I recoiled.

She shook her head. “I told him to do as he wished, as God led.”

“As God led?” I bolted from the chair, my voice bouncing off the walls of the tiny living room. I grabbed the backpack at my feet. She reached for me again, but I swung around the newel post of the staircase before she could touch me. I bounded up the wooden stairs and into my room, but even before the slam of my door finished echoing through the little cottage, I regretted it. Now I was stuck. Why hadn’t I dashed out the front door instead and sent Ezra a text to come get me?

I expected Mom’s quiet knock, but it never came. Neither did Zed’s tentative voice, asking if I was all right. I paced around my room, around the path I’d worn into the braided rug, round and round. It was an Amish rug. The quilt on my bed was Amish too, made by *Mammi*, with the typical blocks of green, blue, maroon, and black. As a little girl, I’d wanted pink. But these were the more common Amish colors.

Amish colors, Amish quilt, Amish rug.

My mother’s forgiveness of my father was most likely Amish as well. Which made sense because she’d grown up in that faith. We had the same deep roots, but Mom had raised us as Mennonites, not Amish.

Still, I used to think I understood the whole Anabaptist forgive-and-forget thing, but clearly something was missing when it came to my father. He had never once, in all these years, contacted me. Not on a birthday or on Christmas. Not for any reason at all. And he’d never acknowledged what he’d done. He’d never asked for forgiveness.

Half an hour later, I sent Ezra a text. I told him I’d had an argument with my mother and could really use some cheering up, but he didn’t respond. He must have left his cell phone in the barn, as his parents had been requesting for a long time. Feeling even more lost and sad and alone, I set my phone aside and closed my eyes.

For years I was out of place not having a father, but by the time I was in high school I’d kind of liked the mystery of him disappearing. Here I was, an ultraconservative Mennonite girl with a mother who was a social

misfit and a geeky younger brother who wanted to make films but wasn't even allowed to have a camera. The missing father added a little intrigue to who I was, which I sorely needed.

At times I made up little stories for myself. Maybe he'd done something heroic and was in a witness protection program in Alaska. Sometimes I pretended he was a famous actor or politician. I imagined he would come back someday, loaded with money.

But tonight, with this new information—and his return a real possibility—I hated what he'd done. Though Mom had always drilled into me to hate the action and not the person, that wasn't happening here. If I was honest with myself, I'd have to admit that I didn't just hate what he'd done; I hated *him*.

And why shouldn't I? He'd abandoned me. He'd cheated on my mother and then abandoned her. And now it turned out he'd abandoned Zed too.

As for Zed himself, I didn't know what to think. All these years I'd been so smug about the fact that even though my father had left, at least I knew who he was. Zed hadn't known who either of his birth parents was. That thought would have driven me crazy were I in his shoes, but it had never mattered to him at all.

Gritting my teeth in frustration, I opened my eyes, got up, and went to my closet. As I changed into my nightgown, I remembered Sarah Berg's book in my backpack. I took it out, curled up on my bed, and pulled the quilt to my chin. I started at the beginning, hoping this would help take my mind off my troubles.

The book began with an entry on the first page dated January 12, 1898, and from the look of the handwriting, I would have guessed her to be a young girl, maybe eight years old or so. It read:

Opa Abraham sent me this book from Switzerland because he liked the drawing I sent him for the box he carved. He said I should draw more, but Mamm says I should use the book to write down recipes, which, unlike my drawings, I'll actually need.

Ouch. Sounded as though little Sarah's creativity hadn't exactly been encouraged around the house. That was a shame, because she was clearly talented. On the very next page was an excellent drawing of a young hen. It was a good rendition with lots of texture and shading, but what was

most striking were the eyes, which weren't those of a chicken, but rather more like an intelligent human. Sarah had been a gifted illustrator, especially for her age.

On the next page, carefully printed across the top were two words, "My Recipes." Below that was a recipe for making sugar cookies, including an ingredient list followed by the instructions. I scanned it quickly but then slowed down and read it again, sure that this was the very same recipe I used when I made sugar cookies. Just the thought filled me with some emotion I couldn't name—not exactly joy, but close—like an intense sort of wonder at the connection of it all.

The next page had a piecrust recipe, followed by one for berry pie filling, with drawings of different leaves all around the border. Then a couple of more pie filling recipes. I was getting hungry just reading them.

Interrupting the recipes was another journal entry, dated August 2, 1898. Still scrawled in a childlike hand, it read, *Opa Abraham passed away. He was planning to come visit, but then he died.*

Those sad words were followed by a page covered with tiny drawings of birds and plants. But then she must have put the book away and forgotten about it for a while, because the next entry was dated five years later, June 17, 1903. Headed "Recipes for Life," the handwriting there was in a tight script, much messier than before, which made it more difficult to read.

I think the word "recipe" can mean many different things. A drawing follows a sort of recipe. So does the behavior of birds. So does drying herbs and making a quilt. So does a song. I think other things do too, like friendships and marriages. Brothers don't seem to follow recipes, though. They seem to do whatever they want, whenever they want, in a far more random fashion. My brother Alvin is especially hard to figure out. Mother says God has a special blessing for all of us through Alvin and that I must be more patient. She says it is a sin for me to ridicule him for his sloppy ways.

A smile crept across my mouth. Clearly Sarah Gingrich had a desire for order, not to mention a mind of her own.

Feeling impatient, I stopped going page by page and began flipping through the whole thing, skipping over the sections written in the weird script-and-number code *Mammi* wanted me to figure out for her.

There were recipes for chocolate sauerkraut cake, lemon tart, and trifle.

The last few seemed downright fancy, especially for that time and place. Reading them, my mouth began to water. The book was quite thick, and as I made my way through it, I noticed that most of the recipes had a symbol at the top. A flower. A crow. A hawk. An alpine horn.

I went back to the scripted code, taking a closer look, but, again, I had no idea how to decipher it. I skipped ahead to an entry about halfway through the book that was dated October 3, 1920, and featured drawings of a vine and leaves encircling the words: *Hang bird feeder. Finish quilt. Sort herbs. Marry D.* I smiled as I read the entry a second time.

My eyelids were growing heavy, so I decided to save the rest of the book for another day and turned to the very last page instead. It featured a hand-drawn maze with a symbol at every correct turn, leading to the middle. First there were mountain peaks, a small flower—probably edelweiss—and the alpine horn again, then a flock of crows, a chicken, a hawk, a city, and an owl. Next was an eagle, the chicken again, but this time with chicks too, and then a small bird. At the very center of the maze was a daisy, and in the center of the daisy was a tiny drawing of a farm.

A little more than a year ago, my cousin Ada had given me a beautiful wooden box that had originally been carved by our Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Abraham. The carving on the box's lid showed a farmhouse and a barn amid wheat fields, and I knew he had based that carving on a picture Sarah had drawn for him.

I was positive this drawing was of the same farm that had been featured in the carving of my box. Underneath, in a cursive script that was shaky and hard to read, was written “the Home Place.”

I shivered. What a beautiful illustration. What beautiful words. I wanted something like that in my life. A place where I belonged.

I traced my finger above the ink, working my way through the maze again, thinking about my own life. Mom was at one turn. Zed at the next. My father at the end of a blocked-off pathway.

Ezra was at the end of the maze, waiting for me at our own someday place. He was my daisy. I grabbed the spiral notebook I used for my journal and flipped to the next blank page. I picked up a pen off the bedside table and drew my own maze with a cottage and a motorcycle, a box and a book. I put a daisy in the middle with a question mark at its center.

Like Sarah, I wrote “Recipe for Life” at the top. I flipped back to her list: *Hang bird feeder. Finish quilt. Sort herbs. Marry D.*

I wrote my own list. *Find job. Go to school. Open bakery. Marry E.* And then, on a sudden impulse, I added one more item.

Visit the Home Place.

Then I sat back and smiled, knowing my words had less to do with *Mammi*’s request than they did with my own deepening curiosity.