

THE AMISH MIDWIFE

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PROLOGUE

Baby number 244 was an easy one—three hours of labor, twenty minutes of pushing, and one healthy seven-pound-three-ounce baby boy. To put it in the vernacular of the parents, the infant slid into my hands like a football dropping into the palms of a wide receiver waiting in the end zone.

“It’s a boy,” I announced as I looked at the clock and noted the time: 5:33 p.m. “You did it, Brie.”

“A boy,” Stanley cried, turning to high-five his wife. The head football coach at Barlow High School, Stanley had guided Brie through the entire labor and delivery much as he must have ushered last year’s team through to the playoffs. “Finally, our own little future Bruin.”

“A Bruin,” she echoed, meeting Stanley’s palm with her own. Then she collapsed back against the pillows, laughter bubbling from her throat even as tears spilled freely across her cheeks. After three daughters, I knew they had both been hoping for a son.

I suctioned the baby, wiped off his tiny face, and then handed the scissors to Stanley, who didn’t need much help cutting the cord for this, his fourth down at the one-yard line, so to speak. Grabbing a warm blanket, I wrapped it around the infant and placed him in his mother’s arms,

and then I added another warm blanket across them both. As soon as I returned to my chair at the foot of the bed, Stanley leaned toward Brie, touching his forehead to hers and wrapping his thick arms around wife and child.

“You did it, babe,” he whispered, kissing her cheek.

“*We* did it,” she replied, unable to tear her eyes from the infant she was clutching so tightly. “And you, Lexie,” she added. “Thank you. For everything. You’re the best.”

I waved off the compliment, saying it was no sweat for a delivery this fast and free of complication.

Through the next fifteen minutes, as I finished things up, I kept glancing at the three of them—father, mother, child—searching as I always did for that moment, that origin of family, that flash of absolute belonging.

Though every birth was different, my search was always the same.

When I was done I headed for the door, telling them I would be back to check on things in just a bit.

“You guys know the drill,” I added, pausing in the doorway to take one more look at the little family. “If you don’t mind, be sure to send me—”

“A photo of the baby. *We* know,” Brie said, laughing. “Don’t worry, we will.”

Out in the hall, as the door swung shut behind me, I couldn’t help but smile. *Baby number 244.*

Good work, Lexie.

When I reached the nurses’ station, three message slips were waiting for me, all from the same person. As soon as I saw them, my legs grew weak. Sinking into the nearest chair, I was thankful no one was around at the moment to see my reaction. I had known this was coming, that this was going to happen sooner rather than later. Still, that didn’t make it any easier.

Fingers trembling, I looked at the number as I dialed, even though I knew it by heart. My old friend and mentor, Sophie, answered on the first ring, blurting out the words I had expected to hear.

“It’s your dad, honey,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. “He needs you. It’s time for you to come on home.”



ONE

Three weeks later

For twenty-six years I thought I'd been told the truth. But I was wrong. "Alexandra," my father rasped, his bony fingers fumbling for my hand.

"What is it?" I asked, leaning forward from my chair beside the bed, realizing that he was the only one who ever called me by my full name. Grasping my hand, he drew me closer, bringing my palm to his face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Sorry? Whatever for?" I asked, refusing to believe this dear man had a need to apologize to me for anything.

"For not telling you sooner. If your mother were still alive, she would have said something long before now."

"Said something about what?" I asked, trying to ignore an odd fluttering in my stomach.

For a long moment he didn't reply. Then he surprised me by saying it was about my adoption. It had been private, handled by an attorney, and though I had never been given many details about it beyond a few basic facts, my father seemed to have some sort of related, long-overdue information he wanted to share with me now.

“When your mother and I flew to Pennsylvania to get you, we met your birth grandmother,” he began, telling me what I already knew, how she had handed me to them in the Philadelphia airport, wrapped in the baby quilt that was now tucked away in the linen closet in my apartment in Portland. “It was the only time your mother and I ever left the Northwest.”

I knew that too. Before Mama became ill, we had taken day trips to Crater Lake and Mount St. Helens and the beach, but after she died he and I stuck pretty close to home, as they had before I came along in the first place.

“It pained your grandmother to give you up.”

I nodded again, wondering where he was going with this, what he so desperately needed to tell me. But then he began to cough, deep, rattling spasms that seemed to draw the very life from his lungs. Once the coughing stopped, he laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Leaning forward, I whispered that he would have to save this conversation for later because right now he needed to stay quiet and get some rest.

The cancer that had started in his kidneys was in his lungs and probably working its way into his brain. Looking at his sad, sunken face now, I imagined the cells splitting, over and over. I willed them to stop, to rewind, but I knew it was too late.

After I washed the morning dishes, I bathed my father and turned him. The hospice nurse had asked me if she could order a hospital bed for the living room to make caring for him easier, but he wanted to die in his own room, the one he had slept in for the last fifty-two years, the one he’d shared with Mama.

At his request I played Bach’s *Sei gegrüßet* on his old stereo, and then after he took a few spoonfuls of vegetable soup for lunch, he asked me to read to him, nodding to his old worn King James Bible on the bedside table. I opened it to Psalm 23, wanting something familiar, words I wouldn’t stumble over. I read, “The Lord is my shepherd—” and then was interrupted by my cell phone trilling in my jeans’ pocket.

“Go ahead,” Dad said. “Maybe it’s your sweetheart.” His lips moved as if trying to smile.

I stood, digging out my phone. It was, indeed, James, his voice somber as he asked how we were doing.

“Getting by.” I didn’t want to give too many details with Dad listening. “How’s your project coming along?” It was the week before midterms, and James had a big presentation due the next day for his master’s in counseling program.

“Ah, I get it,” he said, his voice softer, deeper. “You’re there with your dad right now?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I understand. Just tell me, are you all right? I mean, relatively speaking? You hanging in there?”

“Trying.”

“That’s my girl. I know this isn’t easy. Losing a parent is hard enough, but your dad...” His voice faltered. “I mean, he’s just such a special...” Again, he stopped, cleared his throat, and then finally gave up.

“I know,” I whispered into the silence, aching for James as much as for myself. “I know.” Taking a deep breath, I blinked my tears away and forced my voice to sound more upbeat. “So the project’s going well?”

Clearing his throat again, James seemed glad for the change of subject. We chatted for a few minutes, and by the end of our conversation we both had our emotions back under control—until the moment we said goodbye and James added, “Give your dad my love, okay?”

“Will do,” I managed to squeak out before quickly pressing the “End” button. Just because I was feeling weepy myself was no reason to get James going again too.

Wiping my eyes, I sat back down on the needlepoint cushion my mother made when she and Dad first married. They waited twenty-five years for a baby, for me. That was part of the story too—part of the miracle, they said.

“James says hello.”

Dad nodded. He’d probably gathered that from my side of the conversation.

“He has projects and then midterms,” I added. “Otherwise he’d be here.”

Dad nodded again, his eyes still closed. I thought that maybe it was too difficult for him to speak, but then he said, “You look nice today. You’re so pretty with your hair pulled up like that.” His eyelids fluttered as he spoke.

I pursed my lips. All my life, my father had told me how pretty I was, even when I was wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and a simple ponytail. Even when I was thirteen and in braces, the tallest person in my class at five feet ten inches, including the boys and the teacher, and even when I was fourteen and couldn't wash my hair for a week because I had broken my arm.

"I think I'll rest a while," he said.

"I'll read to you later."

"Thank you," he whispered, his eyes still closed. "For everything."

He'd done a round of chemo, for me, but then he refused any more, saying seventy-six was a good age to die.

His snow-white hair grew back curly after the treatment. He'd always been handsome, but now he looked like a geriatric angel. I pulled a tissue from my pocket and dabbed at my eyes. He was wrong. Seventy-six was far too young for him to die.

As he slept, a new rattle developed in his breathing.

I carried a wicker basket of wet towels out the back door into the shade of the overgrown yard. Dad bought an automatic washer when I was in high school, but he never felt a dryer was necessary. The sun was warm for a February afternoon, and the towels would dry by nightfall, even in the shadows of towering evergreen, maple, and walnut trees. To my right was the windmill, completely still now due to the breezeless afternoon, and beyond the yard were the hazelnut trees Dad had lovingly tended all of his adult life, although he always called them filberts, the more old-fashioned term.

Regardless of what the trees were called, I had always loved the order of the orchard: the perfect symmetry of the trees planted row by row, the cleared ground, and the comfort of the green canopies in the heat of summer. I sighed. I'd have to sell the orchard—and hire someone in the meantime to prune and mulch and then spray the trees in the spring and harvest the hazelnuts in the fall if it hadn't sold by then. It was too much work for me to try to do on my own.

I reached into the cloth bag of pins at the end of the line and started hanging the towels.

Dad had stubbornly cared for himself as he battled cancer through the cold and dreary months of winter. I know there were days when he had

still tried to care for the orchard too. When Sophie called me at the hospital a few weeks ago to say that Dad could no longer fix his own meals or keep up with the chores, I had taken an official family leave from the clinic where I worked and come right away, knowing I wouldn't be going home until he passed.

I had a wooden pin in my mouth and a towel in my hands when Sophie's Subaru turned into our driveway. I dropped both into the basket and started toward her. By the time we embraced, tears were streaming down my face.

"There, there," she said, patting my shoulder. "How is he?"

I sucked in a ragged breath and then exhaled.

"He's sleeping, but his breathing sounds different. The hospice nurse said she thinks he has a week left, but I'm not so sure. She increased his morphine yesterday."

Sophie's comfort enveloped me.

"Finish your laundry and then go back and sit with him. I have a birth to go to, but I'll stop back on my way home. I shouldn't be long."

I thanked her and waved. She was still slim and slight, but her hair was completely gray now, a silvery color under the Mennonite head covering—or cap, as I thought of it—that gave her an elegant look. At the base of her neck, her hair was twisted into a tidy bun.

Sophie had given me my very first job, hiring me as an assistant the summer I was sixteen to file papers, order supplies, and drive her to births when she was tired. I would also watch siblings, make tea, and wash dishes. She was a lay-midwife, initially trained by another lay-midwife, though she had never attended college or become a nurse. She did go to an occasional conference and took continuing education classes by correspondence, and she belonged to an association where she networked with other midwives. As a lay-midwife, Sophie had an Oregon license to do home deliveries, but that's all she could do. When one of her clients ended up at a hospital, she couldn't care for the mother or deliver the baby. A nurse-midwife or a doctor took over from there.

Some of my colleagues disapproved of lay-midwives, but I didn't, at least not when it came to a normal birth. Even though I'd had six years of college, Sophie still knew more than I did. She knew remedies to start labor and to stop it, methods to soothe and relax the mother, and natural

ways to calm her. She knew when to take charge and when to step back. In high school I'd written an essay about the history of midwifery and came across a quote by a second-century Greek physician. He said a midwife needed to be of a "sympathetic disposition, although she need not have borne a child herself." That was Sophie. Never married. Never a mother. But always sympathetic.

It was because of her that I found the work I loved. Becoming a midwife was both my passion and my profession. Being a nurse-midwife meant I experienced all the joy of the delivery while being in the controlled environment of a hospital.

In the past few weeks, I had been so consumed with my father's care that I hadn't thought much about work. But I realized now that I missed it very much, missed the excitement and joy and even the heartbreak that were all part of the package.

Putting away those yearnings for now, I pinned the last towel in place, picked up the basket, and turned back toward the house.

Dad woke at six and asked for water. As he drank I offered him soup, but he declined. He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "Your grandmother loved you very much."

I nodded. That was part of my story. And that my grandmother was tall, like me. She had told my parents then that my birth mother wasn't in a position to keep me, but I was loved very much. That was what my grandmother most wanted me to know: that I was loved.

I thought it was odd how Dad wanted to talk about my adoption now. We hadn't discussed it in years, not since I was a teenager. Back then, when I wrestled with matters of identity and religion, I asked my father if my birth grandmother had been concerned about his and Mama's faith.

"Why?" he had asked.

I probably rolled my eyes, and then I said, "Mama's head covering. Didn't the woman think it odd?" I had stopped wearing my own cap the year before, telling my father it had no meaning for me.

Back then I spent a lot of time thinking about my birth family, creating a story of my own to pick up where the few facts my parents knew left off. My Oregon birth certificate didn't have the names of my biological parents on it, but it did list my birthplace as Montgomery County, Pennsylvania,

which I found on a map, a tilted rectangle not far from Philadelphia. The atlas described it as one of the wealthiest counties in the country, so after that I began to imagine my birth family living in their mansion in their fancy Philadelphia suburb and belonging to a country club. I could just see my grandparents playing golf during the summer and bridge during the winter.

I did a lot of research, scouring the library at my high school for information about Pennsylvania, trying to replace the fictions in my head with facts. I even studied the style of the quilt I had been wrapped in when I was first handed over to my parents. It was a simple block pattern of burgundy, green, and blue squares on a black background. One book said the design was often used by the Amish, whose quilts sold for hundreds and even thousands of dollars. I figured my grandmother had purchased it at an expensive handicraft boutique in the city. Either that, or she had gotten it straight from Amish country herself, which didn't look all that far from Philadelphia and was probably a common day trip for a woman of means and leisure.

I imagined my birth mother as eighteen or nineteen when I was born. Pregnant by accident. Old enough to love me but not to keep me. I imagined my grandmother to be between Mama and Dad in age—forty-four and fifty at the time—when she handed me to them, young enough to keep me but benevolent enough to give me to a childless couple. Though she might have been familiar with Plain people in general, because she lived in Pennsylvania and had purchased the quilt, I felt sure she had been a little alarmed by their age and dress. Already, Dad would have had white hair and must have had his black hat with him. And Mama would have worn her Mennonite cap, rubber-soled shoes, and a Plain caped dress.

Dad spoke slowly, something I found especially annoying back then in my teenage years. “Your birth grandmother didn't think there was anything odd about Mama's head covering,” he said. He was shelling hazelnuts at the kitchen table. He looked at me with his kind blue eyes. “She knew we were Mennonite, Alexandra. We're whom she wanted for you—whom God wanted.”

The tone in his voice hadn't been harsh, but it had been firm. And final. I was afraid I'd hurt his feelings.

Now Dad coughed. I offered him more water, but he shook his head, his eyes barely open. With each breath the rattle in his chest grew more pronounced, and after a while he closed his eyes and I thought he'd drifted

off to sleep, but then he said, "Always remember how much Mama and I love you too."

"I will," I whispered.

"When your grandmother gave you to us, she handed over a box as well. A carved box."

A box had never been part of the story. I sat on the edge of the bed, and he relaxed his grip on my hand and turned his face toward me.

"Why didn't I know about this?"

"It wasn't something to give a small child, not like the quilt, so we put it away until you were older. Time passed, and then your mother..." His voice trailed off.

Then my mother died, and either he forgot or he chose not to tell me. I held my breath as I waited for him to continue.

"What can I say but forgive me? She would have told you about the box years ago."

"Where is it now?"

"In my closet."

I glanced toward the closed wooden doors.

"What's in it?" I asked.

"Some old papers." He coughed again. "That sort of thing. Nothing of too much importance, as far as we could ever tell."

He coughed some more, stirring the rattle from deep in his chest.

"I'll look at the box later." I squeezed my father's hand.

"The key is on the bureau." He placed his free hand flat over his chest, over the double wedding ring quilt my mother made their first year of marriage.

"The key?"

"To the box. It's in my coin dish."

I remembered coming across a key when I chose coins for my Sunday offerings as a child.

"Don't forget," he said.

"I won't." I let go of his hand and picked up his Bible again. Under any other circumstances, especially with Dad's blessing, I would have been tearing the closet apart as I searched for the box, but at the moment I couldn't bear to leave his side, not even for that.

I continued to read, even though he fell back to sleep by the time I finished Psalm 24. When Sophie let herself into the house, I was on Psalm 50.

“Go on,” Sophie said, sitting on the edge of the bed, taking my father’s hand.

I finished with, “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I show the salvation of God.” I closed his old Bible with a thump.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“A boy. Five hours, two pushes, and six brothers thrilled with his arrival.”

I smiled. I didn’t see births like that very often in the maternity ward where I worked—that many siblings awaiting the baby’s arrival, the whole family celebrating together.

“Have you decided what you’ll do with the house?” Sophie asked.

I shrugged. I hadn’t decided anything. I didn’t want to sell it, rent it, or live in it. Nor did I want to sell the orchard. I wanted Dad in both the orchard and the house, alive. “I don’t know,” I said softly.

“How are things going with James?”

Sophie knew I had a habit of dumping men who became too serious. I thought I would feel differently with James because we’d known each other so many years, but now I wasn’t so sure. We started going out right after Dad was diagnosed last year, which might have been a reaction on my part to my fear of losing my father. I’d always found James attractive, even when I’d pretended to hate him during high school, but there was a part of me that was afraid to trust him, to trust any man besides Dad.

James and I didn’t talk much about our future. Sophie, the ladies at church, friends from work, and the people he went to school with all assumed we would get married. I knew James wouldn’t ask me until he was done with graduate school and had a job, though. He’d become hopelessly old-fashioned in that way.

Two months ago I wanted nothing more than to marry him and start a family. But lately I had no idea what I wanted.

An uneven breath from Dad caught both Sophie’s and my attention. He inhaled again. We waited. Finally he exhaled.

“Sweetie,” Sophie said as she stood. She reached for my hands and

placed them on top of his, on top of his chest, on top of the quilt. “Sweetie,” she said again. “I think it’s time.”

“No.” I laced my hands in his, leaning over him. It was too soon. I wasn’t ready.

He inhaled again. We waited.

“Come quickly, Lord Jesus,” Sophie whispered.

“Breathe,” I countered. But he didn’t.

He had never been overly affectionate with me, nor I with him, but now I kissed his face, his cheek, his eyelids, his forehead.

“He’s gone,” Sophie said.

“I know.” I squeezed his hands.

“Death is so holy, just like birth.” Sophie smiled as tears spilled down her face.

I let go of his hands, hoping he was right and that he and Mama had just been reunited.

“God rest both your souls,” I said, but the words rang hollow. I turned away and wept.