

ROAD TO KINGDOM – **BOOK THREE**

UNFORESEEABLE

NANCY MEHL



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Nancy Mehl, *Unforeseeable*

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To my beloved daughter-in-law, Shaen

A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

Proverbs 31:10–12 NIV

This was my prayer. You were my answer.

CHAPTER 1

“Murder and meat loaf just don’t go together,” Lizzie grumbled. “Why did the elders agree to let the new sheriff come here? To my restaurant? No one asked my permission.”

“It’s absurd to think a serial killer could possibly be hiding out in Kingdom,” I replied. “I don’t see why the sheriff needs to bother us with this.”

Lizzie chopped a large onion with a little too much gusto. “Well, your fiancé is the one who suggested it, Callie. Maybe you need to ask him what’s behind it.”

I set a tray of dirty dishes on the counter and sighed. “Levi says they’re bringing Sheriff Timmons here after his meeting with the elders so they can properly introduce him. After that, he plans to speak to us.” After washing my hands, I leaned against the sink and frowned at Lizzie. “Levi says the sheriff feels it’s important to warn us about these . . . murders.”

“Levi says. Levi says.” Lizzie shook her head. “You’re so funny. I can’t remember the last time I saw anyone so much in love.”

I pointed my finger at her. “Besides you and Noah, you mean?”

A quick smile flitted across her face and then disappeared.

“After everything this town has been through, to be honest, the idea of more bad news . . .”

“I know. I feel the same way. Why can’t the sheriff meet with just the elders and let them decide what to tell us?”

Lizzie sighed. “Women have been killed, Callie. I guess the sheriff is trying to warn us. To keep us safe.” She plopped the onions into a big pot of chili sitting on the stove and pushed a lock of curly black hair out of her eyes. “I still wish they’d picked someplace besides my restaurant. Murder doesn’t really stimulate the appetite, does it?”

Lizzie had worked hard to make Cora’s Corner Café a spot where families felt comfortable. It had taken Cora Menlo, the original owner, a long time to get Kingdom’s Mennonite citizens to accept the restaurant. When she’d opened it, over fifteen years ago, most families were convinced meals should be served at home. But over time, Cora’s Café had been received by a majority of our citizens. In fact, it had become a popular meeting place for friends to gather and socialize. I was grateful to work there and even more thankful that Lizzie and I had become good friends. During the past several years, I hadn’t had much time for socializing. Papa’s illness took up almost all of my time. Since he passed four months ago, I really leaned on my relationship with Lizzie.

“I think Levi chose the restaurant because the topic is . . . well, not one easily discussed in church,” I said. “This is the only other place in town big enough to accommodate a crowd.”

Lizzie grunted. “He’s right, I guess. But I still don’t have to like it.”

“Levi would never do anything to hurt you, Lizzie.”

“I know that. I’m not upset with him. Frankly, I’m still try-

ing to get used to Levi's being our pastor. It feels so strange, Pastor Mendenhall's leaving and Levi being elected to take his place. I used to love to tease him, but now it feels . . . I don't know, sacrilegious or something."

Even though our conversation was a serious one, I couldn't hold back a giggle. "Try being engaged to marry your pastor. That's really confusing."

Lizzie frowned at me. "Does it bother him that a few folks in the church think he's too young for the position?"

I shrugged. "He acts like it doesn't, but you know Levi. It's hard to know what he's really thinking."

Lizzie nodded. "I don't like the way he's changed in the last few months. I mean, he's always had a serious side, but we were always able to tease him out of it. Lately he's been different. Almost glum. I'm worried about him."

"I don't think he's unhappy. He just wants to do a good job."

"Well, he's a little too somber for me. Since accepting the pastorate, he doesn't laugh much. Or joke with Noah the way he used to."

I knew exactly what Lizzie was talking about, but for some reason her words made me feel defensive. Levi should be happy because of our engagement, but what Lizzie said was true. Day by day he seemed to grow more solemn.

"I wish people would leave him alone and let him do his job," I said tersely. "Why does everyone have to have an opinion about everything? No wonder he's changed."

Lizzie grunted. "This is Kingdom, Callie. Folks think poking their nose into other people's business is their right. Their responsibility. It's always been that way. Hopefully, the uneasiness about Levi will fade away after a while."

“I guess there were already some concerns because we had three younger elders on the board.”

“The blame for that should be directed toward the older elders who quit. My father, John Lapp, and Elmer Wittenbauer.” She shook her head. “Seems ridiculous to worry about good men like Levi, Noah, and Ebbie Miller when the church voted for someone like Elmer Wittenbauer. He’s old, but that sure didn’t make him the right choice.”

I nodded my agreement. Elmer Wittenbauer, who’d stepped down over a dispute with Pastor Mendenhall, didn’t have a good reputation in Kingdom. When he was first elected, no one knew about all the problems in his home. But after he began serving as an elder, his laziness toward his family, and the mistreatment of his wife and daughter slowly became common knowledge. Before Pastor Mendenhall and the other elders were faced with having him removed, he’d quit, citing health reasons. At least the church had learned an important lesson about being more careful in selecting men for positions of authority.

Lizzie grabbed a large spoon and began stirring the chili. “Levi’s one of the wisest men I’ve ever known. Even if he is only thirty.” She stopped and turned toward me. “What about you? Do you ever worry about your age? Twenty-two is pretty young for a pastor’s wife.”

“I try not to think about it too much, but I do pray I won’t let him down.”

Even though I tried to sound undaunted, I was very concerned about my age and lack of experience. How could I possibly live up to the job? Besides taking care of a husband, a home, and any future children, I was expected to visit those in our church who were sick, as well as coordinate assistance

to families who needed help with food, clothing, and other needs. Along with those duties, several of the women had asked that the ladies' Bible study begin again. It had disbanded after Bethany, Pastor Mendenhall's wife, left town. The idea terrified me. I'd spent a lot of time reading the Bible, but as a new bride, how in the world was I supposed to teach married women in the church about being godly wives? It was ridiculous.

I wanted to confess my fears to Lizzie, but I was afraid. Afraid that she'd see me for the fraud I really was. For the failure I felt like. I'd been in love with Levi for a long time, but I'd never considered that one day he might become the pastor of Kingdom Mennonite Church. Now I had no choice but to try to find a way to live up to the role of a pastor's wife. If I couldn't, I risked losing the only man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

"Oh, Callie," Lizzie said. "You'll be wonderful. We all loved Bethany, but this last year she was so restless and unhappy that she didn't do much for the church. You don't have a tough act to follow. Everything will work out."

"I hope you're right. I think everyone's in shock because of Pastor and his family moving away."

"Bethany was convinced that living here was keeping them from fulfilling the Lord's admonition to 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.' Then when Pastor was almost killed in the church fire last summer, she put her foot down and insisted they leave. It was hard to argue with her when she truly believed it was wrong for them to stay."

"Do you think she was right?"

Lizzie shrugged. "I have no idea. All I know is that I miss

them. Of course, I'm thrilled to have Levi as our pastor," she added quickly, "but Pastor Mendenhall was such a blessing to this town. He tried so hard to move us toward grace and away from judgment."

I knew exactly what she meant, but some church members, including Lizzie's father and John Lapp, seemed to believe that Pastor Mendenhall's stand for grace had led to his downfall. No amount of reasoning would sway them or their companions. In the past year, Matthew Engel's attitudes had softened in many ways, especially toward his daughter, Lizzie, and granddaughter, Charity, but his views about keeping the leaven of the world out of Kingdom remained strong—much to Lizzie's dismay. And John, who had recently lost his wife to cancer, stood with Matthew every step of the way.

"Well, I pray the Mendenhalls are happy in Nebraska," I said, "and I hope Levi will be given the chance to fill pastor's shoes without undue pressure."

Lizzie sighed deeply. "The whole church should support him. He was brave enough to accept the position."

"I hope so too. It would hurt Levi to think his appointment might bring strife." I straightened my apron and adjusted my prayer covering. As usual, several curls had escaped my bun. No matter how hard I tried to attain the sleek look most of the women in Kingdom achieved, my stubborn hair refused to stay in place. I finally gave up.

"I hate that you and Levi had to push back your wedding date," Lizzie said.

I sighed. "I understand why it was necessary, but I hope we don't have to wait much longer. We've been engaged for three months now and moved the wedding twice."

"What's the new date?"

“We haven’t picked a date, but we’re planning for March. Levi feels things should be going more smoothly by then.”

Lizzie grunted. “Two more months. I know you’re getting impatient.”

“I’m trying not to be, but it’s hard.”

She nodded and turned her attention back to her chili.

I grabbed two clean coffee carafes and carried them over to one of the new electric coffee makers Lizzie had purchased for the restaurant. Now, instead of trying to brew coffee on the stove in large tin coffeepots, we just filled these huge metal containers with water and coffee grounds, flipped a switch, and let them sizzle and pop until the red lights came on, telling us the coffee was brewed and ready to drink. At first the chrome monsters intimidated me, but now I found the convenience wonderful—even though I still felt a little guilty about using electricity.

As I prepared to fill the carafes, I noticed that the red light was lit on only one of the coffee makers. Putting my hand against the other one, I was dismayed to find it was still cold. I checked the plug and jiggled it, but nothing happened.

“This pot’s not working,” I told Lizzie.

“Oh, Callie,” she said, “I forgot to tell you about that receptacle. It’s not functioning. You’ll have to move the pot over here.” She pointed to an empty receptacle near the dishwasher. “Bud Gruber will be back tomorrow to fix it.”

I unplugged the heavy container and carried it to the spot Lizzie indicated. “But he was just here this morning,” I said. “Why didn’t he fix it then?”

“He needed some part he didn’t have with him.” She shook her head. “He’s been working really hard to put in our additional receptacles and help us switch over from our generator

to electricity. I feel guilty allowing him to give us so much of his time for the pittance he charges.”

“Isn’t he the same man who helped Cora get the restaurant up and running when it first opened?”

Lizzie nodded. “Yes. And don’t think he didn’t catch some flack from the elders back then.”

“I’m surprised he was willing to help us again.”

“Well, Cora said he was the only one she trusted to get everything up and running. I felt bad about calling him so soon after his wife died, but according to Cora, having something to do is just what he needs.”

I laughed. “You certainly have been filling that requirement. He’s starting to become a fixture around here.”

The addition of electricity to our town was met with joy by some residents and with suspicion by others. At first, those wanting service had to ask for approval from the elders. Some of our downtown businesses received permission, along with a lot of our farmers. But after a while, spurred on by Levi and most of our younger elders, the church lifted its ban. Everyone had to decide for themselves if electricity was something they really needed. Interestingly enough, most folks concluded they liked life the way it was and didn’t want to alter their plain existence. Most of us lived in Kingdom because we loved simplicity, so change wasn’t always looked upon as progress. A few people, like Matthew, were convinced that the addition of “evil” things like electricity would ruin the soul of our town. In truth, there wasn’t much of a difference.

“Well, this coffee maker is full,” I said. “The other one should be ready in plenty of time. I’ll make the rounds again, but to be honest, most folks aren’t ordering much. Except pie, of course. I’m glad you made extra.”

Lizzie shrugged. “It’s two o’clock. People in Kingdom like to eat their meals at the proper time. They won’t start ordering supper until at least five or five-thirty.”

I grinned. “But pie is acceptable anytime?”

She laughed. “You’ve got that right.”

I headed out into the crowded dining room. The usual cheery atmosphere was noticeably subdued. I loved the restaurant with its gleaming oak floors, chrome tables, and wooden booths. Oak paneling halfway up the walls turned into red-and-white-checked wallpaper, although not much of the wallpaper was actually visible. Quilts, painted plates, and a few rare pictures from the early days of Kingdom covered almost every available space. A hearty fire crackled in the large brick fireplace, adding an additional impression of coziness. Usually I felt safe and secure inside the inviting room, but today there was a chill that even a roaring fire couldn’t quench. Death hung in the air, and though I tried to ignore uneasy feelings of dread, they refused to be banished.

After warming up everyone’s coffee and refilling a few water glasses, I took orders for five more pieces of Lizzie’s Dutch apple pie. I’d just delivered the last one when I noticed three buggies pull up in front of the restaurant, one right after the other. Behind them, a Washington County sheriff’s car drove up slowly and parked a few spots away. I watched as the new sheriff got out. The sudden silence in the dining room was an indication I wasn’t the only person interested in what was happening outside.

I almost gasped when I got a clear look at the sheriff. He looked young. Really young. As he and the elders entered the restaurant, it got so quiet I could almost hear people breathing. The men paused to wipe snow off their shoes and boots.

We had almost three inches on the ground, and it had started snowing again early this morning. It was still coming down outside, and I wondered when we'd get a break. I loved the snow, but it made life harder on those who relied solely on a horse and buggy to get around.

I hurried to the kitchen to let Lizzie know the elders and the sheriff had arrived. She followed me back to the dining room. As we entered, Levi had just begun to address the crowd. His eyes sought mine, and he gave me a shy smile. I felt a sudden deep rush of emotion. Levi looked a lot like his younger brother Noah, but was a little taller. In the summer his brown hair became streaked with blond. In winter, however, his hair darkened and was almost exactly the same shade as Noah's. Even though the brothers were similar in appearance, they were very different in personality. Noah was gregarious and friendly, but Levi was more quiet and introspective. Levi had a deep and abiding faith and loved to encourage people to put their trust in God, no matter what the circumstance. Sometimes he would chide me for not trusting enough. I had to admit that my faith needed encouragement. Caring for my father had weakened me physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Levi firmly believed that God would meet every need, answer every prayer, and touch every broken place. In truth, his support and prayers lifted my spirits, and his love gave me hope for the future. Something I'd misplaced during Papa's illness.

Levi's convictions usually kept him upbeat and calm, so the recent transformation in his demeanor worried me, just as it did Lizzie. I not only loved Levi with every fiber of my being, but I respected him more than anyone I'd ever known. If he was struggling, I wanted to help. But so far he wouldn't

admit that anything was wrong. Down deep inside me dwelt a nagging fear that he was sorry he'd asked me to marry him. His proposal had been so heartfelt and romantic. Yet now, sometimes, he seemed to be so far away. Could his feelings have changed?

"May I have your attention?" Levi said, although it wasn't necessary, since all eyes were already glued on him. "This is our new sheriff, Brodie Timmons. He has something important to say to you."

Levi stepped back and left the sheriff standing alone. Sheriff Timmons took off his hat and smiled at us. He had short dark hair, light-blue eyes, and deep dimples that made him look even younger than my first impression.

"First of all, folks, I'm glad to meet you. I understand you didn't have a very good relationship with the previous sheriff. I'm real sorry about that, and I want you to know that I'm going to work hard to make things different."

I don't know if he expected his words to make an impact on the conservative Mennonite crowd that stared back at him, but the response wasn't encouraging. We'd been through a lot with his predecessor—a man who disliked us because of our choice to live a simple, set-apart lifestyle. It would take some time for Timmons to build a bridge of trust with the citizens of Kingdom. For the most part, even before our problems with the previous sheriff, we tended to solve our own troubles. Calling on help from the world was certainly a last resort.

Sheriff Timmons blinked several times and took another run at it. "I have a strong faith background too, so I have a lot of respect for your community. Anything you need, anything at all, just ask."

He cleared his throat, and for the first time, his dimples disappeared. “We have a very serious situation right now in our area, and I felt you should know about it. In the past few months, three women have lost their lives due to what we believe is one particular suspect. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation is heavily involved in searching for this killer, and our department has been pulled into the case. The bureau believes the man who committed these murders was involved in similar crimes twenty years ago—also in Washington County.” He folded his arms across his chest, still holding his hat, and frowned at us. “It’s highly unusual for a suspect to stop killing for twenty years and then take it up again, but it’s been known to happen. Take BTK in Wichita.”

Levi cleared his throat, and Sheriff Timmons looked at him.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Sheriff, but I don’t know what a BTK is.”

Timmons face went slack in surprise. His eyes traveled around the room. “You folks don’t know about BTK?”

“I know who he is,” Lizzie said. “He murdered several women but then disappeared. After many years he came back and killed again. The police finally caught him.” She shook her head. “I lived in Kansas City for several years, but most of these people have no idea what’s going on in the world, Sheriff. You’ll have to explain things a little more carefully in Kingdom.”

“Sorry,” Timmons said sheepishly. “I forget that you folks don’t get much news from the outside. I apologize.” He cleared his throat again, a sign he was nervous. “I brought up that particular case because it helps us to profile our guy a little better. We’re looking for someone who’s been away and recently returned to the area. Or someone who’s been

here the whole time but may have had a change in his life. Something unusual happened that's set him off. He may act differently than he used to. Although I doubt seriously he comes from Kingdom, I would appreciate it if you folks would keep your eyes and ears open. If you think of anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable . . . someone who might fit the pattern I'm suggesting, would you please contact me? We'll keep your information confidential. I know you'd hate to cast aspersions toward a friend or neighbor and turn out to be wrong."

He gazed down at his shoes for a moment as if gathering his thoughts. "One other thing. Since the original killings happened in another part of the county, it's possible our perpetrator might be fairly new to the area, although we can't be sure of that. Maybe he just chose another place to kill." He took a deep breath, raised his head, and gazed around at the silent crowd. "Your elders have assured me that your women don't go out alone at night, and that's good. Please don't change that under any circumstances. It's especially important now. It would also be best if no woman wandered around alone at any time—even during the day. And it's especially important they don't leave town without an escort."

I glanced over at Hope. She loved driving her buggy to nearby Washington for supplies, but since it had been an especially cold January, I suspected it wouldn't bother her to forgo those trips for now. As I figured, she didn't seem the least bit bothered by the pronouncement.

Sheriff Timmons cleared his throat. "Are there any questions?"

After several moments of silence, Jonathon Weise, one of

the young single men who lived in Kingdom, raised his hand. The sheriff nodded at him.

“So we’re looking for someone who used to live here and moved away, or someone new, or someone who’s been here the whole time?” He shook his head. “Um, doesn’t that pretty much describe everyone?”

The sheriff colored. “I know it sounds like that. I guess the most important thing is that all of you remain especially vigilant. If someone you know is acting . . . odd, let us know. If you see a stranger hanging around, it’s particularly important that you notify us right away.”

“There aren’t any strangers in Kingdom, Sheriff,” Jonathon said. “We all know each other.”

Timmons nodded. “That should actually help to keep you safe. Unless . . .”

“Unless the murderer lives here?” Noah said. “I can assure you that there aren’t any serial killers in Kingdom, Sheriff.”

A small spate of nervous laughter filtered through the room. Although the topic was certainly serious, I also found the notion rather comical—and impossible.

“I heard these recent killings were all north of us, Sheriff,” Jonathon said, frowning. “Is there any reason you think Kingdom residents could be in danger?”

He shook his head. “Nothing specific, but Washington is a small county. Anything that happens in one part of the county affects all of us. Besides, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Luke Pressley, a local farmer, raised his hand. “Sheriff, I have lived here all my life, and I do not remember any murders twenty years ago.”

“I’m glad you brought that up. Although the deaths were reported, they weren’t tied to a serial killer until about two

years back. In fact, in two of the cases, there was a suspect, but not enough evidence to charge him. All of the cases went cold. Stayed unsolved. But they were finally linked through state-of-the-art investigative techniques, including DNA tests.”

Luke frowned at him. “DNA? I do not know the term.”

The sheriff flushed again. “Of course you don’t. Sorry. DNA is something found in the nucleolus of a human cell. It’s almost like fingerprints, but even more accurate. By looking at DNA, we can tell who might have touched a victim before they died. If the same DNA is discovered at more than one crime scene, we’re able to conclude that one specific person is tied to all the murders. That’s what happened in this case. Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to link the DNA to any known suspect.”

Although no one said anything, I was sure most of us were still confused. Lizzie nodded as if she understood, but she’d been exposed to many things when she lived in Kansas City.

I was certain there were more details that could be shared about the murders, but further questions wouldn’t be asked in a mixed group like this one. It would be inappropriate. After a few more moments of silence, Levi stepped up next to the sheriff.

“I’m not sure how many of you have heard, but Roger Carson, Mary Yoder’s husband, is working for the sheriff’s department now.” He caught Timmons’s eye. “If some of our people feel more comfortable talking to Roger, would that be all right with you?”

The sheriff nodded. “Roger completed his training a couple of weeks ago and is officially my deputy. Anyone who would rather contact him is welcome to do so.” He paused for a moment and slowly looked around the room. “I do hope you’ll

give me a chance though. It may seem that law enforcement isn't on your side, but it's not true."

"I encourage you to take Sheriff Timmons at his word," Levi said. "He's a good man. I don't believe we have anything to worry about under his watch." He waited a moment, studying the crowd while allowing his words to sink in. "If there are no further questions, we'll let the sheriff go on his way. I hope you will all be vigilant and contact him if you see or hear anything that concerns you. And, of course, if anyone wants to talk to me or one of the elders, that's fine too. We'll pass your information along. The most important thing is that you don't dismiss information that could be useful. Lives may be at stake."

With that, the meeting was over. Sheriff Timmons spoke briefly to Levi and then took off. As soon as the door closed behind him, conversation broke out all over the room. It was clear Kingdom residents had a lot to say about the sheriff's visit. Several people rushed up to the elders who stood together near the front door. One of the first was John Lapp, and he didn't look happy. I wondered what kind of trouble he was trying to stir up. After a few minutes, Levi left them and came over to me.

"What do you think?" he asked quietly.

"I think the sheriff's visit will be the number one topic in town for quite some time."

He nodded. "I suspect you're right. I have to admit that at first I was against his coming here. I felt it would be best if he brought his information to me and the elders and allowed us to inform the community."

I frowned at him. "I've been thinking the same thing. Subjects like this make me very uncomfortable."

His blue eyes locked on mine. “Kingdom is a special place, Callie. I don’t want to see us lose our innocence either, but I truly believe Brodie Timmons has our best interests at heart. I know he’s an outsider, but he’s a good man. I trust him.”

I shrugged. “I hope you’re right.” I shivered, even though the room was warm. “At least I’m certain there aren’t any serial killers living in Kingdom. And a stranger would never be able to make his way into town without being spotted.” As soon as I said the words, I remembered that a stranger *had* made his way into Kingdom last summer. The consequences from that situation had almost ended in tragedy.

Levi was quiet, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing. He turned away from me and looked out at the people gathered together in the dining room. His parishioners. His friends. I knew he felt protective of them.

I put my arm through his. “I hate that something so evil has come this close to us. It makes me feel so—”

“Maybe it’s just wedding nerves,” he said with a smile. “You’re not getting cold feet, are you?”

I laughed in spite of the seriousness of our previous conversation. “Nothing could stop me from marrying you.” I looked up at him. “How about you?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I may be unsure about a lot of things, but marrying you isn’t one of them.” He let go of my arm. “We’ll talk more about this later. Right now, I’ve got to get back to the church. I’ll return for supper, but I might be a little late.”

“Okay.” I wanted to kiss him good-bye, but that’s something a Mennonite pastor doesn’t usually do in public.

I watched as he made his way across the room. Several people stopped him to talk. When he finally got to the door

he looked back at me one last time. For some reason, I felt like running after him, begging him not to leave. Something my father used to say echoed in my mind. “*The devil is stirrin’, Callie. Can you feel it?*”

I never understood what he meant until that very moment.

CHAPTER 2

After Levi left I went back in the kitchen, trying to shake the strange feeling that had come over me. I was probably just reacting to the sheriff's visit, and I tried to tell myself that the topic was upsetting enough to distress anyone. I was in the kitchen only a few seconds before Lizzie and Noah walked in. Noah looked disturbed.

“So what do you think of the new sheriff?” I asked him.

He shook his head and slumped down into a chair by a small table Lizzie kept in the kitchen for the nights her daughter, Charity, ate dinner at the restaurant.

“I like him, I really do. But this whole serial-killer thing chaps my hide. In the past year we've had two murders and two attempted murders.” He looked at Lizzie. “Our church was burned to the ground, and the previous sheriff shot his son not far from where we're sitting. Now we're on the lookout for a serial killer. What in the world is going on? As an elder, I have to wonder if the church leadership is failing in its duty to keep this town safe. I've tried to talk to Levi about it, but you know my brother. He just keeps telling me to ‘have faith.’”

Lizzie went over and stood behind her husband, putting her hands on his shoulders. “I know it sounds like we're

no better off than anyone else, but it's not true. I lived in Kansas City for five years. The difference between Kingdom and Kansas City is . . ." She paused for a moment. "It . . . it's hard to describe. But here I feel the love of God protecting us, watching over us. Outside of Kingdom, there were so many voices, so much violence, and so much fear. It was hard to feel God anywhere and almost impossible to hear his Spirit speak to my heart. I think Levi's right. We just need to trust God. Believe He's watching over us." She shook her head slowly. "Kingdom may not be impenetrable, but it is definitely a refuge. A place of peace and love." She leaned over and kissed Noah on the head. "And love, my dearest husband, is stronger than any evil the world sends our way. Even the devil himself can't stand in its presence."

Noah reached up and grabbed her hand. Then he pulled her around and onto his lap. Lizzie giggled like a schoolgirl.

"That's nice," I said with a grin. "What a great example for an elder of Kingdom Mennonite Church to set in front of one of his parishioners."

"You're worried about this?" he said. "Just wait." With that, he kissed Lizzie right on the lips.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You two are incorrigible."

Lizzie pushed herself away from Noah and stood up. "You're a mess, Noah Housler. I'm going to tell your brother."

He put his hands up in mock surrender. "Go ahead. He'll think it's funny."

"I'm not so sure about that," Lizzie said. "He hasn't been much fun lately."

Noah sat up straighter. "Well, you're right about that." He rubbed his stubbly chin, a concession to the Mennonite tradition of growing a beard after marriage. Lizzie's abhor-

rence of full beards had thrust Noah into an uncomfortable place between Mennonite tradition and the favor of his wife. Thankfully, his compromise seemed to satisfy all concerned parties. “I think all the unpleasant incidents that have happened in this town are weighing heavily on him. I have to wonder if he’s experiencing a crisis of faith. Of course, he won’t talk about it.” Noah shrugged. “The Bible talks about how evil the world will become before the Lord returns. That darkness may be reaching past the borders of Kingdom, and it may be impossible to stop. Even for someone like Levi.”

I didn’t respond. Noah’s words disturbed me. Just a few months earlier, churches and people of faith had been attacked by a group of angry young men bent on causing destruction. We’d lost one of our dearest citizens to their wrath. Now, once again, we would have to face the reality of a fallen world trying to breach our boundaries. The realization stoked a sensation of underlying panic that had been stirring up my emotions for almost a month. I couldn’t understand it, nor could I banish it. It upset me that I couldn’t name the source of my alarm and deal with it. I wanted to talk to Levi about it, but with everything else going on in his life right now, I didn’t want to add to his burdens.

Lizzie turned down the fire on the chili and then leaned against the counter. “Well, I still say we’re better off here than anywhere else. I have a child to consider, and I can’t think of a better place to raise her than in Kingdom.”

Noah rubbed an invisible spot on the table with his finger. “I lived in the world for two years, and I couldn’t wait to come home. But it wasn’t because I felt safer here. I just felt . . . called. I love farming, and I love this town.” His forehead wrinkled in thought. “But I worry sometimes that by being

so isolated we're not fulfilling Christ's commission to reach the world."

"That's what Bethany believed," I said.

Lizzie sighed. "I totally understood why she felt that way, but sometimes the *world* we're called to is right where we are." She waved her hand around the room. "We have a town of almost three hundred souls to minister to. That's enough world for me."

"Yes, but almost all of them already know God," Noah said. "That's why they're here."

"Jesus also admonished us to feed His sheep, Noah. I just took it literally."

Noah and I burst out laughing.

"And she does too," Noah said. "There will never be an empty stomach in Kingdom, thanks to my wife."

"You're right about that," Lizzie said. "This is exactly where I belong. Maybe Bethany felt the need to leave, but not me."

"I understand," Noah said. "I'm perfectly content here too. But at the same time, not everyone is called to live in Kingdom." He smiled at me. "I think the key is to find the place God wants you to be. He puts the people in your life He wants you to touch, and He leads you to your point of blessing."

"What if one day Charity feels called to leave?" I asked. "Then what?"

"Then she'll have to leave," Noah said matter-of-factly. "What God wants must come first if we're ever to fulfill our destiny. Anyway, that's what I believe."

Lizzie grunted. "Since Charity's only eight, I don't think I'll make plans to pack her up and send her out anytime soon, if you don't mind."

"Well, we weren't suggesting she was going to grab her

bags and head out tomorrow,” Noah said, grinning. “She should wait until she’s at least ten.”

Lizzie picked up a nearby dish towel and snapped him on the leg with it.

“Ouch,” he yelled. “I’m being abused. Call the sheriff.”

I laughed again, rather embarrassed to be having so much fun right after the sheriff’s serious announcement.

“Brodie Timmons won’t help you,” Lizzie teased. “He’d be on my side.”

“I think she’s got you there, Noah,” I said.

“Changing the subject for a moment,” Lizzie said to her husband when he settled down, “can you tell us more about what the sheriff said in your private meeting? I felt like we weren’t getting the whole story. Were the women . . . defiled?”

I felt myself blush. Sex wasn’t really talked about much in our community, although Lizzie had said more than once it should be. She’d gotten pregnant as a teenager, partially because she’d been unaware of the consequences of her actions. She’d had a long talk with me after Levi and I became engaged. My father had never spoken to me about such things, and since my mother was gone, I’d had no one to fill me in on what Lizzie referred to as “the facts of life.” Our conversation was a real eye-opener. Although I’d figured out a lot on my own, having spent many years around farm animals, there were a few details I wasn’t aware of. Thinking about it now made my ears burn. Even though it had been a rather embarrassing conversation, I was very grateful Lizzie cared enough to tell me what I needed to know before my wedding night.

Noah shook his head. “No. They weren’t harmed in that way. When they were found, they’d been strangled, their hands folded on their chests, and their bodies wrapped in plastic.

Except for the marks on their necks, there were no other injuries.” He sighed. “Brodie said the KBI is stumped.”

I frowned at him. “But I thought Sheriff Timmons said they’d found D . . . DN . . .”

“DNA,” Noah said. “Yes, they did. Most of it came from the victims’ necks when he strangled them. They also have some skin and hair samples that were probably left behind when the women fought for their lives.”

I felt my stomach turn over. “Oh my.”

“Are you okay?” Lizzie asked, looking at me with concern. “You just turned really pale.”

I nodded, trying to compose myself. “Yes, but that’s so . . . so—”

“Shocking?” Noah said. “Yes, it is. Here’s something really strange. Brodie said that wrapping the women in plastic shows the killer had some remorse for what he was doing. In some strange way he was trying to care for the women.” He stared at me. “I know. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s demonic, Callie. Demons seek to kill, steal, and destroy. They’re agents of destruction. You can’t figure them out.”

“But the man must have some reason to kill. What is it?”

“I asked Brodie that same question. He said many times they never find a motive. It could be a deep-seated hatred for all women. Or something happened to him when he was young. But understanding the motive isn’t always possible.” He shook his head. “Our new sheriff repeated the same thing I just told you—that the devil doesn’t make sense.”

Lizzie’s eyebrows arched. “He said that? Wow, that’s a switch. A sheriff who knows God.”

Noah nodded. “I think he’s going to be an asset to Kingdom. We could actually end up being friends.”

“That would certainly be a change over the previous sheriff,” Lizzie said.

“By the way,” Noah said, “don’t repeat that information about the plastic. The KBI is trying to keep some information quiet.”

“Well, I won’t be telling anyone,” I said. “It’s not something I want to talk about anyway.”

“Thanks,” Noah said. “I probably shouldn’t have told you and Lizzie, but I know you can keep a secret. And I’m fairly sure neither one of you is a serial killer.”

“Thanks, honey,” Lizzie said wryly. “That’s the nicest thing you ever said to me.”

Noah laughed.

I straightened my apron. “Well, I think I’m ready to concentrate on the dinner crowd. No more serial killers or demons for me for a while.”

Lizzie grunted. “I agree. The chili’s simmering, and I’ve got to start getting the steaks ready. Why don’t you go out and see if we have any real customers or if everyone went home after the meeting?”

I nodded and pushed open the kitchen door. The people who had remained in the restaurant were deep in conversation and didn’t seem the least bit interested in ordering food. After checking with everyone, I went back into the kitchen to help Lizzie prepare for supper. Noah offered to keep an eye on the dining room since we weren’t busy. Lizzie and I spent the next hour preparing that night’s menu items. Neither one of us brought up the murders again. After a while, I started to feel almost normal again. Serial killers and Kingdom didn’t go together, of that much I was certain.

A little after four, I was bringing a carafe of coffee out to

the dining room when Ruby, Elmer and Dorcas Wittenbauer's niece, walked in the front door. Dorcas's sister in Arkansas had passed away several months earlier, and Ruby's father had abandoned her. Lizzie and I worried that Ruby would be mistreated like Sophie, the Wittenbauers' daughter who had fled Kingdom last summer, had been. Fortunately, Leah, who leads our small Kingdom school, took Ruby under her wing, promising to keep a close eye on her. And Lizzie's daughter, Charity, had befriended the girl as well. Even though Charity was much younger, the girls seemed to have bonded like sisters. As their pastor, Levi checked in regularly with the Wittenbauers, making certain they knew the church would not take kindly to any abuse. I especially felt drawn to the young girl, trying to reach out to her when I helped Leah at the school. But so far, Ruby wasn't responding much to anyone except Charity.

Ruby stood near the door, looking around the room, her expression full of anxiety. I put the carafe on a nearby table and went over to her.

"If you're looking for Charity, she's not here," I said gently. "She goes to her grandparents' house after school on Wednesdays."

Ruby stared back at me. Her large green eyes held a shadow of fear that tore at my heart. No child should be so afraid. I felt protective of her, and my anger at the Wittenbauers began to bubble.

"I know she's not here," Ruby said softly. "But Uncle Elmer was supposed to pick me up after school, and he never showed up. I tried to wait, but it got too cold."

"Ruby, where's your coat?" I noticed for the first time that she was wearing just a thin dress and an apron. Both too large for her. Probably Sophie's old clothes. I could see her tremble.

“Aunt Dorcas said I didn’t need one today.”

“Take my hand, Ruby,” I said, trying to control my rage. “Let’s get you warmed up. How about some hot chocolate and a piece of pie?” She was so thin I wondered if the Wittenbauers bothered to feed her at all. By the time we reached the kitchen, I was beyond furious.

“Oh, my goodness,” Lizzie said when she saw me. “What’s wrong?”

I took a deep, shaky breath, trying to calm myself. The last thing I wanted to do was upset the child more than she was. “Elmer forgot to pick Ruby up from school. She’s been waiting outside all this time—without a coat. I thought maybe a cup of hot chocolate and a piece of pie would help to warm her up.”

Lizzie pulled out a chair from the small table. “Absolutely. You have a seat here, Ruby.”

The child looked back and forth between us, as if unsure of our motives.

“It’s okay, Ruby,” I said softly. “You like pie, don’t you?”

She nodded and sat down at the table. I was trying desperately not to cry. It wouldn’t help her to see me upset, but at that moment, Mennonite or not, I wanted to thrash Elmer and Dorcas Wittenbauer to within an inch of their lives.

Lizzie pulled out a large pan and started the hot chocolate. I opened the refrigerator door. “What kind of pie do you like?” I asked Ruby.

At first I wasn’t sure she was going to answer, but finally she said, “Do you have chocolate?” Her voice was so soft, I almost didn’t hear her.

I smiled. “There just happens to be an entire chocolate cream pie in here. How about—”

Before I could finish, the door to the kitchen swung open and a red-faced Elmer Wittenbauer stomped inside, trailing melting snow behind him.

“What are you doin’ hidin’ in here, girl?” he said loudly when he spotted Ruby. “I been lookin’ all over for you. You get outta here and in the buggy. Now.”

Lizzie put down the spoon she was stirring the chocolate with and started to say something. But before she had a chance, the anger inside me boiled over. I slammed the door to the refrigerator and went over to Elmer, grabbing his arm.

“I’d like to speak to you, Brother Wittenbauer,” I said between clenched teeth. “Will you please step outside a moment?” Before he had a chance to argue, I pulled him out the door and into the small hall that led to the dining room. No small feat, since he was huge, and I didn’t even tip the scales at one hundred pounds.

“How dare you manhandle me,” he sputtered. “I will make sure your ungodly behavior is reported to the elders. If you think—”

“Now you listen to me, Elmer Wittenbauer,” I said, trying to keep my voice low enough so as not to garner attention from our customers, “you are not going to haul that girl out of here right now. She’s having pie and hot chocolate. What you *will* do is sit down out here until she’s ready to go.”

Elmer pulled his fat arm out of my grasp. “Look here, little girl, you ain’t gonna tell me nothin’. I’ll take what’s mine now and ain’t no one gonna stop me. Specially you. Yes sir, the elders is gonna get an earful.” His greasy smile sent a shiver running through me. “Your boyfriend won’t be marryin’ you if he wants to stay pastor.”

He started to move toward the kitchen door, but I stepped

in front of him. My body shook so hard I felt as if I might fall down.

“You’re not going to say anything to anybody,” I choked out. “Because if you do, I’ll make sure the elders know about the way you’ve been treating that child.” I stuck my small face up as close to his round one as I could. His expression told me I’d hit my mark. “I’m not stupid, Elmer. This is your last chance. If I see even one sign that you’ve been mistreating Ruby, I’m going to make sure you lose any help the church is giving you and Dorcas. And one more thing”—I stuck my finger just inches from his nose—“I’m going to be watching you. Closely. If that child isn’t picked up on time from school, if I see her out in cold weather without a coat, or if I see one thing that concerns me, *you* will be hauled before Levi and the elders for discipline. And don’t think for one moment I can’t make that happen. They’re going to believe me a lot sooner than they’ll trust a word that comes out of your mouth.” I glared at him. Whatever he saw in my face made the blood drain from his. “Do you totally and completely understand me?”

Elmer didn’t say anything, just nodded.

“You go sit down at a table and be quiet. Ruby will come out when she’s good and ready. Then you’ll take her home, and things will be different. Or else.”

I whirled around and ran right into Lizzie who stood in the doorway, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open. She stared at Elmer, who seemed transfixed by what had just happened. She quickly pulled the door closed behind her.

“You heard Callie,” Lizzie said firmly. “Now get going.”

Elmer scampered off like his britches were on fire. Lizzie grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me a couple of times. “Callie!” The expression on her face frightened me.

I twisted away from her. “I’m okay. Let me go.” My voice trembled like an old woman’s, and I felt faint. Lizzie put her arm around my shoulders. This time I didn’t pull away.

“Are you okay?” she asked quietly. “I-I’ve never seen you act like that before.” She gazed into my eyes. “You don’t look well. I think you need to sit down.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I can’t go in there right now. I’m too upset.” I was surprised to feel tears running down my cheeks. “I . . . I don’t know what came over me.”

Lizzie hugged me. “I think I do, but we’ll talk about it later. When you’re not so upset.” She took my chin in her hand. “You put the fear of God into old Elmer. He’ll think twice about how he treats Ruby from now on.”

I wasn’t proud of how I’d acted, but I felt confident my tirade would help the child. Abusing Ruby could cause the Wittenbauers serious trouble with the church. They were dependent on the congregation’s assistance. Financial help had increased since Ruby had come to live with them. If the church decided to discipline them, all that free food and monetary aid would disappear. For Elmer and Dorcas anyway. They might actually have to work, and that was something they dreaded more than anything else. I hoped Lizzie was right, that they would change their ways, but I wasn’t confident that would happen. More than anything, I wanted to see Ruby in a home where she would be loved and cherished.

I wiped my face with my apron. “I’m all right now, Lizzie. Thank you.” I smiled at her. “I have an extra cloak upstairs in my closet that I think would fit Ruby. Will you watch her while I fetch it?”

Lizzie nodded. “Go get it. But for pity’s sake, please don’t

say anything else to Elmer for a while. I thought he was going to have a heart attack right here in the restaurant.”

Even though I was appalled by my loss of control, the look on Lizzie’s face made me giggle. Lizzie joined in and we cackled like two old hens.

“I have no idea what I’m laughing about,” I said, once I regained my composure. “That was hardly ladylike behavior. My father would have been horrified by that ungracious display of temper.”

Lizzie looked at me oddly. “Well, maybe he would have been, Callie, but I’m not. I’m proud of you. You stood up to Elmer, and you did it for a child who couldn’t defend herself.” She leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I’m very, very proud of you,” she said again.

My face grew warm with embarrassment, but down deep inside, I was tickled by Lizzie’s praise.

“I-I’d better get going.”

“Okay. I’ll get some food inside Ruby before we send her out in the cold again. I think a nice bowl of chili would help. Looking at Elmer and Dorcas, I can see where most of the food the church gives them is going. Ruby certainly isn’t getting enough.” Lizzie got a look on her face I’d seen before. “I know she’s being fed at school because I take food over there every day. Maybe I can come up with a way to do a little more.”

I turned to go, a smile on my face. Ruby wouldn’t need to worry about food from this day forward. Lizzie would see to that.

As I made my way into the dining room, I noticed Elmer sitting at a table, talking to John Lapp. When Elmer saw me, his face went slack and he clamped his mouth shut. John

looked my way, a scowl on his thin face. I ignored them both and hurried up the stairs. Going through my closet, I found both my cloaks. I took out the nicest one and grabbed a couple of warm dresses as well. For once, being small was helpful, although realizing I was the same size as a fourteen-year-old girl didn't make me feel very mature. I'd also noticed that Ruby's shoes were coming apart and not appropriate for winter. I took a pair of black lace-up boots from my closet and added them to the other clothes.

The entire time, my body continued to tremble, as if it had a mind of its own. I'd never lost my temper before the way I'd just done with Elmer. I had concerns about Ruby, but so did Lizzie, and she hadn't seen fit to verbally assault anyone.

After praying for God's forgiveness and asking for His help, I tried to compose myself by breathing deeply and repeating the Scripture verse about the peace of God that passes understanding. Little by little, I felt the calming influence of God's Spirit wash through me.

Once I was ready, I headed downstairs. I could only hope that news of my insolence wouldn't get back to Levi. What would he think? How could I possibly be the wife of a pastor if I acted so unpleasantly toward a member of our church?

When I reached the dining room, I refused to look at Elmer and Brother Lapp, keeping my eyes trained straight ahead. In the kitchen I found Noah, Lizzie, and Ruby all together. Lizzie stood at the stove, and Noah sat at the table with Ruby, who welcomed me with a big smile on her face.

"This is the best chili I ever tasted," she said. "Mama used to make chili, but it wasn't nearly this good."

"Lizzie's a great cook," I said. "She makes lots of wonderful things."

Ruby gazed around the kitchen as if it were the most wonderful place she'd ever seen. "I wish I could cook. Good food makes people so . . . happy."

Lizzie cleared her throat, obviously moved by Ruby's statement. "We've been talking," she said, looking over at me, "and Ruby will be coming here after school from now on. Elmer will pick her up after supper. She and Charity can work on their homework together until it's time to eat."

"Except on Wednesdays," Ruby said, "'cause Charity goes to her grandparents' house. Then I get to study with you."

"I didn't think you'd mind if I volunteered you," Lizzie said with a smile. "Noah and I will take care of the dining room until five. It's not very busy in the afternoons anyway."

"That sounds great," I said hesitantly, "but does Brother Wittenbauer know he's picking Ruby up here in the evenings?"

Noah grinned. "He's been informed. Oddly enough, he didn't seem to have any objections."

"Good." I took a plastic sack out of the cupboard. "Ruby, here are some clothes I don't need. You take these home. But for now, let's go ahead and change your shoes. These are the right kind for snow. Is that all right?"

Ruby nodded. "My feet get so cold." She frowned as I slipped off her tattered old shoes. "My socks have holes in them."

"Those socks have more holes than material," Lizzie said, watching from the stove. "Noah, you go downstairs and get some socks out of the dryer. Grab about three pairs." She smiled at Ruby. "My socks will be a little big for you, but at least they don't have holes."

Noah jumped up from the table and hurried down the stairs.

Ruby's eyes shone with tears. "Thank you. You're being so nice to me."

"People should be nice to you, Ruby," I said as I peeled the ragged socks off her feet. "If they're not, you must come and tell us." I cast a quick look at Lizzie, who nodded her approval. "Will you do that? Will you let us know if the Wittenbauers are mean to you?"

Ruby looked down at the floor. "If they get mad at me, I won't have any place to live. They told me they would send me to an orphanage."

Lizzie's face flushed. "They will *not* send you to an orphanage, Ruby. Don't you worry about that. If we need to, we'll find you another place to live. Okay?"

The young girl nodded as a tear splashed down on her thin dress.

I wasn't worried about Lizzie's promise. People in Kingdom took care of one another. If Ruby couldn't get along at the Wittenbauers', someone would surely open their home to her. The look on Lizzie's face made me wonder if that new home might be with her and Noah. What a blessing that would be for the young girl.

I got a warm washcloth and washed Ruby's dirty feet. It was obvious she wasn't getting regular baths. It was getting too late to do anything about it tonight, but I'd make sure she got a nice hot shower after school tomorrow. Noah came back with the socks, and I pulled a warm pair onto Ruby's feet.

"That feels really good. Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you for everything." She stood to her feet. "I'd better leave. I don't want Uncle Elmer to get any madder at me."

I held out the bag of dresses and the extra socks. "Here, take this." I picked up the cloak I'd carried downstairs. "This

should keep you warm.” I looked over at Noah. “Would you make sure Ruby’s uncle understands that she is to wear this every day when it’s cold?”

“Oh, I’ll make absolutely certain he understands that,” Noah said firmly. “Come on, Ruby. I’ll walk out with you. There are a couple more things I want to tell your uncle.”

Ruby started toward the door, but suddenly she whirled around and ran to me, wrapping her thin arms around me. “Thank you, Miss Callie.”

“You’re very welcome.” I tried to keep the emotion out of my voice, but I failed.

When she let go of me, Ruby went to Lizzie and hugged her too. “Thank you,” she whispered. Without looking back at us, she ran out the door, Noah behind her. Lizzie and I looked at each other with tears in our eyes.

“She’ll be all right, Callie,” Lizzie said. “We’ll keep a close eye on her.”

All I could do was nod. Without any further discussion, we got back to work, preparing for our supper crowd.

When it was almost time to serve the evening meal, I grabbed my order pad and went out into the dining room. I’d just approached Jonathon Wiese’s table when the front door flew open. Mercy Eberly, the daughter of the man who runs our hardware store, stumbled in. Her eyes were wild, and she was as white as a sheet. Everyone stopped talking and stared at her.

“A . . . a woman,” she said. “There’s a woman. She’s . . . she’s dead!” With that she fainted and fell to the floor.