

AMONG THE INNOCENT by Mary Alford

EXCERPT

Prologue

He drove by the house again. The second time today. All because of her.

The sight of his car rolling down the dirt road in front of her isolated farm filled Beth Zook with thoughts not proper for an Amish girl. A cloud of dust followed the car, instantly covering the freshly washed sheet she'd hung out to dry minutes earlier. Despite the sweltering July heat, he'd put down the window. Was it because he wanted her to see him as he eased by?

He waved when he saw her looking, and she reacted like a moth drawn to a flame. Beth had never met anyone so unpredictable before. One minute he teased, the next his eyes smoldered with such intensity that it frightened her.

Looking at his handsome face sent the butterflies in her stomach scattering. A flash of a smile revealed white teeth, perfect like everything else about him.

Beth waved back, then glanced over her shoulder. What would *Mamm* and her sister say if they noticed? She covered her mouth to suppress the giggle. She'd been giggling a lot lately.

Too soon . . .

Her head warned it was too soon for these emotions, yet her heart threatened to explode from her chest each time they were together.

Heat flooded her cheeks as she recalled his kisses from the night before. She'd been so afraid her parents would wake and hear her slipping out of her bedroom window. A sense of fear and adventure had followed her each step of the way as she'd crossed the yard in the pitch-black dark of night to the old Miller barn where he'd waited for her.

At first, she'd been afraid to go there after what had happened all those years ago. Four members of the Miller family had been found dead inside that barn. Leah Miller, the oldest daughter, was the only survivor. Whispers around the community about the unspeakable evil that had transpired that night could still be heard.

When Beth told her suitor about the murders, his eyes gleamed with excitement. While he seemed to enjoy envisioning what had happened back then, the barn gave Beth the creeps. But she kept that to herself because he made her feel special. Beautiful. *Important*. For the first time in her life, she longed for things not found among the Plain people of St. Ignatius. A life of pretty things. Like he promised.

Last night when they'd met, he'd asked her to run away with him. Her heart had overflowed with eagerness until reality tamped down her happiness, and Beth realized she wasn't ready to leave her home. Her family. While she remained torn between staying Amish forever and leaving with him, he'd told her he would drive by her house every day until she said yes. Part of her was thrilled—intrigued at the consuming way he watched her. The other part was scared. Beth did not understand his almost feral wildness.

She took the dust-covered sheet down and reached for the next one, pinning it to the clothesline with unsteady hands. When Mamm wasn't watching, she'd sneak inside and rewash the soiled one. That way there wouldn't be questions to answer. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the car slowing.

Brake lights flashed. She picked up the next sheet and hung it. When he honked, she whirled toward the sound while praying the family wouldn't come to investigate. He slid out and leaned against the rotting fence post near the Miller property. Many times, Beth wished she could be as daring. He did not live by the same rules as the Amish. In his world, anything was possible. She still couldn't imagine why he wanted her. A man so handsome could have his choice of any girl, *Englisch* or Plain. Why her?

When he realized he had her attention, he motioned her over. Beth felt obliged to shake her head, though she'd thought about him throughout the day. Was eager to see him again. She anticipated his kisses with every beat of her heart.

She touched her hands to her burning cheeks. Such thoughts were not *gut*, but she couldn't help how she felt. With him, Beth felt truly alive. The hardest part was she had no one with whom to share how she felt. Her friend Eva listened, but Beth sensed she might be jealous.

She'd almost told her older sister Colette about him last Saturday night before the biweekly church service, but she'd lost her nerve. Married and ten years older, Colette had three *kinner* of her own.

Besides, her sister was always so serious. She would not understand this reckless feeling.

Until her sixteenth birthday, Beth hadn't either. She'd loved everything about the Amish way of life. Then, she'd started her *rumspringa* and had gotten a taste of the freedom of the *Englischer* world. She liked it. Before *him*, she'd planned to join the church and eventually marry Caleb Wagler, but not before enjoying every minute of her running around. Now, Beth was not sure she wanted to spend the rest of her life in St. Ignatius, living on a farm like her sister with a house full of kinner pulling on her apron. *He* offered her excitement. Adventure. Love. How could she not accept those gifts?

She hung the last of the sheets and picked her way across the patches of grass in the bare yard to where he stood. The glint in his eyes as he watched her wasn't anything like the way Caleb looked at her.

Beth stopped a few feet away. With the fence separating them, she snuck a peek over her shoulder. "You should not be here." She tried to sound stern but failed miserably.

Without warning, he jumped the fence. Beth giggled as he grabbed her hands and tugged her closer. "Yes, I should. You belong to me, Beth Zook."

Her heart skipped a beat at his proclamation, and she couldn't help imagining what their life together would be like.

Foolishness, Beth. You waste the day with all your imprudent thoughts, she could almost hear Colette saying.

"Mamm will notice I'm gone soon. You must leave now." She tried to tug her wrists free, but he tightened his grip to the point of pain, and a flash of anger glittered in those deep dark eyes. "You are hurting me," she murmured, tears forming. This was a side of him she hadn't seen before. A cruel side she didn't much like.

He let her go. Smiled. Everything became right again with the curve of his lips. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, Beth." The gentleness in his tone soothed her worries away. "You're just so pretty."

"You are such a flatterer." She playfully swatted at his arm but secretly loved the way he spoke.

He leaned close and planted a kiss on her lips right there in broad daylight. Her legs turned to gelatin. A sigh escaped as warmth coursed through her limbs. After another stolen kiss, he released her.

"It's true. Don't be coy. You know you're pretty." His gaze skirted past her to the house. "And you deserve more than this life. Come away with me now."

More than anything she wanted to, but when she thought about her mamm's pained reaction to her middle daughter forsaking their faith, she couldn't do it. "I told you, I cannot run away with you.

And I have to go back to my chores.” She turned. Then, emboldened by his claims, she swung around, framed his face with her hands, and kissed him earnestly.

He chuckled at her brazenness. He snatched her hand once more. Though she secretly relished his desire to be with her so badly, she pretended differently. “Please, you must let me go. Mamm will see.”

“I don’t care.” A second passed before he finally relented. “Only if you promise to meet me tonight at our place.”

The eagerness in his eyes sent a shiver through her body. It made her hesitate. This was the man she adored. Surely, there was nothing to fear.

“I have something special planned for you,” he added with a cajoling smile when she wavered. “Something you’ll like.”

“If I can,” she whispered and pulled her hand free. They both knew she’d be there. As she ran across the scorching earth, Beth peered over her shoulder. He still stood next to the fence, grinning when he noticed her looking. She stumbled over the uneven ground. Heard him laughing.

As she stepped up on the porch, the front door opened and Mamm stood in the doorway, hands on hips. Her wrinkled brow furrowed at her daughter’s labored breathing.

“*Komm*, help your sister prepare supper.” Her mother studied Beth with narrowed eyes. Took in her flushed face. Her nervous hands. Had Mamm ever felt this way about *Daed*?

“Who is that out on the road?”

Beth struggled to keep her face blank. “Someone passing by, I suppose.” With one final glance his way and a secret smile, she hurried to go inside.

Her mother cast another disapproving stare at the car as Beth entered the house.

“I have something special planned for you.”

It was hard to keep the excitement to herself. She couldn’t wait to see the mysterious surprise he had in store.

ONE

Heat rose in waves off the blacktop where Leah Miller had parked her police cruiser. Recent statistics showed that the crime rate in St. Ignatius, Montana, was at an all-time low. Today, Leah shot radar at the occasional passing vehicle to occupy her shift until something more challenging came along.

Leah looped her raven hair into a bun at the nape of her neck, seeking relief from the record-breaking hot spell the county was suffering through this July. Her uniform clung uncomfortably to her skin while her thoughts wandered to the things she planned to do when her shift ended. She'd need to check in on Kitty before heading over to have dinner with Marge.

A few years back, Leah had bought her tiny house on Pope Lane. It had taken all her savings, but it was worth it because it represented a huge milestone: putting down roots for the first time since that horrific night. She'd even brought home the stray tabby cat that hung out behind the police station. They were still adjusting to each other, since Kitty had been on her own for a while. In the six months Kitty had lived at Leah's house, Kitty mostly stayed in the laundry room except at night, when she preferred the foot of Leah's bed.

Since Chief Ellis Petri's death, Leah had been spending as much time as she could with her adoptive mother, Marge. Losing Ellis had been hard on both of them, but Marge had been struggling with health issues as well.

Marge and Ellis Petri had been Leah's rock since that night ten years ago when her world changed forever. Several years earlier, Marge and Leah's mother had struck up an unlikely friendship, and Marge had become a frequent visitor at Leah's home. Sometimes Ellis came along. After what happened, Leah had left the Amish community, despite her neighbors offering to take her in. To survive, she'd had to let that part of her life go. Ellis and Marge had taken her in. They'd become her world.

And now Ellis was gone.

Let it go. The past is written and done, but you're not.

In the distance, dark clouds gathered over the Mission Mountains. A storm was on its way. Despite the sweltering heat, a cold shiver sped down Leah's spine. Something bad was approaching. She could feel it moving in.

It's just the time of year, she told herself. The anniversary of what happened always churned up stuff.

She'd seen plenty of terrible things in her four years on the force. Yet, at sixteen, Leah had become personally acquainted with the devastating effects tragedy had on the living. Her grief had wrapped its spindly limbs around her and took up residence in her soul. That night in the barn—the things she'd witnessed—had imprinted itself in her DNA.

The woman staring back in the rearview mirror was an older version of that frightened Amish girl whose life had changed forever with a flick of a knife. The scar on her neck was a constant reminder of how close to death she'd come and of those who hadn't been so lucky.

Leah dragged in a deep breath and dropped her eyes from the mirror. Better to keep that door closed. Too many bad things hid behind it. For Marge's sake, she needed to stay strong.

Leah shoved her dark aviator sunglasses into place like a defensive shield against the world. She focused on the upcoming car cresting the hilltop.

"Leah? Are you there?" Dispatcher Sugar Wallace's voice came through the police radio, immediately drawing Leah's attention from the approaching vehicle.

"Yes, Sugar, I'm here. What's up?" The car spotted Leah and crawled past. Its speed registered twenty on the radar's screen. "Henry needs your help on a call out in the Amish community."

Leah's stomach knotted.

"Josiah Zook called from the Mission General Store. He said his daughter Beth is missing."

At the mention of her former neighbor, Josiah Zook, Leah was immediately transported back to that barn again. Watching as a psychopath slaughtered her entire family.

Their deaths came at the hands of a masked stranger who had entered their house, tied everyone up, and forced Mamm and Daed, her sister Ruth, and brother Elijah into the barn. Then, he'd systematically slit each of their throats in front of Leah, saving her for last. She remembered him standing over her. His hot breath whispering against her ear, "You'll always belong to me." Even now, the words had the power to reduce her to that terrified young girl, so certain she'd die along with her family.

"Leah? Did you hear me?" Sugar repeated.

With her heart racing, Leah struggled for calm and failed. "Sorry, yes. I know the family." She'd been friends with Josiah's older daughter, Colette. "I'll head over and assist."

"Thanks, Leah. Let's hope the girl shows up soon. I don't want to think about something bad happening to one of those innocent people."

Sugar's words fell like knives in her heart. The Amish were peaceful, God-fearing folks. Violence in the community was a rare thing, yet not unheard of. Leah was living proof. Former police chief

Ellis Petri had worked hard to help her achieve closure, yet the suspected killer's end had been just as messed up as his heinous massacre of her family. Even to this day, Leah wondered if the wrong man had died in that fire.

She whipped the cruiser out onto the road and headed toward the Amish community.

The only time she went back there was on a call, and on those occasions, she did her best to avoid her family's homestead. Yet there would be no avoiding it today. The Zook home was a stone's throw from where she'd grown up.

Leah couldn't imagine what her life would have been like without Ellis and Marge. They'd become her entire world. Marge would hold her and assure her everything was going to be okay when Leah woke up in the middle of the night screaming after reliving the nightmare. Yet despite Marge's tender loving care, it was Ellis whom Leah chose to be like. She'd joined the St. Ignatius Police Department after college because she wanted to do good for people, like Ellis.

The sparse community spread out before her. A horse and buggy passed her on the road heading to town. The Amish man waved. Leah returned his greeting. Rolling hayfields spread out toward the stunning vistas of the Mission Mountains. Overwhelming memories came pouring from her heart. Most of them good. All contaminated by that day.

Leah slowed her speed out of respect for the buggy and others that might be traveling the road. A familiar darkness pressed in. Her breaths came quick. Straight ahead, her former house appeared through the haze of summer.

Leah couldn't take her eyes off the old place. She'd lived there until a few months after her sixteenth birthday. In her head the house was as she'd left it that night. Yet the harsh reality was it had sat vacant all those years. Its white paint had faded to gray and was peeling from too many brutal Montana winters. The barn, some distance from the house, hovered over the place like some ancient gargoyle and just as frightening.

A lump formed in her throat that she couldn't swallow. Tears scalded her eyes. Leah's grip tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. She wouldn't cry. Hadn't since the funeral. She'd built a wall of stone around her heart no person, including Ellis and Marge, had been able to fully penetrate. It was best that way. Her past had taught her stones could break apart and thrash her heart to pieces at a second's notice.

She shifted her attention to the Zook farm and let the past return to its tenuous resting place.

Officer Henry Landry's patrol vehicle was parked in front of the house beside a second cruiser. As soon as Leah turned onto the drive, another vehicle captured her attention. A familiar one. Ellis's old police SUV. A glaring reminder of more change coming.

A new chief was scheduled to take over the helm of the St. Ignatius Police Department, though no one expected him so soon. Why was Chief Cooper on this call? She leaned forward and peered through the dusty windshield at the vehicles while resisting the desire to call Sugar for answers.

The small police department was still reeling from the intentional shooting of one of their own. Chief Ellis Petri had died on a deserted stretch of mountain road almost a year earlier to the date from a point-blank gunshot wound. With no leads, Ellis's case was dangerously close to turning cold.

Now, someone else would sit at his desk. Drive his SUV. Take his place. Leah did her best to quell her resentment. It was bad enough they'd lost Ellis in such a violent way. That he could be replaced so easily was like twisting the knife in the wound. Henry had obviously been watching for her. He stepped out onto the porch as Leah pulled up alongside his patrol car. By the time she got out, Henry was standing by her door with a flustered expression on his face. Leah often wondered if a good strong wind might blow the Barney Fife-thin officer away. "Boy, am I glad to see you. They've been asking for you."

Henry pointed to the house and lowered his voice. "*He's* in there too." He wiped sweat from his forehead and cast a nervous glance back to the Zook home.

"Why's he here anyway? I thought Cooper wasn't coming in until later in the week." Leah didn't even bother to hide her disapproval.

Henry shrugged. "He was at the station when I arrived. He heard the call come in."

"What's he like?" The question was out before she could stop it. Gossiping about the new chief was not her finest moment. "Kind of intense," Henry said with the same amount of anxiety that had consumed Leah since the announcement came through from the mayor. "Sam sure was mad when he didn't get the job, though you're the one who's practically run the force since Ellis passed. I'd hoped you'd take over as chief."

Henry had been on the job only a few years and had made his fair share of rookie mistakes, but Leah had liked him from the beginning and had done her best to help him whenever possible. For that, Henry seemed determined to put her on a pedestal.

"I appreciate the compliment, but I'm just an officer like you. We'll leave the big decisions to someone with a higher pay grade than us."

“Yeah, right,” Henry confirmed with a nod. “We’d better get inside. I can’t explain it, Leah, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

Did he mean the case or the new chief? With those uneasy words hanging between them, Leah followed Henry into the simple Amish home that belonged to people she’d once loved like a second family.

As Leah stepped foot inside the living room, it was like going back to her youth. The simple furnishings hadn’t changed much. Same threadbare sofa. Same two functional rockers near the woodstove. A chest in the corner held the quilts Miriam and her daughters had crafted. Hooks adorned the walls near the door for coats and lanterns. A scenic calendar on one wall was turned to the current month. Behind the sofa, a framed picture of the Ten Commandments had been there for as long as Leah could remember.

Back then, she and Colette Zook had done everything together. They talked about what their lives might be like in the future. A husband. A houseful of kids. Their enduring friendship foremost in every part of their lives.

Regret seeped into Leah’s heart. She’d left the community and Colette and never looked back, even though her dear friend had tried to reach out to her many times. It wasn’t right, the way she’d cut Colette out of her life. In her defense, at the time it seemed like the only way to keep from losing her mind.

“Leah, oh Leah!” Miriam Zook spotted her and immediately pushed to her feet. “I am so glad you came.” Miriam sobbed inconsolably. “Our Beth is missing. Josiah checked the entire property, but there’s no sign of her. We’re afraid something has happened.” The show of emotion was out of character for the woman, who rarely expressed her feelings.

Leah patted Miriam’s arm. “We’re going to do everything we can to find your daughter and bring her home to you.” She did her best to comfort Miriam while praying her words wouldn’t come back to haunt her.

Miriam seemed to latch on to what Leah had said as if it were a lifeline. Her dark, red-rimmed eyes searched Leah’s face. She sniffed twice and squared her shoulders.

Leah guided the woman back to the sofa, where she sank beside her husband and a young girl who appeared to be around eight. The Zooks had another child. She hadn’t realized the family had expanded. Her last contact with the family had been at the funeral.

“This is our daughter Katie.” Josiah made the introductions. Katie was a younger version of Colette. Same silver-blond hair and deep blue eyes.

Josiah placed his arm around his weeping wife. He'd aged in the ten years since Leah had last seen him. The Amish way of life was not an easy one. His hair, now almost entirely white, matched his neatly trimmed beard. The worry on his face drove home the reason they were all here. Josiah was an honest, trusting man who kept his faith in *Gott* and his attention on hard work. Worry wasn't part of his subsistence. Until now.

Another man who had been seated in a rocker near the woodstove had risen when Leah entered the room. Leah's attention latched on to the new man in charge as he came her way. Tall and fit, he was probably former military if the way he carried himself was any indication. He wore his dark hair cut short. Brown eyes captured hers as he closed the space between them. Henry's description of the man came to mind. "Intense" seemed fitting. He extended his hand. "I'm Dalton Cooper, the new chief.

Sorry to have to make the introductions this way." He kept his voice low enough for only her to hear. "Sam and Ethan are searching the property and surrounding area."

Leah shook his hand and forced words out. "It's nice to meet you, Chief Cooper."

"Dalton," he said with a brief smile. He glanced past her to where Henry stood in the doorway still. "Why don't you run through what we have for Leah?"

Henry snapped to attention and opened his notepad. "The call came in around 7:15 a.m. Mr. Zook phoned from the Mission General Store to say his daughter was missing from her room. She'd gone to bed at the same time as the rest of the family the night before, but when she didn't come down for breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. Zook checked in on her and discovered her bed was empty. That was at 6:00 a.m."

Around the time when the morning household chores were ending. Leah looked around the familiar room, mulling over Henry's statement.

The stale aroma of that morning's breakfast, probably still uneaten, wafted out from the kitchen. She remembered the many times she'd spent the night here growing up. At daybreak, the family gathered around the table. A flicker of a smile touched her lips as she recalled Miriam bustling about to make sure everyone was fed and ready for the day.

"Beth is around sixteen, correct?" Leah asked Josiah. No doubt going through her rumspringa, a period when Amish youth enjoyed more freedom to go out into the world and experience what it felt like to not be Plain. Most returned to join the faith. Some did not.

Images of Leah's own rumspringa came to mind. She and Colette had committed only small acts of defiance. Colette did her best to keep Leah on the right path, but she didn't know about *him*. He'd

turned Leah's head away from the path chosen for her and she'd regretted it ever since. Calling himself John, he'd induced her to do things she wouldn't normally have done, like slipping away in the middle of the night to meet him in her family's barn . . .

"*Jab*, that is correct." Josiah's firm response intruded into Leah's regrets. He adjusted his glasses on his nose, brows slanted together in a familiar frown. Josiah had always been a solemn man. Leah cleared her throat and posed the question she knew would not be well received. "Is it possible Beth may have gone out after everyone fell asleep? Maybe to a friend's? Perhaps she spent the night there?"

Miriam's head shot up. Anger ignited in her eyes. "Nay. It is not possible. Beth is a *gut* girl. She would not go sneaking out of the house. She is happy with the Plain life and is going to be baptized soon. She and Caleb Wagler will marry one day. Beth would *not* do such a thing." Miriam collapsed against her husband, deep sobs racking her body.

Most Amish parents did not question their children about what they did during rumspringa. It stood to reason the Zooks wouldn't know everything going on in Beth's life, yet Leah had obviously touched a nerve. She let the matter drop.

"Would you mind if I checked Beth's room?" She addressed Josiah again as Miriam continued to weep. The man stared at her blankly. Josiah's simple world had been sent into a tailspin and he was clearly struggling to understand.

Leah focused on the little girl seated beside her mother. "Do you share a room with your sister?"

Katie nodded slightly while keeping her attention on her clasped hands.

"Would you mind showing me around your room?"

Katie twisted her skirt in her hands and snuck a peek at her father. Leah suspected she had information about her sister's disappearance she might not wish to share in front of her parents.

Josiah gave an approving nod. Katie rose and headed for the stairs without a word. With a glance at the new chief, Leah followed.

The little girl clutched the railing as she slowly climbed the stairs and headed down the hallway to the same room that Colette once shared with Beth.

A wealth of memories waited inside the room. She and Colette had been like sisters back then. Once more, guilt pierced Leah deep. She should have reached out to Colette. Kept in touch. If she were being honest, she'd missed her friend through the years, missed their girlish conversations. Colette had stood at her side, clutching her hand, at the cemetery. And afterward, her friend had reached out to her through visits and letters. Leah had been the one to shut her out. Because remembering the life she'd left behind was just too hard.

She focused on the child. “Do you enjoy sharing a room with your sister?”

Katie’s huge eyes found hers. The little girl’s bottom lip trembled. Was Katie’s reaction due to worry for her sister or guilt over harboring Beth’s secrets?

“*Jah*, she is a *gut* big sister. She brings me sweets from the store where she works.”

The news surprised Leah. She had had no idea Beth had worked outside of the farm. Leah made a mental note to check with the owners of the store if Beth wasn’t found soon. She glanced around the small, tidy space. “Which is your sister’s bed?”

Katie pointed to the one near where Leah stood while her eyes darted to the open window, where the morning breeze whipped the curtains around.

Leah searched inside the drawer of the nightstand. Nothing but an extra prayer *kapp*. Where would Beth keep things she didn’t want her parents to see? Leah’s had been under the mattress. A search there produced nothing. Whatever deep, dark secrets Beth might have been keeping, she’d hidden them well. “Was Beth excited to be going through her rumspringa?”

Leah did her best to make Katie feel at ease.

“I guess so.” Katie’s words were vague, offering little, while her gaze kept returning to the window. Leah swung toward it. Did the girls open the window to cool the room against the oppressive heat, or had Beth left it that way when she slipped out the night before?

“Katie, did Beth sneak out to meet someone last night?” Leah’s direct question struck a reaction in the little girl. Tears glistened in her eyes.

Leah moved to Katie’s side. “You’re not in trouble,” she said gently. “I’m just trying to find your sister.”

Katie hiccupped several sobs. “*Jah*, sh-she snuck out last night. Beth thought I was sleeping, but I wasn’t. I told her Mamm and Daed would be mad when they found out. She begged me not to tell . . . and I didn’t.” Katie scrubbed at the tears that were streaming down her cheeks. “I did not tell anyone but you.”

Leah squeezed her arm. “It’s okay. You’re doing the right thing. Beth needs our help, and this will hopefully let us bring her home safely. Do you have any idea who she was meeting?” Katie vigorously shook her head. “Nay. She did not tell me, but I’m positive it was a boy. An Englischer.” The last word came in a whisper. “I saw her with him once before when she didn’t know. He drove a car and he smiled a lot. Beth did too. She had a funny look on her face when she came back inside.” Beth had let an Englischer into her life. What kind of ideas had he put in her head? Leah thought about her own forbidden romance with John, and her concern for Beth intensified.

“Can you tell me what he looked like, Katie?”

“I did not see him very clearly.” Katie gulped back fresh tears. “They talked over at the Millers’ barn, and I only saw him for a moment before he pulled her into the barn. He was taller than Beth and he had dark hair. That’s all I remember.”

Beth had met the stranger in her old barn. Too much of a coincidence to dismiss.

She grabbed her phone and called Sam. “Where are you?” she asked the second he answered.

“The pasture behind the Zook house. So far, there’s no sign of the girl.”

“Check the barn next door.” Trembles ran through Leah’s frame, and her bad feeling doubled. Was it just the memories of what happened to her family bleeding into this case because of the approaching anniversary? Or something far more deadly? Sam’s silence confirmed he understood the significance. He’d been on the force back when it happened. “We’ll head there now,” he said quietly.

Leah punched End and stuffed the phone into her pocket. The little girl beside her watched her with huge, worried eyes.

More than anything, she wished to reassure Katie everything would be okay, but her gut wouldn’t allow it. The mention of the barn amped up her concerns to a whole new level.

“Katie, do you remember anything about the car the Englischer drove?”

The little girl stared at her for the longest time. “I-I think it may have been black. But it was dark, so I cannot be sure.” “You’re certain it was a car and not a pickup truck?” Leah pressed. They needed answers. *Now*. Every passing minute reduced Beth’s chances at survival.

“*Jah*, I am positive it was a car.”

“Good, that’s very helpful,” she assured the girl. “Thank you, Katie.”

The room’s window faced Leah’s old homestead. As she peered out at the barn, goose bumps sped up her arms despite the oppressive heat. The rickety door stood wide open. While she tried to process the few details they had so far, Sam and Ethan entered her line of sight. Both men paused in front of the open door, staring at something she couldn’t see before they went inside.

Leah’s pulse ticked off every second they were out of her sight. Twenty beats passed before the men rushed from the building, their stricken faces chilling Leah’s blood.

“Stay here,” Leah told the little girl and crossed the room. Descending the steps as fast as possible, Leah was certain they’d found Beth Zook. And she wasn’t alive.

Two of his uniformed officers ran past the Zooks' front windows. Seeing the terror on their faces catapulted Dalton to his feet.

"Henry, stay with the family," he said as he hurried to head the men off before they came inside. The small four-officer St. Ignatius police force hadn't dealt with many serious crimes in the past. He sensed that was about to change.

Before he reached the screen door, Leah Miller pounded down the stairs. Their eyes connected briefly. The same wave of emotion swept over him that had hit him when he'd first introduced himself to her. Fear lived in the depths of those green eyes. A deep red scar on her throat flared despite her attempts to hide it with makeup. No doubt a constant reminder of what she'd been through.

He and Leah were kindred spirits. Though she'd lost so much more than he could ever imagine, they had both been affected by the same crime. Only she had no idea of their connection. Leah broke eye contact, yanked the door open, and headed outside. Dalton caught it before it slammed in his face. She'd seen her fellow officers' reactions as he had.

"You found her." Leah addressed the senior officer, Sam Coeburn. It wasn't a question.

Sam was silent for a moment. "I didn't think I'd ever see something like that again," he muttered, his face ashen.

"Let's take this conversation away from the porch," Dalton told his officers. He didn't want the Zooks to hear the fate of their daughter like this. Once the group moved away from the open windows, he asked, "What did you find?"

Sam dragged in several breaths and struggled to get the words out. "The girl, Chief. She's dead. Her throat's been cut and there's blood everywhere . . ."

"Where is she?" The thought foremost in his mind was how devastated the family would be when he had to deliver the news of their daughter's death.

"In the old Miller barn." Sam looked anywhere but at Leah. The similarity to what happened all those years ago clearly was not lost on him.

In an instant, Dalton's worst nightmare materialized before his eyes. When he'd agreed to assist with the missing persons call earlier, not in his wildest dreams did he imagine they'd be facing a homicide with ties to the past. His past.

"We do this by the book," he told them. The town of St. Ignatius was unique in that it resided on the Flathead Indian Reservation, as did this Amish community. The Flathead police would need to be brought into the investigation along with the sheriff's office. Since the original call was to the St. Ignatius police, they would take the lead.

Dalton hit the radio on his uniform. “Dispatch, have the coroner come out to the old Miller place right away and contact the tribal police and the sheriff’s department in Polson. Have them send the crime scene investigations unit here as well.”

“Yes, sir.” The tremor in Sugar Wallace’s tone confirmed she understood what had happened.

He’d met Sugar earlier. The fifty-something woman had dyed-red hair piled high on her head. Sugar wore too much makeup and called him “hon,” and he was pretty sure she’d checked him out. But he believed behind that in-your-face abrasive exterior beat a heart of gold. Still, her personality would take some getting used to.

Dalton ended the transmission and faced his waiting officers. “We secure the crime scene right away. Everyone glove up but try not to touch anything unless you have to. When CSI arrives, they can take over and we’ll assist.”

Henry stepped out on the porch, his gaze ping-ponging between the four. “What’s going on?”

Dalton sensed the young officer might still be green. He’d read all his people’s files. Henry had served under Petri’s watch for a short time before the chief had died from a gunshot wound while out on a call. “Close the door,” Dalton told him. Until they had more to go on, he wasn’t ready to break the news to the family.

Henry glanced back inside before he shut the door and came down the steps.

“Sam and Ethan found the girl.” Getting the next part out proved harder. “She’s dead. I need you to stay with the family and keep them inside and away from the windows until we’ve had time to investigate.”

Henry’s mouth flopped open. He repeatedly shook his head. “I can’t. They’ll see the truth on my face.”

“Yes, you can,” Dalton insisted. “Do your job, Officer. This will be hard enough for the family as it is. Be strong.”

Henry’s hesitation confirmed his lack of confidence. He slowly nodded, hitched his thumbs in his belt, and adjusted his pants, then swung toward the door. Dalton watched him disappear inside the home before turning to Leah. “Did you get anything useful from the girl?”

Her attention fixed on him, and Dalton tried not to get sucked into the storm going on inside those tumultuous green eyes. Some of her raven hair had escaped from its restraint, and she tucked it behind her ears. “I did. Katie told me Beth snuck out last night. She said she’d seen her sister with an Engischer over near the barn once before.”

The past slapped him in the face. Had the real killer returned to take up his old games? The time of year was not lost on Dalton. Stuffing down the resentment flowing through his veins proved hard because it was always there whenever he thought about Harrison's death. Dalton had known Harrison since he was just a child. Knew he wasn't a killer. "Can she identify this man?"

Leah shook her head. "She thought he had dark hair, and he drove a dark-colored car, but that's it." She shrugged. Like him, Leah had to be comparing the details of this murder to the ones that had taken place in that same barn ten years earlier.

A vague description of the perpetrator was all they had to go on. It could fit any of a dozen men around the area. And it fell on his shoulders as the chief of police of little more than a few hours to solve Beth Zook's murder. His stomach churned. Dalton didn't believe for a moment the killer would stop with her. He had a bloodlust and he'd just begun his deadly games again. More bodies would follow unless they apprehended him soon.

Dalton stared across the short distance to the barn. Rising heat appeared like a vapor between the two properties. Though it was not even midday, the temperature had already reached the sweltering point. What appeared to be a bloody handprint on the barn door grabbed his attention. He hadn't noticed it before because the door was open. Now, the crimson blood appeared a stark contrast to the weathered gray exterior of the barn. It served as a warning that the horror of the day had just begun. He remembered reading about a handprint found on the same barn during the Millers' murder investigation. It was determined to be left by Leah as she fled to the Zooks' to get help for her family.

When Dalton first heard about Ellis Petri's murder and the subsequent vacant chief of police position, he'd immediately contacted the hiring committee even though it meant leaving behind a promising detective position in Denver. Not to mention the suggestion from his commander that he was making a mistake by chasing ghosts. When he'd received the call to set up an interview, he tried not to get his hopes up. But Dalton soon learned he was the only outside candidate to apply for the position. The committee had offered him the job the same day. In Dalton's opinion, the offer came by God's own hand.

After ten years, he had the chance to find out the truth beyond the story Ellis Petri had given. He would stop at nothing to know what happened to the Miller family . . . and to Harrison. "Let's take two patrols over and park on the road near the barn. It stands to reason Beth and possibly the killer may have crossed the same path as Sam and Ethan to the barn. There might be evidence left behind we can't afford to disturb." Dalton turned to Leah. "You'll ride with me." As the only surviving

witness to the original murders, she might remember something useful to the case now. And he wanted her close.

Adrenaline shot through his veins. He'd expected it to take months if not years of going over the murder files—chasing down leads missed by Ellis—to have answers. If this was the work of the Miller family's killer, was the timing an accident or deliberate in anticipation of the tenth anniversary of that crime?

Leah clutched her arms tight around her body. Her troubled eyes seemed to confirm her mind had traveled down the same dark road as Dalton's.

A tragedy such as hers changed a person. It had certainly changed him. He'd grown up with Harrison. As kids they'd played together. Toward the end of his mother's life, he spent more time with Harrison's family than at his own home. Though Dalton was Englisch, neither Harrison nor his family treated him differently.

In the years since Harrison's death, the mystery of what really happened chased him through his tour of duty in Afghanistan and into his college years as well as his marriage.

"Are you ready?" Leah's voice intruded into his pain. Dalton's attention went to her face. She shoved her dark sunglasses in place and climbed into the passenger seat of his SUV without waiting for his answer. Though he'd only met her a short time earlier, he had the feeling she did her best to keep people at a distance. Something they had in common. Since Harrison's death and the devastation that followed, he'd done the same.

Let it go . . . Give it to me. That small voice whispered in his head.

"Sam, you and Ethan follow me." Dalton rounded the front of the SUV and climbed behind the wheel. In the passenger seat, Leah stared straight ahead.

Dalton fired the engine, reversed, and then headed down the dusty dirt road. His curiosity about the woman beside him grew. Ellis Petri and his wife had adopted her shortly after the grisly tragedy that had befallen her family. She'd excelled in school and had worked on the force for several years now.

He pulled off the road near the Miller place. He and Leah got out. "Go slow," he told his people as they headed for the barn. "Keep your eyes open and disturb nothing."

Leah's full attention remained on the barn. This investigation would no doubt reopen old wounds. From Sam's account, Beth Zook's injuries matched those of Leah and her family. Dalton's instincts wouldn't let him accept they had a copycat. Which left one other option. The killer had returned.

He glanced past the structure to the crumbling house while a quick prayer ran through his head. *Please be with Beth's family, Lord. Give them your strength.*

After today, the Zooks would never be the same again. The Miller house and barn sat some distance off the road. According to what he could ascertain, the property had remained vacant since the night of the murders. But he was familiar with every inch of it. He'd come here many times after Harrison's death without anyone knowing. Desperate to understand why Ellis Petri would go after someone as innocent as Harrison for such a heinous act. Especially without iron-clad proof.

"Tire tracks." Leah stopped and pointed to the dusty earth nearby.

Dalton knelt and studied them. "Sam, get photos of these. We'll have CSI make molds. Maybe they can match them to a particular make of vehicle." He rose and glanced at the woman at his side. Her tension was almost palpable.

As they neared the barn, he saw two sets of footprints that came from around the side of the building. One much larger than the other.

"Which way did you and Sam enter the property?" he asked Ethan.

The former marine picked up on what he was asking right away. "Those aren't ours."

"The smaller set probably belongs to Beth. It's possible the second is the killer's," Leah said, her voice scratchy.

Without words, they moved to the barn's entrance, which faced the Zook farm. Up close, the blood-red handprint acted as an omen of what they'd find inside.

Dalton eased open the door and went in first while Leah trailed behind him. Shadows clung to everything despite the time of day. The scent struck him head-on. Metallic and overpowering. Even in the dim light, there was no mistaking the brutality that had taken place within these dilapidated walls.

Beth lay in the middle of the barn on the dirt floor, dressed in a simple white nightgown, blood covering the front of it.

Someone gasped. Dalton's attention shifted to Leah, her face as pale as the white gown.

"Do you need to step outside?" he asked gently. The reminder of that night long ago had to be crippling. He'd certainly understand if she needed to take a moment.

Leah swallowed repeatedly and visibly collected herself. "No, I'm fine," she mumbled and moved to the dead girl's side. Dalton pulled in a ragged breath before joining her.

They faced each other across Beth's body. Her sightless eyes stared into space. Beth's throat had been slashed.

Upon taking the police chief position, Dalton had read the report of the Miller murders. He'd seen the crime scene photos. They matched what he witnessed here almost perfectly. However, for reasons only the killer could explain, he hadn't shown the same vengeance toward Leah as he had the rest of his victims. It appeared the perpetrator had some type of connection to her, whether real or made up in his twisted mind.

A noise broke his concentration. Dalton realized Leah was struggling to keep from being sick.

"Go outside, Officer. That's an order." Without answering, she rushed from the barn.

Dalton stared down at the lifeless young woman. Terror and excruciating pain had undoubtedly filled Beth's final minutes on this earth. "I'm sorry this happened to you," he whispered. Beth Zook had had her whole life ahead of her. She didn't deserve this. Blood spatter spread out around the body like a halo. The attack had been a violent one. Most of Beth's nails were broken.

She'd fought her attacker. It was possible they'd recover some trace DNA from underneath her fingernails.

Someone entered. Dalton turned his head as Ethan came his way.

"This is a terrible thing, Chief. A terrible thing."

Dalton didn't respond as he concentrated on Beth's body. He saw that she clutched an item in her left hand. He freed the paper from the girl's lifeless hand.

"What is that?" Ethan asked.

Leah had quietly returned to the barn. She and Ethan peered over Dalton's shoulder at the note.

As carefully as possible, Dalton unfolded the paper. "What's it say?" Ethan asked.

Dalton glanced at Leah. Her haunted expression solidified his own suspicions. The nightmare that had taken place in this barn ten years earlier had come calling again.

Bright red words jumped out at him from the page. There was no doubt in his mind the killer used Beth's blood to pen the note. The message written here was intended for one person alone.

"Tell Leah I'm back."

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