

JODI
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Plain Truth


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For my dad, Myron Picoult, who taught me to be an original.

*There are not many men in the world who can sneeze like a
duck, spy hales of bay, make very bad puns . . . and cherish
their daughters so completely.*

I love you.

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I.

I must be a Christian child
Gentle, patient, meek and mild;
Must be honest, simple, true
In my words and actions too . . .
Must remember, God can view
All I think, and all I do.

—Amish school verse

ONE

She had often dreamed of her little sister floating dead beneath the surface of the ice, but tonight, for the first time, she envisioned Hannah clawing to get out. She could see Hannah's eyes, wide and milky; could feel Hannah's nails scraping. Then, with a start, she woke. It was not winter—it was July. There was no ice beneath her palms, just the tangled sheets of her bed. But once again, there was someone on the other side, fighting to be free.

As the fist in her belly pulled tighter, she bit her bottom lip. Ignoring the pain that rippled and receded, she tiptoed barefoot into the night.

The barn cat yowled when she stepped inside. She was panting by now, her legs shaking like willow twigs. Lowering herself to the hay in the far corner of the calving pen, she drew up her knees. The swollen cows rolled their blue moon eyes in her direction, then turned away quickly, as if they knew better than to bear witness.

She concentrated on the hides of the Holsteins until their

black spots shimmied and swam. She sank her teeth into the rolled hem of her nightgown. There was a funnel of pressure, as if she were being turned inside out; and she remembered how she and Hannah used to squeeze through the hole in the barbed wire fence by the creek's edge, pushing and angled, all knees and grunts and elbows, until by some miracle they'd tumble through.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. And lying on the matted, stained hay between her legs was a baby.

Aaron Fisher rolled over beneath the bright quilt to stare at the clock beside the bed. There had been nothing, no sound to wake him, but after forty-five years of farming and milking, the smallest things could pull him out of sleep: a footfall in the corn, a change in the pattern of the wind, the rasp of a mother's tongue roughing a newborn calf.

He felt the mattress give as Sarah came up on an elbow behind him, the long braid of her hair curling over her shoulder like a seaman's rope. "*Was ist letz?*?" What's the matter?

It was not the animals; there was a full month before the first cow was due to deliver. It was not a robber; there was too little noise. He felt his wife's arm slip around him, hugging his back to her front. "*Nix*," he murmured. Nothing. But he did not know if he was trying to convince Sarah, or himself.

She knew enough to cut the cord that spiraled purple to the baby's belly. Hands shaking, she managed to reach the old scissors that hung on a peg near the pen's door. They were rusty and coated with bits of hay. The cord severed in two thick snips, and then began spurting blood. Horrified, she pressed her fingers to the ends, pinching it shut, wildly looking around for something to tie it off.

She rummaged in the hay and came up with a small length of baling twine, which she quickly tied around the cord. The bleeding slowed, then stopped. Relieved, she sank back on her elbows—and then the newborn started to cry.

She snatched the baby up and rocked it tightly. With her foot, she kicked at the hay, trying to cover the blood with a clean layer. The baby's mouth opened and closed on the cotton of her nightgown, rooting.

She knew what the baby wanted, needed, but she couldn't do it. It would make this real.

So she gave the baby her pinkie finger instead. She let the small, powerful jaws suckle, while she did what she had been taught to do in times of extreme stress; what she had been doing for months now. "Lord," she prayed, "please make this go away."

The rustle of chains awakened her. It was still dark out, but the dairy cows' internal schedule had them rising at their individual stalls, their bags hanging blue-veined and round with milk, like full moons caught between their legs. She was sore and tired, but knew she had to get out of the barn before the men arrived to do the milking. Glancing down, she realized that a miracle had come to pass: the blood-soaked hay was fresh now, except for a small stain beneath her own bottom. And the two things she'd been holding when she fell asleep—the scissors and the newborn—were gone.

She pulled herself to her feet and glanced toward the roof, awed and reverent. "*Denke*," she whispered, and then she ran out of the barn into the shadows.

Like all other sixteen-year-old Amish boys, Levi Esch no longer attended school. He'd gone through the eighth grade and was now in that limbo between being a child and being old enough

to be baptized into the Amish faith. In the interim, he was a hired hand for Aaron Fisher, who no longer had a son to help him work his dairy farm. Levi had gotten the job through the recommendation of his older cousin Samuel, who'd been apprenticing with the Fishers now for five years. And since everyone knew that Samuel was probably going to marry the Fishers' daughter soon and set up his own farm, it meant Levi would be getting a promotion.

His workday started at 4:00 A.M., as on all other dairy farms. It was still pitch-dark, and Levi could not see Samuel's buggy approach, but he could hear the faint jingle of tack and traces. He grabbed his flat-brimmed straw hat and ran out the door, then jumped onto the seat beside Samuel.

"Hi," he said breathlessly.

Samuel nodded at him but didn't turn, didn't speak.

"What's the matter?" Levi teased. "Katie wouldn't kiss you good-bye last night?"

Samuel scowled and cuffed Levi, sending his hat spinning into the back of the buggy. "Why don't you just shut up?" The wind whispered at the ragged edge of the cornfield as they drove on in silence. After a while, Samuel pulled the buggy into the Fishers' front yard. Levi scuffed the toe of his boot into the soft earth and waited for Samuel to put the horse out to pasture before they headed into the barn.

The lights used for milking were powered by a generator, as were the vacuum pumps hooked up to the teats of the cows. Aaron Fisher knelt beside one of the herd, spraying the udders with iodine solution and then wiping them dry with a page ripped from an old phone book. "Samuel, Levi," he greeted.

He did not tell them what to do, because by now they already knew. Samuel maneuvered the wheelbarrow beneath a silo and began to mix the feed. Levi shoveled out the manure

behind each cow, periodically looking at Samuel and wishing he was already the senior farmhand.

The barn door opened, and Aaron's father ambled in. Elam Fisher lived in the *grossdawdi haus*, a small apartment attached to the main building. Although Elam helped out with the milking, Levi knew the unwritten rules: make sure the old man carried nothing heavy; keep him from taxing himself; and make him believe that Aaron couldn't do without him, although Aaron could have, any day of the week. "Boys," Elam boomed, then stopped in his tracks, his nose wrinkled above his long, white beard. "Why, we've had a calf."

Puzzled, Aaron stood. "No. I checked the pen."

Elam shook his head. "There's the smell of it, all the same."

"More like it's Levi, needing a bath," Samuel joked, emptying a fresh scoop of feed in front of the first cow.

As Samuel passed him with the wheelbarrow, Levi came up swinging and slipped on a slick of manure. He landed on his bottom in the ditch built to catch the refuse and set his jaw at Samuel's burst of laughter.

"Come on now," Aaron chided, although a grin tugged at his mouth. "Samuel, leave him be. Levi, I think Sarah left your spare clothes in the tack room."

Levi scrambled to his feet, his cheeks burning. He walked past Aaron, past the chalkboard with the annotated statistics on the cows due to calve, and turned into the small cubby that housed the blankets and bridles used for the farm's workhorses and mules. Like the rest of the barn, it was neat as a pin. Braided leather reins crossed the wall like spiderwebs, and shelves were stacked with spare horseshoes and jars of liniment.

Levi glanced about but could see no clothing. Then he noticed something bright in the pile of horse blankets. Well, that would make sense. If Sarah Fisher had washed his things,

they had probably been done with the other laundry. He lifted the heavy, striped blanket and recognized his spare trousers and jewel green shirt, rolled into a ball. Levi stepped forward, intending to shake it out, and found himself staring down into the tiny, still face of a newborn.

"Aaron!" Levi skidded to a stop, panting. "Aaron, you've got to come." He ran toward the tack room. Aaron exchanged a glance with his father, and they both started after the boy, with Samuel trailing.

Levi stood in front of a stool piled high with horse blankets, on top of which rested a sleeping baby wrapped in a boy's shirt. "I . . . I don't think it's breathing."

Aaron stepped closer. It had been a long time since he'd been around a baby this small. The soft skin of its face was cold. He knelt and tipped his head, hoping that its breath would fall into the cup of his ear. He flattened his hand against its chest.

Then he turned to Levi. "Run to the Schuylers and ask to borrow their phone," he said. "Call the police."

"Get out," Lizzie Munro said to the officer in charge. "I'm not going to check an unresponsive infant. Send an ambulance."

"They're already there. They want a detective."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. Every year that she'd been a detective-sergeant with the East Paradise Township police, the paramedics seemed to get younger. And more stupid. "It's a medical call, Frank."

"Well, something's out of kilter down there." The lieutenant handed her a slip of paper with an address on it.

"Fisher?" Lizzie read, frowning at the surname and the street. "They're Amish?"

"Think so."

Lizzie sighed and grabbed her big black purse and her badge. “You know this is a waste of time.” In the past, Lizzie had occasionally dealt with Old Order Amish teenagers, who’d gather together in some guy’s barn to drink and dance and generally disturb the peace. Once or twice she’d been called to take a statement from an Amish businessman who’d been burglarized. But for the most part, the Amish had little contact with the police. Their community existed unobtrusively within the regular world, like a small air bubble impervious to the fluid around it.

“Just take their statements, and I’ll make it up to you.” Frank held the door open for her as she left her office. “I’ll find a nice, fat felony for you to sink your teeth into.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” Lizzie said, but she was grinning as she got into her car and headed to the Fisher farm.

The Fishers’ front yard was crowded with a squad car, an ambulance, and a buggy. Lizzie walked up to the house and knocked on the front door.

No one answered, but a voice behind Lizzie called out a greeting, the cadences of the woman’s dialect softening her consonants. A middle-aged Amish woman wearing a lavender dress and a black apron hurried toward Lizzie. “I am Sarah Fisher. Can I help you?”

“I’m Detective-Sergeant Lizzie Munro.”

Sarah nodded solemnly and led Lizzie into the barn’s tack room, where two paramedics knelt over a baby. Lizzie hunkered down beside one EMT. “What have you got?”

“Newborn, emphasis on the new. No pulse or respirations when we got here, and we haven’t been able to revive him. One of the farmworkers found him wrapped up in that green shirt, underneath a horse blanket. Can’t tell if it was stillborn or not,

but someone was trying to hide the body all the same. I think one of your guys is around by the milking stalls, he might be able to tell you more.”

“Wait a second—someone gave birth to this baby, and then tried to conceal it?”

“Yeah. About three hours ago,” the paramedic murmured.

Suddenly the simple medical response call was more complicated than Lizzie had expected, and the most likely suspect was standing four feet away. Lizzie glanced up at Sarah Fisher, who wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “The baby . . . it’s dead?”

“I’m afraid so, Mrs. Fisher.”

Lizzie opened her mouth to ask another question, but was distracted by the distant sound of equipment being moved about. “What’s that?”

“The men, finishing up the milking.”

Lizzie’s brows shot up. “The milking?”

“These things . . .” the woman said quietly. “They still have to be done.”

Suddenly, Lizzie felt profoundly sorry for her. Life never stopped for death; she should know that better than most. She gentled her voice and put her hand on Mrs. Fisher’s shoulder, not quite certain what sort of psychological state the woman was in. “I know this must be very difficult for you, but I’m going to have to ask you some questions about your baby.”

Sarah Fisher raised her eyes to meet Lizzie’s. “It’s not my baby,” she said. “I have no idea where it came from.”

A half hour later, Lizzie leaned down beside the crime scene photographer. “Stick to the barn. The Amish don’t like having their pictures taken.” The man nodded, shooting a roll around the tack room, with several close-ups of the infant’s corpse.

At least now she understood why she'd been called down. An unidentified dead infant, an unknown mother who'd abandoned it. And all this smack in the middle of an Amish farm.

She had interviewed the neighbors, a Lutheran couple who swore that they'd never heard so much as raised voices from the Fishers, and who couldn't imagine where the baby might have come from. They had two teenage daughters, one of whom sported a nose and navel ring, who had alibis for the previous night. But they had agreed to undergo gynecological exams to rule themselves out as suspects.

Sarah Fisher, on the other hand, had not.

Lizzie considered this as she stood in the milk room, watching Aaron Fisher empty a small hand tank of milk into a larger one. He was tall and dark, his arms thick with ropes of muscle developed by farming. His beard brushed the second button of his shirt. As he finished, he set down the tank and turned to give Lizzie his full attention.

"My wife was not pregnant, Detective," Aaron said.

"You're certain?"

"Sarah can't have more children. The doctors made it that way, after she almost died birthing our youngest."

"Your other children, Mr. Fisher—where were they when the baby was found?"

A shadow passed over the man's face, disappearing as quickly as Lizzie had marked it. "My daughter was asleep, upstairs. My other child . . . is gone."

"Gone, like down the road to her own home?"

"Dead."

"This daughter who was asleep is how old?"

"Eighteen."

At that, Lizzie glanced up. Neither Sarah Fisher nor the

paramedics had mentioned that there was another woman of childbearing age who lived on the farm. "Is it possible that she was pregnant, Mr. Fisher?"

The man's face turned so red that Lizzie grew worried. "She isn't even married."

"It's not a prerequisite, sir."

Aaron Fisher stared at the detective coldly, clearly. "It is for us."

It seemed to take forever to get through milking all forty cows, and it had nothing to do with the arrival of a second battalion of police officers. Samuel closed the pasture gate after letting out the heifers and walked toward the main house. He should go help Levi sweep out the barn one last time for the morning, but this once it would wait.

He didn't bother to knock. Just opened the door, as if the home was already his and the young woman inside at the stove also belonged to him. He stopped for a moment, watching the sun grace her profile and gild her honey hair, her movements quick and efficient as she fixed breakfast.

"Katie," Samuel said, stepping inside.

She turned quickly, the spoon flying up in the batter bowl as she started. "Oh, Samuel. I wasn't expecting you yet." She peered around his shoulder, as if she might see an army behind him. "Mam said I ought to make enough for everyone."

Samuel walked forward and took the bowl, setting it on the counter. He reached for her hands. "You don't look so good."

She grimaced. "Thanks for the compliment."

He drew her closer. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes, when they met his, were the jewel blue of an ocean he had once seen on the cover of a travel magazine, and—he imagined—just as endlessly deep. They were what had first

attracted him to Katie, across a crowded church service. They were what made him believe that, even years from now, he would do anything for this one woman.

She ducked away from him and began to flip the pancakes. "You know me," she said breathlessly. "I get nervous around these *Englischers*."

"Not so many. Only a handful of policemen." Samuel frowned at her back in concern. "They may want to talk to you, though. They seem to want to talk to everyone."

She set the spatula down and turned slowly. "What did they find out there?"

"Your mother didn't tell you?"

Katie slowly shook her head, and Samuel hesitated, torn between her trust in him to tell her the truth and the desire to keep her blissfully unaware for as long as possible. He ran his hands through his straw-colored hair, making it stand on end. "Well, they found a baby. Dead."

He saw her eyes widen, those incredible eyes, and then she sank down onto one of the kitchen chairs. "Oh," she whispered, stunned.

In a moment he was at her side, holding her close and whispering that he would take her away from here, and to heck with the police. He felt her soften against him, and for a moment Samuel was triumphant—after so many days of being rebuffed, to finally come back to this. But Katie stiffened and drew away. "I don't think this is the time," she chided. She stood and turned off the stove's gas burners, then folded her arms across her middle. "Samuel, I think I *would* like you to take me somewhere."

"Anywhere," he promised.

"I want you to take me to see this baby."

• • •

"It's blood," the medical examiner confirmed, kneeling in the calving pen in front of a small, dark stain. "And placenta. Not a cow's, from the size of it. Someone had a baby recently."

"Stillborn?"

He hesitated. "I can't say without doing the autopsy—but my hunch says no."

"So it just . . . died?"

"I didn't say that, either."

Lizzie sat back on her heels. "You're telling me someone intentionally killed this baby?"

The man shrugged. "I guess that's up to you to find out."

Lizzie calculated quickly in her mind. Given such a small window between the baby's birth and death, chances were that the perpetrator of the crime was the infant's mother. "What are we talking? Strangulation?"

"Smothering, more likely. I should have a preliminary autopsy report by tomorrow."

Lizzie thanked him and wandered away from the scene the patrolmen were now securing. All of a sudden this was no longer an abandonment case, but a potential homicide. There was enough probable cause to get a warrant from a district judge for blood samples, evidence that might point a finger at the woman who had done this.

She stopped walking as the barn door opened. A tall blond man—one of the farm help—stepped into the dim light with a young woman. He nodded at Lizzie. "This is Katie Fisher."

She was lovely, in that sturdy Germanic style that always made Lizzie think of fresh cream and springtime. She wore the traditional garb of the Old Order Amish: a long-sleeved dress, covered by a black apron that fell just below her knees. Her feet

were bare and callused—it had always amazed Lizzie to see these Amish youth running down gravel roads without their shoes, but that was how they spent the summer. The girl was also so nervous that Lizzie could nearly smell her fear. “I’m glad you’re here, Katie,” Lizzie said gently. “I’ve been looking for you, so that I can ask you some questions.”

At that, Katie moved closer to the blond giant beside her. “Katie was asleep last night,” he said. “She didn’t even know what happened until I told her.”

Lizzie tried to gauge the girl’s response, but something had distracted her. She was staring over Lizzie’s shoulder into the tack room, where the medical examiner was supervising the removal of the baby’s body.

Suddenly the girl wrenched away from Samuel and ran out the barn door, with Lizzie chasing her to the farmhouse porch.

As reactions to death went, this was a violent one. Lizzie watched the girl trying to compose herself, and wondered what had prompted it. Had this been any ordinary teen, Lizzie would have taken such behavior as an indication of guilt—but Katie Fisher was Amish, which required her to filter her thoughts. If you were Amish, you could grow up in Lancaster County without television news broadcasts and R-rated movies, without rape and wife-beating and murder. You could see a dead baby and be honestly, horribly shocked by the sight.

Then again, there had been cases in recent years; teenage mothers who’d hidden their pregnancies and after the birth had tied up the loose ends by getting rid of the newborn. Teenage mothers who were completely unaware of what they’d done. Teenage mothers who came in all shapes, all sizes, all religions.

Katie leaned against a pillar and sobbed into her hands. “I’m sorry,” the girl said. “Seeing it—the body—it made me think of my sister.”

"The one who died?"

Katie nodded. "She drowned when she was seven."

Lizzie looked toward the fields, a green sea that rippled with the breeze. In the distance, a horse whinnied, and another answered. "Do you know what happens when you have a baby?" Lizzie asked quietly.

Katie narrowed her eyes. "I live on a farm."

"I know. But animals are different from women. And if women do give birth, and don't get medical attention afterward, they may be putting themselves in great danger." Lizzie hesitated. "Katie, do you have anything you want to tell me?"

"I didn't have a baby," Katie answered, looking directly at the detective. "I didn't." But Lizzie was staring at the porch floor. There was a small maroon smudge on the painted white planks. And a slow trickle of blood, running down Katie's bare leg.