



AMISH CHRISTMAS

at North Star

FOUR STORIES OF LOVE & FAMILY

CINDY WOODSMALL,
MINDY STARNS CLARK
AND EMILY CLARK,
AMANDA FLOWER, AND KATIE GANSHERT

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Prologue



by Katie Ganshert

Rebekah Schlabach was accustomed to young women looking a little scared. She was well acquainted with the anxious expression, the painful grimace, the sweaty brow. She could close her eyes at any given moment throughout the day and see the look of dogged determination that often crossed a woman's face when it came time to push, the exhaustion that followed when the baby tarried. As a midwife for going on twenty years, Rebekah had helped countless women bring new life into the world. This was the first time, however, that she could remember a mother-to-be looking so terribly haunted.

"Will my *Mudder* come?" the young woman asked, her face pale and drawn, the dark circles beneath her big blue eyes so pronounced they could almost be mistaken for bruises.

"I'm not sure." A gust of wind rattled the windowpane, calling Rebekah's attention to the thick flurry of snow swirling outside. Not more than an hour earlier that snow had floated peacefully from the sky. It was alarming how quickly some things could change. She wiped the young woman's brow with a damp cloth, worry knotting her stomach.

No matter how many babies she helped birth, the nervousness never went away, though she had grown adept at hiding it. This, however, called for so much more than nerves. The full weight of the situation was settling on her shoulders. Ruth Hershberger was not the only woman in Rebekah's care today. Down the hall, Lydia Beiler rested in

bed, her stomach every bit as swollen. And earlier that morning, before the unexpected snow began, Glen Danner had come to the house to cut firewood and had mentioned that his wife, who should have already had her baby by now, woke up feeling uncomfortable. The very real possibility that Rebekah might be attending to three women at once in the midst of a snowstorm pressed an anxious hand against her heart.

“Do you think the gentleman was able to get my parents the message before the snow picked up?” Ruth asked.

Rebekah gave her hand a reassuring pat. An *Englischer* had dropped Ruth off twenty minutes earlier. Apparently she had been out for a walk nearby when her water broke. Rebekah had jotted down the address of Ruth’s parents and asked the gentleman to let them know their daughter was safe. “His tires looked nice and big, *ya*?”

Ruth smiled, but the gesture came without any spirit. Something more than childbirth was troubling this young woman.

Normally Rebekah would sit by her side between contractions and coax the trouble out. Normally she would ask why a smart girl like Ruth had been walking in the snow so far from home when she was heavy with child. Today, however, did not lend her that luxury.

“I know this isn’t what you had planned,” Rebekah said. Ruth had returned to North Star, Pennsylvania, to have her first child at home with her mother and eldest sister. She had never intended to be here, at the birthing center. “But I promise you’re in good hands. Now I want you to focus on taking deep, soothing breaths, and I will be right back.”

Rebekah slipped out into the drafty hallway, torn between stoking the fire and checking on Lydia, who had arrived two hours ago. Her husband, James, had dropped her off before being sent back home by his wife to look after their other children. James had hesitated until Lydia reminded him that this was their sixth child. She could deliver the baby all by herself at this point.

Rebekah had agreed. James was needed at home and would be little

help to them here. Even if Glen Danner arrived with Rose, Rebekah was confident, especially with a veteran like Lydia, that she could deliver two babies at once. But then the Englischer had come with Ruth. And now . . .

Now Rebekah found herself wishing she could take back her words.

She washed her hands in the bathroom sink and scurried into the room down the hall. Lydia rested in bed, the few loose tendrils of hair sticking to her neck the only sign of her hard work. Rebekah checked to see how Lydia was progressing and then made a quick decision.

She had to get a message to Glen. He and Rose were new parents, and nervous ones at that. They wanted the competency of an experienced midwife and the comfort of their own home, so Rebekah had agreed from the beginning to make a house call when the time came. If that time happened to be today, as she suspected, she needed to get word to Glen that he would have to bring Rose here. Rebekah could no more make a house call tonight than she could make the wind stop howling outside.

After feeding the ravenous stove some more firewood, she put on her winter cape, a matching black bonnet, and a pair of snow boots and headed out into the gale. Snow assaulted her cheeks. Wind whipped her skirt. Gray sky gave way to darkness, making visibility next to nothing. Thankfully, Rebekah could find the phone shanty with her eyes closed.

By the time she arrived, her fingers had turned to ice. Shivering, she was reaching for the receiver to call the phone in the Danners' barn when she saw the blinking light on the answering machine. The message was from Glen, saying that Rose's discomfort continued to worsen and that, with the weather so bad, he was going to hitch up the buggy and drive over.

The knots in Rebekah's stomach pulled tighter.

Another gust of wind pushed against the shanty, so strong Rebekah was sure it would tumble right over. She hung up the phone and

hurried back to the house, snow well above her ankles. When she reached the front porch, she made out the vague image of a horse and buggy parked nearby. She waited for Glen to appear through the flurry of white, supporting his wife.

But Glen and Rose did not materialize. Mary Hochstetler and her eldest son, Luke, did. He held one of his mother's arms while she supported her bulging abdomen with the other.

"I'm sorry, Rebekah, but this *Bobbeli* will not wait," Mary said.

She wasn't due for another two weeks at least.

"I had Luke drive me here while we could still make it."

"Yes, *kumm* out of the cold." Rebekah waved mother and son inside, ignoring the frantic butterflies flapping about where her dinner should be. "Kumm."

Before she closed the door, the faint *clippety-clop* of horse hoofs was carried on the wind. That would be Glen and Rose.

Rebekah asked Luke to go outside and help them. She settled Mary in a room and then hurried back to greet Rose, whom she settled in the last remaining room—her own. She checked on Ruth and Lydia, then went to the living room to speak with her inadequate team. The young men didn't know a lick about bringing babies into the world, but they could keep the fire stoked and melt snow should the pipes freeze. Both seemed very glad to have something to do and went to work at once.

Down the hall one of the women groaned.

Rebekah rushed toward the sound, praying for strength and courage as she went. Praying that God would protect each heartbeat and guide her hands.

She didn't stop until the last baby arrived at two minutes before midnight, greeting the world with a gusty wail. Rebekah, totally depleted, finally took a breath of her own.

Four babies in one night. All healthy and whole.

A miracle of God.

When all was clean and calm, Rebekah stepped outside, kneading the taut muscles in her neck. The storm had ceased, leaving behind a crystallized blanket of white that draped itself over the landscape. It covered every rooftop, every tree branch for as far as her eyes could see. The town of North Star had turned into one of those snow globes she saw in the Christmas aisle at the local grocery store. And inside that globe, on her front porch, the world had gone quiet.

Rebekah inhaled cold air deep into her lungs, then exhaled—her frozen breath forming a cloud around her lips.

A star shone up above—a bright beacon in the night.

It was officially December first. Advent had begun. Christmas was on the way.

Rebekah wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and smiled, her thoughts turning to another baby, born to a virgin millenniums ago and laid in a manger while angels sang to the shepherds on a hilltop. Light had come into the world at last, and the darkness would not overcome it.

Closing her eyes, she prayed over each child in her home. Three precious baby girls and one handsome baby boy. She prayed that no matter where they went or who they became, each one would grow up to know this light all the days of their lives.

Guiding Star



KATIE GANSHERT



CHAPTER ONE

Floorboards creaked beneath Chase Wellington's work boots as he set another labeled box near the open hatch in the floor, stirring up a host of dust motes. They floated like glitter in the stream of light pouring in through the attic window.

"Be careful not to break anything!" his mother called from below.

"Don't worry, Ma. I'm being extra careful."

Brooke poked her head up through the trapdoor, a bright smile on her face. "You know how Mom is about her stuff. Telling her not to worry is like telling the sun to cool off."

"Good point." He lifted another box from one of the shelves with a grunt. Their mother was an infamous pack rat. Chase often joked that she could star in an episode of *Hoarders*, to which she always scoffed and said her house looked nothing like a hoarder's, thank you very much. But that was only because she and Doug had plenty of storage and Mom was highly organized. Now that they were moving into one of the new town houses a few neighborhoods away, she might have to get things under control.

He set the box next to Brooke. A week ago his kid sister had turned thirteen. And she had a boyfriend. Last night over dinner, she said they were "going out." But they were thirteen, for crying out loud. Where in the world were they going to go? He expected Mom or Doug to disapprove. Instead, Doug teased Brooke about the kid's haircut. Brooke insisted it was cool. And Mom used the conversation to pry into Chase's love life.

When was he going to “go out”?

“*Chase has ADHD when it comes to the women in North Star, Ma,*” Brooke had said matter-of-factly. “*None of them can hold his attention for very long.*”

He’d lobbed a roll at her.

Brooke climbed a few more rungs of the ladder and read the box’s label. “Why doesn’t Mom let Gage deal with storing his trophies?”

“Because Gage would throw them away.”

Brooke peered down the ladder. “Mom, we aren’t going to have room for this stuff, you know.”

“We’ll find room. And if we can’t, your father promised he’d rent me a storage unit.”

Brooke rolled her eyes.

“I heard that,” Mom called.

“But I didn’t say anything!” Brooke turned her exasperation on Chase. “How does she hear an eye roll?”

“I’m your mother, that’s how.”

Chuckling, he grabbed another box. It was filled to the brim with old newspapers. He wouldn’t put it past Mom to have kept every single article he’d ever written. He was a construction manager by trade, but he also wrote for the *North Star Tribune* on the side. He’d been doing so ever since he graduated from college with a random minor in journalism.

He peeked inside, but instead of finding his work, he found old copies of *The Budget*. Mom had been a subscriber to the Amish newspaper for as long as Chase could remember. Every time one came in the mail, she’d brew a pot of coffee and read it beginning to end. Growing up in Lancaster County, he was no stranger to the Plain life. Growing up with a mother so intrigued by that life made him extra familiar.

“I’m supposed to tell you that lunch is ready,” Brooke said.

“I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Don’t wait too long. You know how Mom gets.” She shot him a wink before climbing down the ladder.

Chase set the box next to the others. Yes, he did know. Mom was perpetually concerned with his thinness even though he was perfectly healthy and fit. It didn’t matter what the BMI charts said. Mom wouldn’t be happy until he settled down with a nice wife who fed him home-cooked meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and he had a Santa belly. Chase wasn’t sure that breed of woman existed anymore, at least outside the Plain community, and as much as he admired the lifestyle, he wasn’t about to marry into it. Or marry at all, for that matter. It hadn’t worked out for his brother the first time around or for his mom. So unless Chase met a girl who could convince him it was worth the risk, he was happy being a bachelor.

He glanced at the faded newspaper on top. The headline caught his attention.

Unable to resist a special-interest story, he put the box by the others and read the article all the way through. On November 30, 1990, a record-setting blizzard slammed Lancaster County. And in the midst of that blizzard, right here in his hometown of North Star, Pennsylvania, an Amish midwife named Rebekah Schlabach delivered not one, not two, not three, but *four* babies all in the same night—three girls and one boy.

Wow. Talk about a pressure situation.

As Chase spent the next thirty minutes carting boxes down the ladder into the hallway, his intrigue grew. Special-interest stories had a way of doing this to him—grabbing and not letting go. When he was no more than three years old, while wind gusted and snow swirled outside, while power and telephone lines failed, a woman delivered four babies in a single night not more than a few miles away.

“Chase, honey?”

He blinked away the scene unfolding in his mind.

Mom stood at the top of the ladder, her bottle-brown hair pulled up into a messy bun, gray roots starting to show. “You should come get something to eat before you dwindle away to nothing.”

He followed his mother down to the main level, toward the savory smell of her famous homemade chili, and pulled the newspaper article from his back pocket. “Do you remember this?”

Mom’s eyes went bright. “I sure do.”

In the kitchen Brooke packed utensils in a small box. Chase’s step-father, Doug, placed his empty bowl into the sink, clapped Chase on the shoulder, and squeezed by them to continue working.

“That story was picked up by *People* magazine,” Mom said, lifting the lid off the Crock-Pot.

“*People*? ”

“They became known as Rebekah’s Babies. The gal who wrote the story came here to North Star, hoping to get a picture of the midwife with the four infants, but you know how the Plain folk are about pictures.” Mom scooped some chili into a clean bowl. “After the article was published, that birthing center, which of course was also the poor woman’s home, turned into a tourist attraction.”

He could only imagine how Rebekah and the babies’ families would have felt about the attention. The Amish were notoriously private people. Kind, but private. Chase gently nudged Mom aside and finished serving himself.

“I can’t believe that was nearly twenty-five years ago.” She shook her head. “Somebody needs to tell time to slow down already.”

He sat at the table with the article in front of him, his journalistic mind firing on all cylinders. Steam rose from his bowl as he stirred his chili, lost in thought.

Rebekah’s Babies.

He couldn’t help but wonder where they were now.



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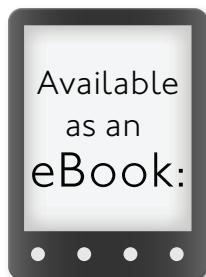
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