

*When the*  
BISHOP NEEDS  
*an ALIBI*

*Vannetta Chapman*



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The King James Version of the Bible.

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## **WHEN THE BISHOP NEEDS AN ALIBI**

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*For Priscilla Wright*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to Priscilla Wright, who has been a good friend and a constant source of encouragement. She meets me for breakfast, for lunch, even to exercise. What more could a girl ask from a friend?

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If my math is correct, this is my nineteenth full-length novel. Some of you have been faithful readers since that first book in 2010, *A Simple Amish Christmas*. Some of you are just finding me. To all of you, I want to offer thanks from the depths of my heart. The fact that you are willing and eager to put aside part of your day to step into my fictional world continues to amaze me. Thank you, and may God be an ever-present hope and comfort in your lives.

And finally, "Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:20).

*Those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.*

ISAIAH 40:31



*In three words I can sum up everything  
I've learned about life: It goes on.*

ROBERT FROST



# One

*San Luis Valley, Colorado*  
*September 21*

Henry Lapp crouched in a sea of bulrushes and cattails. A light breeze tickled the hair at the nape of his neck as the distinctive rolling cry of cranes filled the morning. He recognized the call of a marsh wren, a night heron, and an ibis.

As he waited, dawn's light splashed over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east, crossed the San Luis Valley, and settled against the base of the San Juan Mountains in the west. Sunrise turned the marshland into a sea of gold and warmed the brisk fall air. Henry moved behind a clump of bulrushes, the ripened seeds temporarily filling the lens of his Nikon binoculars.

Henry again heard the flat, rattle call of a sandhill crane, a *gar-oo-oo* that never failed to quicken his pulse. He brought his binoculars around to the sound and adjusted his focus. Nearly four feet tall, with a wingspan of at least six feet, the male crane was a beauty to behold. Its gray color provided a perfect camouflage against the fall stalks, rendering the splash of red against its forehead all the more surprising.

The crane took several steps east, and Henry did the same, barely noticing the way his boots sank in the mud.

Lexi stuck close, quivering, eager to chase. He should have left her at home. Throughout most of the preserve, pets were not allowed. He'd chosen this spot so he could bring her. No doubt it was something akin to torture for the beagle to not be able to do what came so naturally, but Henry

had been unable to deny her pleading brown eyes when he'd begun stuffing items into his day pack.

With his left hand, he calmed his dog. With his right, he steadied the binoculars. Many people had abandoned binoculars altogether when bird-watching, opting for cameras instead. But Henry had no intention of taking photographs. Being Amish, he didn't own a camera. No, for him the joy was in seeing the majestic creatures, observing them and appreciating the wonder of God's hand in all things.

The male croaked, spread its wings, and jumped, neck stretched long—all for the benefit of its mate. Although he couldn't see her, Henry knew the female was close. She must be among the cattails, searching for breakfast.

He crouched lower, continued to follow the male's direction, and forgot about the arthritis in his knees or how he wished he'd eaten a bigger breakfast.

And then she was there, filling up his lens, slightly smaller and staying close to the juvenile.

"A family unit," he muttered. He could have raised his gaze and seen hundreds, possibly thousands of the birds, but this chance to observe a family rewarded him more than watching an entire flock of birds ever could.

He crept closer, eager to focus in on the juvenile, which must be nearly six months old. The young bird mimicked the male, jumping and dancing and attempting to imitate the unison call that rang out from the adult male and female. The male had flipped his head upward, the female mirroring him so that her neck was parallel to his. What a beautiful sight.

Henry stepped forward, completely focused on the birds, and his foot struck against something. He lost his balance and began to fall. Lexi jumped out of his way, and Henry tried to focus on saving the binoculars, on not dropping them in the mud.

He was thinking of that, of how precious the binoculars were to him, when he landed on his backside, scaring away the family of three and causing an entire flock of cranes to take flight. He shook his head at his clumsiness and called Lexi closer, but the beagle was now emitting a low, menacing growl.

"Lexi, shush."

The dog paid him no mind. Her growl turned to high-pitched barks, and more cranes rose into the morning sky.

Henry lurched for the dog's collar, and he twisted, turning back in the direction he'd come. That was the moment he saw what made him trip, what Lexi was now backing away from, still alternately growling and yipping.

Hidden among the bulrushes and the cattails lay a woman's body, face-down in the brush.

Stumbling forward, he knelt beside her, swept aside her hair, and placed two fingers to her neck. He couldn't detect a pulse, and she certainly wasn't moving. But then again, his own heartbeat was thundering in his ears, and his hands were shaking. He should get help, run to the visitor center, but first he had to be sure. Gently he rolled the body over, his heart sinking in recognition.

She wouldn't be needing help. That much was for certain. Henry uttered a prayer for her soul even as his gaze froze on the bruise marks around her neck. His tears didn't begin to fall until he looked at her face—unmarred and unlined in death, as if the worries of her life had slipped away and sailed across the vast Colorado sky.

## *Two*

*Seven days earlier*

Henry directed Oreo to the parking area at the side of Maggie's Diner. "Buggy Parking" was painted on the building above an artistic rendering of a horse and buggy. Henry couldn't help chuckling at the mural every time he saw it. The horse resembled a draft horse, which would never be used to pull a buggy. And the buggy looked like a carriage from the 1800s. But at least the good folks of Monte Vista tried to incorporate Henry's Plain community into their image of the town, which he supposed was a compliment.

Oreo didn't seem to mind the mural's incorrect details. The buggy parking area was unpaved, which was better for standing, and there was grass to crop. Nearby trees provided a fair amount of shade when the sun took a westerly dip.

Only one other buggy was there—Leroy Kauffmann's, by the looks of it. Leroy was a deacon in their church and the wealthiest member in their small community. He was probably meeting someone about selling his fall crops.

Tourists often looked surprised to see an Amish person at a diner, but the truth was Plain folks enjoyed a meal out as much as anyone. Most Amish families had eight to ten children, so for them eating at restaurants was usually reserved for special occasions, such as birthdays or anniversaries. But because Henry was a widower, and a childless one at that, he frequented Maggie's much more often.

"Back in a few, old girl." He tucked his large drawing pad under his arm,

patted the mare on her neck, fed her a piece of carrot from his pocket, and turned to enter the diner.

Several people nodded hello as he walked in. Leroy sat at one of the two-seat tables with a man in a cowboy hat. He waved a hand in greeting to Henry, and then he returned to his conversation.

The place was fairly packed with a late-lunch crowd, so Henry was especially pleased his favorite booth was available. It was in the back corner, and he always sat facing away from the front door and toward the window so he could see the mountains to the west. He enjoyed eating there several days a week, and he believed it was one way he could build bridges between the Amish and the *Englisch*.

Though his community strove to remain separate in many of their ways—no electricity, no telephones, and their own parochial school—he also understood it was wise to foster relations when two such different groups lived in close proximity. He could be a good neighbor by supporting local businesses, and certainly that was one reason he came to the diner. But if he were honest, he'd have to admit he also grew tired of eating alone three meals a day. Plus, he liked Maggie's made-from-scratch biscuits and the fact that they served breakfast all day long.

"Coffee with biscuits and gravy, Henry?" The waitress, Sophia Brooks, had started working at Maggie's a little over a month ago, and they'd been on a first-name basis for weeks. It seemed she rarely took a day off. Henry had never seen her at the grocer or the library or the town's park. Work appeared to be her entire life.

She was young and capable, but an almost constant hooded expression on her face spoke of loss and pain—or so it seemed to Henry. As a bishop, he'd dealt with plenty of both in his congregation, as well as in his own life.

"Maggie's biscuits are nearly as *gut* as my *mamm's*." Henry readily accepted the mug of hot coffee. "But I'm here for the meat loaf special."

"Good choice." Sophia wrote down the details of his order. "I could add biscuits on the side."

"A *wunderbaar* idea."

Sophia nodded and hurried off to check on her other tables.

Business at the diner was brisk, probably because the fall migration of sandhill cranes had begun. Monte Vista was a natural place for folks to stop since it was situated in the middle of the San Luis Valley. Henry

sipped his coffee and stared out the window. It was a beautiful area. Fourteen years ago, the Amish here decided to revitalize their dying Plain community by inviting families from Indiana who were ready for a change. Henry didn't realize then how much he would grow to love the place, how right it would feel to be there.

The valley was fifty miles across and one hundred and fifty miles from north to south. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains boasted peaks of ten thousand feet to the east. The San Juan Mountains to the west were a high and rugged portion of the Rockies, some of those peaks topping fourteen thousand feet. Yet the valley itself was flat and filled with farms, which made it a natural resting spot for migratory birds. Since moving to the valley, Henry had become quite the birder—a hobby that brought him great joy and cost practically nothing.

Henry enjoyed his meat loaf, mashed potatoes, okra, and coffee, plus two biscuits on the side. When he'd pushed away his empty plate, he stood to go outside.

"Leaving so soon?" Sophia had a coffeepot in one hand and an order pad in the other. She looked rather harried, and in that moment Henry realized she wasn't as young as he'd first assumed. She was probably closer to thirty than twenty.

"Actually, I'd like to stay longer if you don't need the table. But I want to check on my mare."

"Plenty of tables," she assured him. "We're between the lunch rush and the dinner crowd now. I'll refill your mug."

*"Danki."*

Henry knew Oreo would be fine, but it felt good to stand and stretch a moment. At sixty-five, he'd learned that sitting too long in one position left him stiff. He walked out into the fall air and fed the mare a few sugar cubes from his pocket. The day was beautiful, the sun shining as it usually did in the valley. A slight breeze blew from the north, reminding him winter wasn't far away, and if the weathermen were correct, a significant cold front would move in later in the week.

"Enjoy the sunshine while you can, girl." He patted her nose and then went back inside.

Sophia was helping an old woman to her feet, making sure she had a solid grip on her walker before hurrying around the counter to ring up

her check. The woman was accompanied by a nearly bald gentleman who looked as fragile as she did. Whether Amish or *Englisch*, people aged the same. Henry had found the process held agonizing change as well as beautiful moments of grace.

When Sophia glanced up, he nodded once, and then he made his way back to his booth. She'd cleared off the dishes but left the mug, steam rising from freshly poured coffee. He sipped it appreciatively, and then he opened his tablet, pulled out a pencil, and began to sketch.

Henry had spent most of his life actively ignoring his drawing talent, but the situation with the Monte Vista arsonist had changed all of that. He smiled as he drew, thinking of Emma and her admonition that his strange ability was a gift from God. Emma was a good friend—and, he thought, perhaps something more. They were both widowed, and he'd taken to attending social events with her as well as asking her on a buggy ride at least once a week. He wasn't sure where their relationship was headed, if anywhere, but he was enjoying the time they spent together, and for the moment that was enough. Emma seemed to feel the same way.

As often happened, he became lost in the process as he drew. He had no sense of how much time had passed or that his coffee had long grown cold, so he startled when he realized Sophia was standing beside him, again holding a pot of coffee. She raised it, silently asking if he wanted more.

"*Nein*. I've had plenty." Henry glanced around and saw the diner was now mostly empty. "It seems I stayed longer than I intended."

"You were pretty focused on your drawing. May I?" She nodded toward his tablet.

"Sure. Of course." He turned it toward her and motioned for her to sit down.

Sophia's eyes widened in surprise as all color left her face. She pressed trembling fingers to her lips, and when she spoke, there was a note of fear in her words. "How...how did you do that? And why?"

In that moment, Henry couldn't have said what he'd drawn. Sometimes that was the way of things with him. Sometimes his hand rendered what his unconscious mind had seen rather than any particular scene, such as the beautiful mountain vistas outside the window. So he was surprised when he looked at the tablet.

He had produced a nearly photographic rendering of Sophia.

## Three

Henry cleared his throat as he tried to determine how much to explain. Sophia's gaze darted around the diner, and then she sank into the booth across from him. "Why did you draw me?"

"I don't always decide what I'm going to draw."

"You don't decide? Did someone tell you to do this?" Now her voice was rising in alarm.

He wasn't sure how a picture could frighten someone so. Well, that wasn't quite true. He remembered how his first drawing, done when he was a young lad of twelve, had spooked his parents. But this was different. Sophia's fear was personal.

"I have this...ability. To draw anything I've seen. I suppose when I came back inside after checking on Oreo, I saw you helping this customer, and the kindness of your gesture caught my attention."

"But this is more like a photograph than a drawing." She glanced up now, her fear replaced by confusion. "You weren't even facing me, Henry. You were facing the wall or maybe the window. How could you remember these details?"

With the drawing angled so they could both see, Sophia's fingers skimmed over it—touching the clock above the register, the sign advertising cinnamon rolls *only \$2.99*, the embroidery on the old woman's shirt, and a small scar along the side of her own neck.

She glanced at Henry. Her dark hair was shoulder length and pulled back with a hair band. She quickly put a hand to her neck, covering the mark that appeared in the drawing.

Henry tried to understand her reaction. Many people were surprised

when they first saw his drawings. He knew it wasn't just the degree and accuracy of the details. It was that he was somehow able to capture the emotion of the moment. Glancing down at this drawing, he saw that he'd depicted both Sophia's compassion and the elderly woman's look of gratitude and vulnerability as she accepted help.

"How do you do it?" she asked again.

"It's rather difficult to explain."

She stood, walked back behind the counter, and placed the coffee-pot on the burner. "I'm taking my break," she hollered toward the pass-through window where the cook set plates of food. Someone answered back, "I'll keep an eye out," and Sophia returned to his table.

She sat down, her arms crossed and her expression grim.

"Try. Try to explain this to me." She reached forward and tapped the drawing. "Because this is sort of freaking me out. It's as if you were watching me, only I know you weren't. And I still don't understand why—"

"I'm sorry I've frightened you. This talent I have is the result of an accident. I was hit with a baseball when I was twelve years old." Henry's hand went to the spot on his head. He couldn't resist touching it whenever he related the story of the accident. "The doctors thought I might die, and my parents... well, they were sore afraid. But I recovered, as you can see."

Henry reached for his mug of now-cold coffee and turned it around in his hands. "Afterward, I found I had this ability to draw things, and not just draw them but accurately render them as in an *Englisch* photograph."

"You have a photographic memory?"

"Not quite. The doctors claim there is no such thing. They say what I have is most similar to eidetic memory."

"And what's that?"

"The ability to view memories like photographs." Henry paused. He'd shared his story with very few people, and he could count on one hand the number of *Englischers* he'd spoken to about it. But he'd frightened her, that much was plain, and because of that he felt he owed her an explanation. "I couldn't have told you the gentleman had a stain on his shirt or the woman wore glasses suspended on a chain. I wouldn't remember those details, but somehow my subconscious recorded them."

"Could you draw before? Before the accident?"

"No better than any other child."

“Henry, are you saying you’re a savant?”

He glanced up, surprised at her use of the term. “A label the doctors use, but I’m not quite comfortable with it. Actually, they called me an ‘accidental savant.’”

“Like those people who can play Mozart on the piano when they’ve never had a lesson, or tell you what day of the week your birthday fell on the year you were born?”

“*Ya*, savants come in all types.”

Sophia again pulled the drawing toward her and studied it.

“So you didn’t come in here today to draw me?”

Henry chuckled. “Indeed I did not.”

“You came in for the meat loaf.”

“Which was delicious.”

“And stayed to draw.”

Henry had already shared more than he normally would with a near stranger, and an *Englischer* at that. But something in Sophia’s expression pricked at his heart. He remembered the fearful look in her eyes when she’d first seen the drawing. Why? What was she scared of? And what had she asked? *Did someone tell you to do this?*

He didn’t understand her concerns, but he wanted to ease them.

“I’ve hidden my ability for most of my life, but a little over a year ago something happened that changed my mind about that. I’m trying to learn to embrace it as a . . . well, as a gift from *Gotte*.”

She tilted her head but didn’t interrupt him.

“My *freund* Emma gave me a few drawing tablets and pencils for a Christmas gift. I sometimes take them to the park or library or—”

“Diner?”

“My first time to do that. Perhaps it wasn’t a *gut* idea. I certainly didn’t mean to alarm you.”

She tapped her fingers against her lips, staring off across the diner. Finally, she raised her eyes to his. “May I keep this?”

“Of course.” He tore the sheet from the tablet and passed it across the table to her.

“Thank you.” With a weak smile and a nod, she stood and walked away.