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## CHAPTER 1

Naomi Fisher tiptoed out of the back room and headed to the front of her father's general store. She'd finally gotten Zach down for a nap and felt ready for a break.

"Since there aren't any customers at the moment, would it be all right if I ate my lunch now?" Naomi asked Papa, who was going over his ledger behind the counter near the front of the store.

"Jah, okay. Just don't be too long." He raked his fingers through the long, full beard covering his chin. "That new order of candles still needs to be put on the shelves."

Naomi's hand brushed against her father's arm as she reached under the counter for her lunch pail. "I know."

"Your mamm would've had those candles out already," he mumbled. "She'd never allow the shelves to get dusty, either."

Naomi flinched as though she'd been slapped. She enjoyed working at the store, but it was getting harder to help run the place. There was no way she could keep up with the chores she was responsible for at home and do everything Mama used to do, too. It wasn't fair for Papa to compare her with Mama, and she wished he would consider hiring a maid to help out. She squeezed the handle on her lunchbox. If only Mama hadn't stepped into the road and been hit by a car. The bishop said it was God's will—"Sarah Fisher's time to die," he'd announced at her funeral.

Naomi wasn't so sure about that. How could Mama's death be God's will?

"I—I think I'll take my lunch outside if you've got no objections,"

she said, forcing her troubling thoughts aside.

Papa shook his head. "Schnell—quickly then, and eat your lunch before the baby wakes."

"I'm goin'." Naomi's sneakers padded across the hardwood floor. When she reached the front door, she turned around. "Papa, I'm not Mama, but I'm doin' the best I can."

His only response was a brief nod.

"I'll tend to the dusting and those candles as soon as I'm done eating."

"Jah, okay."

She hurried outside. Some fresh air and time alone would be ever so nice.

Naomi leaned against the porch railing and drew in a deep breath. Spring was her favorite time of the year, especially after it rained the way it had this morning. The air was invigorating and clean—like newly laundered clothes hung on the line to dry. Today the temperature was warm but mild, the grass was as green as fresh broccoli, and a chorus of birds sang a blissful tune from the maple tree nearby.

"It looks like you're takin' a little break. Is your *daed* inside?"

Naomi hadn't even noticed Rhoda Lapp heading her way. "I'm eating my lunch, and Papa's inside going over his books," she replied.

"I guess keepin' good records is part of running a store." Rhoda chuckled, and her pudgy cheeks turned slightly pink. "Them that works hard eats hearty, don't ya know?"

Naomi nodded and stepped aside so the middle-aged Amish woman could pass.

"You have a *gut* lunch now, ya hear?" Rhoda said before entering the store.

Naomi lowered herself to the top step and snapped open the lid of her metal lunch pail. Even a few minutes of solitude would be a welcome relief after her busy morning. She'd gotten up before dawn to start breakfast, milk the goats, feed the chickens, and then, with her

ten-year-old sister Nancy's assistance, made lunches for everyone in the family.

This morning, when breakfast was over, the three older boys headed for the fields. Naomi saw the younger children off to school, and then she'd washed a load of clothes, bathed little Zach, and baked a couple loaves of bread. By the time Papa had the horse hitched to their buggy, Naomi and the baby were ready to accompany him to their store near the small town of Paradise. She'd spent the next several hours waiting on customers, stocking shelves, and trying to keep one-year-old Zach occupied and out of mischief.

Tears clogged Naomi's throat, and she nearly choked on the piece of bread she had put in her mouth. Mama would have done many of those duties if she hadn't died on the way to the hospital. Mama would be holding Zach in her arms every night, humming softly and rocking him to sleep.

Naomi and her mother had always been close, and Naomi missed those times when they'd worked side by side, laughing, visiting, and enjoying the pleasure of just being together. Some days she still pined for Mama so much it hurt clear down to her toes.

A vision of her dear mamm popped into Naomi's mind, and she found comfort in memories of days gone by—a time when life seemed less complicated and happy. . . .



“Sit yourself down and rest awhile. You’ve been workin’ hard all mornin’ and need to take a break.”

“In a minute, Mama. I want to put away these last few dishes.” Naomi grabbed another plate from the stack on the cupboard.

“Let’s have a cup of tea together,” Mama said. “I’ll pour while you finish up.”

A few minutes later, Naomi took a seat at the kitchen table beside

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her mother. Mama looked more tired than Naomi felt, and the dark circles under her eyes were proof of that.

“Here you go.” Mama handed Naomi a cup of tea. “It’s mint. . .the kind I mostly drink these days. Hope you’re okay with it.”

“Sure, Mama. Mint’s fine by me.”

Naomi knew her mother had been plagued with morning sickness ever since she’d become pregnant. She was in her fifth month but still fought waves of nausea. Mint tea helped some, although there were still times when Mama was forced to give up the meal she’d eaten.

Mama leaned over and brushed a strand of hair away from Naomi’s face, where it had come loose from her bun. “I’m awful sorry you have to work hard and have so many extra chores now. If I were feelin’ better, I’d do more myself, but this awful tiredness and stomach rollin’ has really got me down.”

Naomi touched her mother’s hand. “It’s okay.”

“You sure?”

She nodded in reply.

“But a girl your age should be goin’ to singings and other young people’s functions, not doing double chores and waitin’ on her old mamm.”

Naomi fought to keep her emotions under control. She did wish there was time to do more fun things, but this was only temporary. Once Mama had the baby and regained her strength, everything would be as it once was. She’d be able to attend social functions with others her age, someday she would be courted, and then marriage would follow. Naomi could wait awhile. It wouldn’t be so long.



The unmistakable *clip-clop, clip-clop* of a horse and buggy pulling into the store’s parking lot brought Naomi back to the present. Caleb Hoffmeir, the young buggy maker, stepped down from his open carriage and waved. She lifted her hand in response.

As Caleb sauntered up the porch steps, his blue eyes twinkled; and when he smiled, the deep dimple in his right cheek was more pronounced. He flopped onto the step beside her. "It's a *wunderbaar* fine day, wouldn't you say?"

His face was inches from hers, and she could feel his warm breath against her cheek. Naomi shivered, despite the warmth of the sun's rays. "Jah, it is a wonderful day."

"Did ya hear there's gonna be a singin' out at Daniel Troyer's place this Sunday evening?"

Her heart clenched, but she merely shrugged in response. She was eighteen years old the last time she attended a singing.

Caleb lifted his straw hat, raked his fingers through his thick blond hair, and cleared his throat a couple times. "You—uh—think ya might be goin' to the singing, Naomi?"

She shook her head, feeling as though a heavy weight rested on her chest.

"*Was is letz do?*" he questioned.

Naomi sniffed deeply. "Nothin's wrong here, except I won't be goin' to no singing. Not this Sunday—and probably never."

Caleb raised his eyebrows. "Why not? You haven't been to one since long before your mamm died. Don't ya think it's about time?"

"Somebody's gotta feed the kinner and see that they're put to bed."

He grunted. "Can't your daed do that?"

"Papa's got other chores to do." Naomi squeezed her eyes shut and thought about the way her father used to be. He wasn't always cranky and out of sorts. He didn't shout orders or come across as overly critical. He used to be more easygoing and congenial. Everything had changed since Mama died—including Papa.

"Abraham could surely let you go to one little singing," Caleb persisted.

Naomi looked up at him, and Caleb leveled her with a look that went straight to her heart. Did he feel her pain? Did Caleb Hoffmeir

have any idea how tired she was? She placed the lunch pail on the step and wrapped her hands around her knees, clutching the folds of the long green dress that touched her ankles.

Caleb gently touched her arm, and the tiny lines around his eyes deepened. "I was hopin' if you went to the singing, I could take you home afterwards."

Naomi's eyes filled with unwanted tears. She longed to go to singings and young people's gatherings. She yearned to have fun with others her age or take leisurely rides in someone's courting buggy. "Papa would never allow me to go."

Caleb stood. "I'll ask him."

"Nee—no! That's not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because it might make him mad. Papa's awful protective, and he believes my place is at home with him and the children."

"We'll see about that. If Abraham gives his permission for you to go to the singing, you'd better plan on a ride home in my courtin' buggy."

Courtin' buggy? Did Caleb actually believe they could start courtin'? It wasn't likely to happen because Naomi had so many responsibilities. Truth be told, Naomi felt confused whenever she was around Caleb. His good looks and caring attitude appealed to her. But if she couldn't go to singings and other young people's functions, it wasn't likely she'd ever be able to court.

"Maybe I should talk to Papa about this myself," she murmured.

Caleb shook his head. "I'd like to try if ya don't mind."

Naomi's heartbeat quickened. Did she dare hope her daed might give his consent? "Jah, okay. I'll be prayin'."



Caleb glanced over his shoulder. Naomi sat with her head bowed and her hands folded in her lap. She looked so beautiful there with the sun

beating down on the white *kapp* perched on her head. The image of her oval face, golden brown hair, ebony eyes, and that cute upturned nose brought a smile to his face. He'd taken a liking to Naomi when they were kinner, but during their teen years, he'd been too shy to let her know. Now that he'd finally worked up the nerve, Caleb didn't know if they'd ever have the chance to court, what with Naomi being so busy with her family and all. He wasn't sure if Naomi returned his feelings, either, but he'd never know if they couldn't find a way to spend time alone.

He pulled the door open with a renewed sense of determination.

When Caleb stepped into the room, he spotted the tall, brawny storekeeper stocking shelves with bottles of kerosene. "*Gude mariye.*"

Abraham nodded. "I'd say 'good morning' back, but it's nearly noontime."

Caleb felt a penetrating heat creep up the back of his neck and spread quickly to his face. "Guess you're right about that."

"How's your daed?" Abraham asked.

"He's gut."

"And your mamm?"

"Doin' well." Caleb rubbed his sweaty palms along the sides of his trousers.

"What can I do for you?" the storekeeper asked, moving toward the wooden counter near the front of his store.

Caleb prayed he would have the courage to ask the question uppermost on his mind. "I was wonderin'—"

"I just got in a shipment of straw hats," Abraham blurted out. "Looks like the one you're wearin' has seen better days."

Caleb touched the brim of the item in question. It was getting kind of ragged around the edges, but there were no large holes. He could probably get another year's wear out of the old hat if he had a mind to. "I—uh—am not lookin' to buy a new hat today." Caleb hoped his voice sounded more confident than he felt, because his initial presentation had dissolved like a block of ice on a hot summer day.

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Abraham raised his bushy dark eyebrows and gave his brown beard a couple of tugs. "What are ya needin' then?"

"There's to be a singin' this Sunday night in Daniel Troyer's barn."

"What's that got to do with me?" Abraham yawned and leaned his elbows on the counter.

"It doesn't. I mean, it does in one way." Caleb shuffled his boots against the hardwood planks. He was botching things up and felt powerless to stop himself from acting like a self-conscious schoolboy. After all, he was a twenty-two-year-old man who built and repaired buggies for a living. Abraham Fisher probably thought he was *letz in der belskapp*; and truth be told, at this moment, Caleb felt like he was a little off in the head.

"Which is it, son?" the older man asked. "Does your bein' here have something to do with me or doesn't it?"

Caleb steadied himself against the front of the counter and leveled Abraham with a look he hoped would let the man know he meant business. "I'm wonderin' if Naomi can go to that singing."

Abraham's frown carved deep lines in his forehead. "Naomi's mamm died nearly a year ago, ya know."

Caleb nodded.

"Ever since the accident, it's been Naomi's job to look after the kinner."

"I understand that, but—"

Abraham brushed his hand across the wooden counter, sending several pieces of paper sailing to the floor. "It ain't polite to interrupt a man when he's speakin'."

"I—I'm sorry," Caleb stammered. Things weren't going nearly as well as he'd hoped.

"As I was saying. . . Naomi's job is to take care of her brothers and sisters, and she also helps here at the store."

Caleb nodded once more.

"There's only so many hours in a day, and there ain't time enough

for Naomi to be socializin’.” Abraham’s stern look set Caleb’s teeth on edge. “You might have plans to court my daughter, but the truth is, she ain’t right for you, even if she did have time for courtin’.”

“Don’t ya think that ought to be Naomi’s decision?” Caleb clenched his fists, hoping the action would give him added courage.

“Anything that concerns one of my kinner is my business.” Abraham leaned across the counter until his face was a few inches from Caleb’s.

If Caleb hadn’t known Amish were not supposed to engage in fighting, he would have feared Naomi’s father was getting ready to punch him in the nose. But that was about as unlikely as a sow giving birth to a calf. If Abraham was capable of anything, it would probably involve talking with Caleb’s father, which, in turn, could end up being a thorough tongue-lashing. Pop had plenty of rules for Caleb and his brothers to follow. He often said as long as his children lived under his roof, he expected them to obey him and be well mannered.

Caleb figured he would have to watch his tongue with Abraham Fisher, but maybe it was time to take a stand. How could he expect Naomi to respect him if he wasn’t willing to try for the right to court her?

“If Naomi started attending singings again, first thing ya know, she’d be wantin’ to court,” Abraham continued. “Then gettin’ married would be her next goal. I’d be left with a passel of youngsters to raise by myself if I let that happen.” Abraham made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “Who would mind the store if I was at home cookin’, cleanin’, and all?”

“Have you thought about getting married again or even hiring a *maad*?”

“Don’t need no maid when I’ve got Naomi. And as far as me marryin’ again, there ain’t no one available in our community right now, except for a couple of women young enough to be my daughter.” The man grunted. “Some men my age think nothin’ of takin’ a child bride, but not Abraham Fisher. I’ve got more dignity than that!”

Caleb opened his mouth to comment, but Naomi’s father cut him

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off. "Enough's been said. Naomi's not goin' to that singing on Sunday." Abraham pointed to the door. "Now if you didn't come here to buy anything, you'd best be on your way."

All sorts of comebacks flitted through Caleb's mind, but he remained silent. No use getting the man more riled. He would bide his time, and when the opportunity afforded itself, Caleb hoped to have the last word where the storekeeper's daughter was concerned.

## CHAPTER 2

Naomi had just taken a bite from her apple when the screen door creaked open. She looked over her shoulder and saw Caleb exit the store. The scowl on his face told Naomi things probably hadn't gone well with Papa, and a sense of disappointment crept into her soul.

"He said no, didn't he?" Naomi whispered when Caleb slumped to the step beside her.

"Your daed is the most stubborn man I've ever met." He shrugged. "Of course, my pop's runnin' him a close second."

"Matthew says Papa's overprotective 'cause he cares." She blinked against the tears flooding her eyes. Truth be told, Naomi wasn't sure her father cared about her at all. If he did, then why had he been keeping it to himself? Not once in the last year had he said he loved her or appreciated all the work she did.

"I'm thinkin' your daed saying no to my request has more to do with his own selfish needs than it does with him carin'. Tell that to your oldest brother."

Naomi tossed what was left of her apple into the lunch pail and slammed the lid shut. "Papa's not bein' selfish. He's hurting because Mama died."

Caleb crossed his arms. "That was a whole year ago, Naomi. Don't ya think it's time your daed got on with his life?"

"When Mama was alive, Papa used to be fun-loving and carefree. He'd joke around with the brothers and tease me and the sisters sometimes, too." Remembering how happy she used to be, Naomi fought to control her emotions. Things were all mixed up now that she was trying

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to fill her mother's shoes. Life had been much better before Naomi's mother got pregnant with Zach. It had come as a surprise to everyone in the family because Mama was forty-two years old and hadn't had any children since Mary Ann was born six years ago. All during her mother's pregnancy, she'd been sickly. Naomi's only consolation was her confidence that the dear woman was in heaven with Jesus, happy and healthy, no more cares of the world—cares Naomi now shouldered.

"Ain't ya got nothin' to say about all this?"

Caleb's question drew Naomi's thoughts aside, and she turned to look at him. "What's to be said? My daed won't let me go to the singin', I've gotta take care of my family, and I have a store to help run." She grabbed her lunch pail and stood. "I'd best be getting back to work before Papa comes lookin' for me."

Caleb scrambled to his feet and positioned himself between Naomi and the door. "There has to be some way we can make your daed listen to reason. I want to court you, Naomi."

She hung her head. "Maybe you should find someone else to court, 'cause it doesn't look like I'll ever be free. Leastways, not 'til all the kinner are old enough to fend for themselves."

Caleb lifted her chin with his thumb. "I care for you."

Naomi's throat constricted. She cared for Caleb, too, but what was the point in saying so when they couldn't court? Too many problems plagued her mind already. She didn't need one more. "You'd better find someone else." She pushed past him and hurried into the store.

Naomi found Papa kneeling on the floor, holding a sheet of paper, with several more lying next to his knee. He looked up, and a deep frown etched his forehead. "I'm glad you're back. I think I heard the baby fussin'."

She glanced at the door to the back room and tipped her head. She didn't hear anything. Not even a peep out of Zach. Naomi was tempted to mention that to Papa but thought better of it. "I'll go check on the boppli."

A few seconds later, Naomi stepped into the room used for storage. The baby's playpen, a rocking chair, and a small couch were also kept there. Sometimes, when there weren't many customers, Papa liked to lie down and take a nap, which was usually whenever Zach was sleeping.

Naomi liked those moments when she could be by herself. It gave her a chance to daydream about how she wished her life could be. If an English customer came into the store, she worried about her father scrutinizing everything she said or did. Naomi often wondered if Papa was afraid something an Englisher might say would cause her to become dissatisfied with their way of life and turn worldly.

She remembered the last time Virginia Meyers dropped by. Papa hovered around, acting like a mother hen protecting her young. Virginia, who liked to be called "Ginny," came into the store at least once a week, sometimes to buy rubber stamps, other times just to look around. Naomi and Ginny were about the same age and had struck up a friendship, although Naomi was careful not to let Papa know.

She stared at the playpen where her little brother lay sleeping. He looked so peaceful, lying on his side, curled into a fetal position. One hand rested against his rosy cheek, a lock of russet-colored hair lay across his forehead, and the tiny little birthmark behind his right ear seemed to be winking at Naomi. "Sleep well, little one, and enjoy your days of untroubled babyhood," Naomi whispered. "Soon you'll grow up and see life for what it really is—all work and no play."

Tears clouded Naomi's vision. *Oh, Lord, You know I love my family and want to keep my promise to Mama, but sometimes it's ever so hard.*

If there were someone to help on a regular basis, Naomi's burdens might be a bit lighter. Her maternal grandparents were both dead, and Papa's folks had moved to an Amish settlement in Indiana several years ago to be near their daughter Carolyn. They were both ailing now, so even if they had lived close, Grandma Fisher wouldn't be much help to Naomi. Many of the women in their community offered assistance after

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Mama died, but they had their own families to care for, and Naomi knew she couldn't continually rely on others. Looking after the family was her job, and even though she was exhausted, she would do it for as long as necessary.

Naomi swiped at the moisture on her cheeks. *Nobody understands how I feel.*

Naomi was twenty years old. She should be married and starting a family of her own by now. Her friends Grace and Phoebe had gotten married last fall. Naomi had been asked to be one of Phoebe's attendants, and it was a painful reminder that her chance at love and marriage might never come.

Drawing in a deep breath and forcing her pain aside, Naomi slipped quietly out of the room. Zach was obviously not ready to wake from his nap, and she had plenty of work to do. There was no more time for reflections.



Abraham Fisher glanced at his daughter when she entered the room. It was clear by her solemn expression that Naomi was unhappy. No doubt Caleb had told her what had been said in regard to the singing. He grabbed the broom and gave the floor a few brisk sweeps. Naomi didn't understand. No one did. Life held little joy for Abraham since Sarah died. Even though Zach's first birthday last Saturday had been a happy occasion, it was also a painful reminder that ten months ago the baby's mother had gone to heaven, leaving Abraham with a broken heart and eight kinner in his charge. He couldn't care for them alone, and he relied on Naomi's help.

Naomi strolled past him without a word. She reached under the counter, grabbed a dust rag, and started working on the shelves near the front of the store.

"Where's Zach?" he called to her.

“Still sleeping.”

“Oh. I thought I heard him cryin’.”

“Nope.”

“Guess maybe I’m hearin’ things in my old age.”

“You’re not old, Papa.”

Abraham pushed the broom back and forth. “Forty-four’s old enough. Don’t get nearly as much done as I used to.”

“Mama was a big help, wasn’t she?” Naomi asked.

“Jah, she was. Your mamm loved workin’ at the store. Since this place used to belong to her folks, she grew up helpin’ here.”

“Do you ever wish you were doing something other than working at the store six days a week?”

Naomi’s question startled Abraham. Did she know what was on his mind? Had she guessed he wasn’t happy running the store? Truth of the matter, he’d much prefer to be at home farming with his boys than stocking shelves all day or dealing with the curious English who often visited the store.

“Papa, did ya hear what I asked?”

He nodded and grabbed the dustpan he had leaned against the front of the counter. “Jah, I heard. Just thinkin’; that’s all.”

“Mind if I ask what you were thinking about?”

Abraham did mind. He didn’t want to talk about an impossible dream. He was committed to running the store. It was the least he could do to preserve his late wife’s memory. “Just remembering how things were when your mamm was alive.”

Naomi didn’t say anything. He figured she probably missed her mother as much as he missed his wife of twenty-five years. Their marriage had been good, and God had blessed their union with eight beautiful children. Things had gone fairly well until Sarah’s life had been snuffed out like a candle in the breeze.

*Wish it had been me God had taken,* Abraham thought painfully. Truth was, he’d blamed himself for Sarah’s death. If he hadn’t closed

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the store that day last June and gone fishing with his friend, Jacob Weaver, his precious wife might still be alive. If he hadn't suggested Naomi stay home from the store and help her mamm in the garden, Sarah probably wouldn't have gone to the mailbox.

During the two months of Sarah's recuperation from Zach's birth, she hadn't worked at the store. Abraham had insisted she stay home and take it easy. Up until the fateful day of her death, someone else had always gotten the mail. Sarah probably felt since Naomi was there to watch the baby and the younger ones, it would be fine for her to take a walk to the mailbox.

He thought about the way Jacob had helped him work through his grief as well as the guilt he felt. Yet, there were still moments when Abraham berated himself for going fishing, and he'd not gone again since Sarah died.

*Didn't God care how much I loved that woman?*

Abraham thought about Caleb Hoffmeir's suggestion that he find another wife. The young man hadn't been the first person to recommend he remarry. Several of his friends, including Jacob Weaver, had also made such a remark.

"There will always be a place in your heart for Sarah," Jacob said the other day, "but takin' another wife would be good for you as well as the children."

Abraham squeezed the broom handle. *No, I can't bring myself to marry a woman merely to look after my children. There has to be love, and I doubt I could ever care for anyone the way I cared for Sarah.* He swept the dirt into the dustpan and dumped it in the wastepaper basket. *As I told Caleb earlier, there ain't no available widows in the area right now, and I'm not about to court some young, single woman, the way I've seen others do.*

Feeling a sudden need for some fresh air, Abraham leaned the broom against the wall and grabbed his straw hat from the wooden peg by the front door. "I'm goin' out to run a couple errands," he announced.