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Hope Chest

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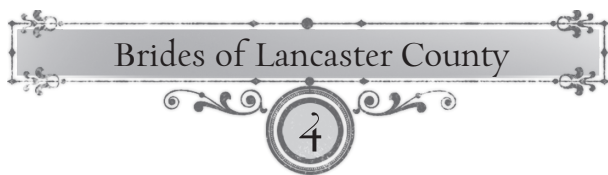
Looking for a Miracle

Plain and Fancy

The Hope Chest

The Simple Life (nonfiction devotional)

THE *Hope Chest*



Wanda E.
Brunstetter



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Wanda E. Brunstetter enjoys writing about the Amish because they live a peaceful, simple life. Wanda's interest in the Amish and other Plain communities began when she married her husband, Richard, who grew up in a Mennonite church in Pennsylvania. Wanda has made numerous trips to Lancaster County and has several friends and family members living near that area. She and her husband have also traveled to other parts of the country, meeting various Amish families and getting to know them personally. She hopes her readers will learn to love the wonderful Amish people as much as she does.

Wanda and her husband, Richard, have been married forty-three years. They have two grown children and six grandchildren. In her spare time, Wanda enjoys reading, ventriloquism, gardening, stamping, and having fun with her family.

Wanda has written 25 novels, as well as several stories, articles, poems, puppet scripts, gift books, and a devotional book.

To learn more about Wanda, visit her Web site at www.wanda-brunstetter.com and feel free to e-mail her at wanda@wandabrunstetter.com.

To my daughter, Lorine, the recipient of my special hope chest.

*With special thanks to my helpful editor, Rebecca Germany,
for giving me the opportunity to revise
and expand the four books in this series that
were originally part of the Lancaster Brides collection.*

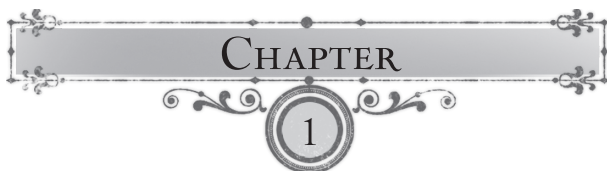
*I also thank the following women
who willingly offered their research assistance:
Betty Yoder, Sue Miller, and Ruth Stoltzfus.*

*As always, I appreciate and thank my husband, Richard,
for his continued help and encouragement.*

*Most of all, I thank my heavenly Father,
who gives me the inspiration, strength, wisdom, and desire to write.*

*For thou art my hope, O Lord GOD:
thou art my trust from my youth.*

PSALM 71:5



CHAPTER
1

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Rachel Beachy halted under a giant birch tree. She would have recognized that distinctive sound anywhere. Shielding her eyes from the glare of the late afternoon sun, she tipped her head back and gazed at the branches overhead. Sure enough, there it was—a downy woodpecker. Its tiny claws were anchored firmly to the trunk of the tree, while its petite little head bobbed rhythmically back and forth as it pecked away at the old birch tree.

Hoping for a better look, Rachel decided to climb the tree. As she threw her leg over the first branch, she was glad she was alone and that no one could see how ridiculous she must look. She'd never really minded wearing long dresses. After all, that was what Amish girls and women were expected to wear. At times like this, however, Rachel wished she could wear a pair of men's trousers. It certainly would make climbing trees a mite easier.

Rachel winced as a piece of bark scratched her knee, leaving a stain of blood that quickly seeped through her dress. It was worth the pain if it would allow her to get a

better look at that cute little wood-tapper, though.

Pik-pik-pik! The woodpecker's unusual call resonated against the trunk. *Rat-atat-tat!* The bird returned to the pecking process.

"Such a busy little bird," Rachel said quietly as it came into view, two branches above where she straddled the good-sized limb. She and her older sister, Anna, had gone to the river to get cooled off that afternoon, and Rachel had been the first one to head for home. Now she wished she had left the water sooner so she could spend more time studying this beautiful creature God had created and knew everything about. She was reminded of Psalm 50:11: "*I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine.*"

Rachel lifted one leg in preparation to move up another limb, but a deep male voice drew her attention to the ground. She halted.

"Hey, Anna, slow down once, would you, please?"

Rachel dropped down so her stomach lay flat against the branch. When she lifted her head a bit and peeked through the leaves, she saw her older sister sprinting across the open field. Silas Swartley was following her, his long strides making Rachel think of a jackrabbit running at full speed.

With his hands cupped around his mouth, Silas yelled, "Anna! Wait up!"

Rachel knew she'd be in trouble if Anna caught her spying, so she held as still as possible and prayed that the couple would move quickly on past.

Anna stopped near the foot of the tree, and Silas joined her there. "I—I really need to talk to you, Anna," he panted.

Rachel's heart slammed into her chest. Why couldn't it

be her Silas wanted to talk to? If only he could see that she would be better for him than Anna. *If Silas knew how much I care for him, would it make a difference?*

Rachel was keenly aware that Silas only had eyes for her big sister, but that didn't make her love him any less. As far as she could tell, Silas had been in love with Anna ever since they were children, and Rachel had loved Silas nearly that long, as well. He was all she wanted in a man—good-looking, kindhearted, interested in birds—and he enjoyed fishing.

She was sure he had many other attributes that made him appealing, but with Silas standing right below the tree where she lay hidden, she could barely breathe, much less think of all the reasons she loved him so much.

Rachel looked down at her sister, arms folded across her chest, body held rigid as she stood like a statue facing Silas. It was as if Anna couldn't be bothered with talking to him, which made no sense since she and Silas had been friends a long time. Silas had been coming over to their place to visit ever since Rachel could remember.

Silas reached for Anna's hand, but she pulled it away. "Just who do you think you are, Silas Swartley?"

"I'm your boyfriend, that's who. Have been since we were *kinner*, and you know it."

"I don't know any such thing, so don't try to put words in my mouth."

Rachel stifled a giggle. *That sister of mine. . .she's sure got herself a temper.*

Silas tipped his head to one side. "I don't get it. One minute you're sweet as cherry pie, and the next minute you act as if you don't care for me at all."

Rachel knew full well that Silas spoke the truth. She'd seen with her own eyes the way her sister led that poor fellow on. Why, just a few weeks ago, Anna had let Silas bring her home from a singing. She had to feel some kind of interest in him if she was willing to accept a ride in his courting buggy.

Rachel held her breath as Silas reached out to touch the ties on Anna's stiff, white *kapp*. Anna jerked her head quickly, causing one of the ribbons to tear loose. "Now look what you've done." She pulled on the edge of her covering, but in so doing, the pins holding her hair in a bun must have been knocked loose, for a cascade of tawny yellow curls fell loosely down her back.

Rachel wished she could see the look on Silas's face. She could only imagine what he must be thinking as he reached up to scratch the back of his head and groaned. "Why, you're prettier than a field full of fireflies at sunset, Anna."

Rachel gulped. What she wouldn't give to hear Silas talk to her that way. Maybe if she kept hoping. Maybe if. . .

Rachel thought about a verse in Psalm 71 that she had read that morning: "*But I will hope continually, and will yet praise thee more and more.*"

She would gladly offer praises to God if she could win Silas's heart. Truth be told, the verse of scripture she should call her own might best be found in the book of Job, chapter 7: "*My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope.*"

Rachel figured she would most likely end up an old maid, while Anna would have a loving husband and a whole house full of children.

"Sometimes I wish I could wear my hair down all the

time,” Anna said, pulling Rachel out of her musings. “Or maybe get it cut really short.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I might look prettier if I . . .oh, never mind.”

“Are you questioning the Amish ways? Now, what would your *mamm* and *daed* have to say about that?” Before Anna could answer, Silas added, “You’ve always been a bit of a rebel, haven’t you?”

Anna leaned against the trunk of the tree, and Rachel dug her fingernails into the bark of the branch she was lying on. *What will my sister say to that comment?*

“My mom and dad would be upset if they knew I had mentioned cutting my hair short.” Anna sighed. “Many things about the Amish ways are good, but sometimes I wonder if I might not be happier if I were English.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“*Jah*, I am.”

Rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat! Pik! Pik!

“Say, that sounds like a woodpecker to me.” Silas leaned his head back and looked into the tree where Rachel lay partially hidden.

She froze in place. If Silas should spot her instead of the bird, she’d be caught like a pig trying to get into Mom’s flower garden. Anna would sure as anything think she had climbed the tree just to spy on her and Silas.

“Forget about the dumb old woodpecker,” Anna said in an impatient tone.

Silas continued to peer into the branches. “Hmm. . .I know I heard him, but I don’t see that old rascal anywhere.”

“You and your dopey bird-watching. One would think

you'd never seen a woodpecker before." Anna grunted. "Rachel's fascinated with birds, too. I believe she'd rather watch them eat from one of the feeders in our yard than eat a meal herself."

Silas looked away from the tree and turned to face Anna again. "Birds are interesting little creatures, but you're right. . . I can do my bird-watching some other time." He touched her shoulder. "Now what was it you were saying about wanting to be English?"

"I didn't exactly say I *wanted* to be English; just that I sometimes wonder if I might not be happier being English." Anna pointed to the skirt of her long, blue dress. "Take these clothes, for example. It might be nice to enjoy the freedom of not having to wear a dress all the time."

Rachel sucked in her breath. Where was this conversation headed? If Anna wasn't careful, she might say something stupid and maybe get in trouble for shooting off her big mouth. Especially if the bishop or one of their deacons got wind of it. Truth was, Anna had been acting a bit strange of late—disappearing for hours at a time and saying some mighty peculiar things. Her conversation with Silas only confirmed what Rachel suspected. Anna felt some dissatisfaction with the Amish way of life. It wasn't like Anna climbed trees and saw her dress as a hazard. No, Rachel's prim and proper sister would never climb a tree.

Rachel knew that a lot more than wearing long dresses bothered Anna about being Amish. Not long ago, Anna had mentioned to Rachel that she wished she hadn't been so hasty to join the church and was worried that she might have made a mistake. When Rachel questioned her sister

about it, Anna had quickly changed the subject. It made no sense, because Anna had never suggested such a thing before or immediately after joining the church. Something had happened between last fall and this summer to get Anna thinking this way.

“What would you suggest women wear, then—trousers?” Silas asked, jerking Rachel’s attention back to the conversation below.

“Maybe.”

“Are you saying that you’d wear men’s trousers if you could?”

“I—I might. I could do some of my chores a bit easier if I didn’t have a long skirt getting in the way.” Anna paused. “If I weren’t Amish, I could do many things that I can’t now.”

Oh, great! Now you’ve gone and done it. Why can’t you just be nice to Silas instead of trying to goad him into an argument? Rachel shifted her legs, trying to get a bit more comfortable. Can’t you see how much the fellow cares for you, Anna? If anyone should be wanting to wear men’s trousers, it’s me—Rachel, the tomboy. At least I’ve got the good sense to not announce such a thing. And suggesting that you might want to try out the English world is just plain stupid, especially since you already had that opportunity during your rumschpringe.

“I, for one, am mighty glad you’re not English,” Silas said, his voice rising an octave. “And you shouldn’t even be thinking such thoughts now that you’ve joined the church, much less speaking them. Why, if your daed or any of our church leaders heard you say anything like that, you’d have some explaining to do, that’s for certain sure.”

Anna moved away from the tree. “Let’s not talk about

this anymore. I need to get home. Rachel was way ahead of me when I left the river, so she's probably already there and has done half my chores by now. Mom let me have the afternoon off from working in the greenhouse, so I don't want her getting after me for shirking my household duties."

"Jah, well, I guess I need to be heading home, too." Silas made no move to leave, however, and Rachel had to wonder what was up.

Anna rolled and pinned her hair into place; then she put her head covering back on. Just as she started to walk away, Silas stepped in front of her. "I still haven't said everything I wanted to say."

"What'd you want to say?"

He shuffled his feet a few times, gave his suspenders a good yank, then cleared his throat loudly. "I . . .uh. . .was wondering if I might come see you one evening next week."

Rachel's heart missed a beat. At least it felt as if it had. Silas had been sweet on Anna a good many years, so she should have known the day would come when he would ask to start courting her. Only trouble was if Silas started courting Anna, then Rachel's chances would be nil, and she couldn't bear to think about that.

"You want to call on *me*?" Anna's voice came out as a squeak.

"Of course, silly. Who'd you think I meant—your little sister Rachel?"

That's what I wish you had meant. Rachel's pulse quickened at the thought of her being Silas's girlfriend and riding home from singings in his courting buggy. She drew in a deep breath and pressed against the tree limb as though

she were hugging it. No sense hoping and dreaming the impossible. Silas didn't care about her in the least. Not in the way he did Anna, that was for sure. To him, Rachel was still a girl, five years younger than he was, at that. She knew he felt that way, because he'd just referred to her as Anna's "little sister." Besides, whenever Silas had come over to their house, he'd always spoken to Rachel as though she were a child.

"We've known each other for many years, and you did take a ride in my courting buggy after the last singing," Silas continued. "I think it's high time—"

"Hold on to your horses," Anna cut in. "You're a nice man, Silas Swartley, and a good friend, but I can't allow you to court me."

"Why not?"

"Because we're not right for each other."

"Ouch. That hurt my feelings, Anna. I always thought you cared for me."

Rachel could only imagine how Silas must feel. Her heart went out to him. How could Anna be so blind? Couldn't she see what a wonderful man he was? Didn't she realize what a good husband and father he would make?

"I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings." Anna spoke so softly that Rachel had to strain to hear the words. "It's just that I have other plans for my life, and—"

"Other plans? What kind of plans?"

"I—I'd rather not say just now."

"You may think I'm just a big, dumb Amish fellow, but I'm not as stupid as I might look, Anna Beachy."

"I never meant you were stupid. I just want you to

understand that it won't work for the two of us." After a long pause, she added, "Maybe my little sister *would* be better for you, Silas."

I would! I would! Rachel's heart pounded with sudden hope. She held her breath, waiting to hear what Silas would say next, but disappointment flooded her soul when he turned on his heels and started walking away.

"I'll leave you alone for now, Anna, but when you're ready, I'll be waiting," Silas called over his shoulder. He broke into a run and was soon out of sight.

Rachel released her breath and flexed her body against the unyielding limb. Hot tears pushed against her eyelids, and she blinked several times to force them back. At least Silas and Anna hadn't known she was up here eavesdropping on their private conversation. That would have ruined any chance she might ever have of catching Silas's attention. Not that she had any, really. Besides their age difference, Rachel was sure she wasn't pretty enough for Silas. She had pale blue eyes and straw-colored hair. Nothing beautiful about that. Anna, on the other hand, had been blessed with sparkling green eyes and hair the color of ripe peaches. Rachel was certain Anna would always be Silas's first choice because she was so pretty. *Too bad I'm not schie like her. I wish I hadn't been born looking so plain.*



When Rachel arrived home several minutes behind her sister, she found her brother Joseph replacing the bolts on an old plow that sat out in the yard. A lock of sandy brown hair lay across his sweaty forehead, and his straw hat

rested on a nearby stump.

As she approached, he looked up and frowned. “You’re late! Anna’s already inside, no doubt helping Mom with supper. You’d better get in there quick, or they’ll both be plenty miffed.”

“I’m going. And don’t be thinking you can boss me around.” She scrunched up her nose. “You may be twenty-one and three years older than me, but you’re not my keeper, Joseph Beachy.”

“Don’t go gettin’ your feathers all ruffled. You’re crankier than the old red rooster when his hens are fighting for the best pieces of corn.” Joseph’s forehead wrinkled as he squinted his blue eyes and stared at her dress. “Say, isn’t that blood I see there?”

She nodded.

“What happened? Did you fall in the river and skin your knee on a rock?”

Rachel shook her head. “I skinned my knee, but it wasn’t on a rock.”

Joseph gave her a knowing look. “Don’t tell me it was another one of your tree-climbing escapades.”

She waved a hand and turned away. “Okay, I won’t tell you that.”

“Let Mom know I’ll be in for supper as soon as I finish with the plow,” he called to her.

As Rachel stepped onto the back porch, she thought about all the chores she had to do. It was probably a good thing. At least when her hands were kept busy, it didn’t give her so much time to think about things—especially about Silas Swartley.



Silas kicked a clump of grass with the toe of his boot. What had come over Anna all of a sudden? How could she be so friendly one minute and almost rude the next? Worse than that, when had she developed such dissatisfaction with being Amish? Had it been there all along, and he'd just been too blind to notice? Was Anna going through some kind of a phase, like some folks did during their rumschpringe? But that made no sense, since Anna had already been baptized and joined the Amish church.

Silas clenched his fists and kept trudging toward home. *I love Anna, but if she's really the woman for me, then why is she acting so disinterested all of a sudden?* He still couldn't believe she'd suggested he start courting her little sister.

"Is that woman simpleminded?" he grumbled. "Rachel's still just a kinner. Besides, it's Anna I love, not her little sister."

As Silas rounded the bend, his farm came into view. A closed-in buggy sat out front in the driveway, and he recognized the horse. It belonged to Deacon Noah Shemly.

"Hmm. . .wonder what's up." He shrugged. "Maybe Mom invited Deacon Noah and his family to join us for supper tonight."

When Silas entered the kitchen a few minutes later, he found his folks and Deacon Noah sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tall glasses of lemonade. It didn't appear as if any of the deacon's family had come with him.

"Is supper about ready?" Silas asked, smiling at his mother. "I'm sure hungry."

Mom gave him a stern look over the top of her metal-framed glasses, which were perched in the middle of her nose. “Where are your manners, son? Can’t you say hello to our guest before you start fretting over food?”

Silas was none too happy about his mother embarrassing him that way, but he knew better than to sass her back. Mom might be only half his size, but she could still pack a good wallop to any of her boys’ backsides, and she didn’t care how old they were, either.

“Sorry,” Silas apologized as he nodded at the man who had come to pay them a visit. “When I saw your buggy, I thought maybe you’d brought the whole family along.”

Deacon Shemly shook his head. “Nope. Just me.”

“Noah came by to have a little talk with you,” Pap said, running his fingers through his slightly graying hair, then motioning Silas to take a seat.

“What about?”

“Your friend Reuben Yutzy,” the deacon answered with a quick nod.

Silas took off his straw hat and hung it on a wall peg near the back door. Then he took a seat at the table. “What about Reuben?”

The deacon leaned forward and leveled Silas with a piercing gaze. “As you already know, Reuben works for an English paint contractor in Lancaster.”

Silas merely nodded in response.

“I hear tell Reuben’s been seen with some worldly folks lately.”

“As you just said, he works for the English.”

“I’m talking about Reuben’s off-hours.” Noah gave his

full brown beard a few good yanks. “Word has it that he’s been going to some picture shows and hanging around with a group of English who like to party some.”

Silas frowned deeply. “I see.”

“You know anything about this, son?” Pap spoke up.

“No. Why would I?”

“Reuben and you have been friends since you were kinder,” Mom reminded.

Silas shrugged. “That’s true, but he doesn’t tell me everything he does.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t know anything about Reuben being involved in the things of the world?” Deacon Noah questioned.

“Not a thing, and it’s probably just a rumor.” Silas scooted his chair back and stood. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d best see to my chores before supper.”

“Reuben’s folks are mighty concerned that if he’s involved with the things of the world, he’ll never decide to join the church. So, you will let me or one of the other ministers know if you hear anything, won’t you?” the deacon called as Silas headed for the back door.

“Jah, sure.”

Outside, on the porch, Silas drew in a deep, cleansing breath. What in the world was going on here? First Anna acting off in the head, and now all these questions about Reuben. It was enough to make him a nervous wreck!