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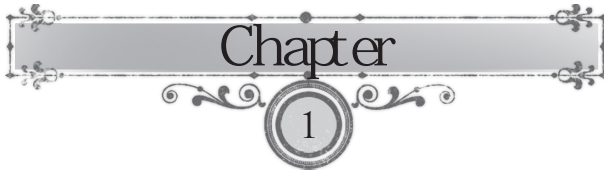
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Chapter

1

Laura Meade opened her laptop, entered the correct password to put her online, and began the e-mail she had been meaning to write for the past week:

Dear Shannon,

I'm finally settled in at the Lancaster School of Design. I think I'm going to like it here. Not only is the college rated in the top ten, but the area is beautiful, and the Amish I've seen are unbelievable! I haven't met any of them up close and personal, but from what I've seen, the women wear simple, dark-colored dresses, with little white hats on their heads. The men wear cotton shirts, dark pants with suspenders, and either a straw or black felt hat with a wide brim. They drive box-shaped, closed-in buggies pulled by a horse.

Tomorrow, I'm going to the farmers' market. I hear it's a great place to get good buys on handmade Amish quilts. I may even be able to acquire some helpful decorating ideas there.

I hope you're doing well and enjoying your new job.

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I'm looking forward to seeing you at Christmas and hearing about those preschoolers you teach.

*Your friend,
Laura*

Laura thought about sending an e-mail to her parents, but she had talked to them on the phone just an hour ago, so there wouldn't be much to write about now. Moving away from the desk, she picked up a brush from the dresser and began her nightly ritual of one hundred strokes through her long, thick tresses.

She glanced around the room with disdain. Even the smallest room at home was bigger than this dinky dorm room. Fortunately, she would only be here two years. Then she could return to Minneapolis and redecorate to her heart's content—starting with her own bedroom at home.

"It's stifling in here." Laura dropped the hairbrush onto the bed and went to open the window. A slight breeze trickled through the screen, but it did nothing to cool the stuffy room. Here it was the first week of September, and the days were still hot and humid. To make matters worse, the air-conditioning wasn't working right and probably wouldn't be fixed until later in the week, according to what she'd been told.

Fall had always been Laura's favorite time of year. Someday, she hoped to decorate her own home with harvest colors. The kitchen windows would be outlined with sheer yellow curtains. The living-room, dining-room, and bedroom floors would be covered with thick, bronze carpets. She wanted to decorate with Early American furniture and to hang plenty of paintings from that era on the walls.

Mom and Dad had allowed her to travel halfway across the country to attend the Lancaster School of Design, despite the fact that several good schools were closer to home. When Laura had heard about this one so near to the heart of Amish land, she'd known she had to come. She'd read about the interesting culture of the Plain People on a few Web sites and was sure she could gain some unique decorating ideas here in Lancaster County.

Laura glanced at the photo of Dean Carlson, set in a gold frame on top of her dresser. Dean was the newest member of her father's law firm, and he had given her the picture soon after they'd started dating three months ago. Dean hadn't been too happy about her moving to Pennsylvania, even though she had assured him it would only be for a couple of years. She wasn't sure if his reluctance to see her go was because he cared so much or if he might be worried that she would find someone else and end up staying in Pennsylvania.

A loud knock jolted Laura out of her musings. With an exasperated sigh, she crossed the room and opened the door.

A young woman with short, curly blond hair stood in the hallway. "Hi. I'm Darla Shelby. I have the room next to yours."

Laura smiled. "I'm Laura Meade."

"Nice to meet you. Where are you from?"

"Minneapolis. How about you?"

"I grew up here in Lancaster, moved to New York with my folks when I was sixteen, and came back here again to attend this school." She grinned. "But my favorite place to be is Philadelphia. In fact, since tomorrow's Saturday,

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I thought I'd drive into Philly and do some shopping. Would you like to go along?"

"So you must have your own car?"

Darla nodded. "It's a little red convertible—got it for my birthday last year."

Laura thought about her own car parked in the garage at home. She wished she could have driven it here, but her parents had insisted that she fly to Pennsylvania and lease a car during her stay.

"I realize we've only just met," Darla continued, "but I figure what better way to get acquainted than during a shopping spree."

Laura leaned against the doorframe as she contemplated the tempting offer. "I appreciate the invitation, and I'd love to go with you some other time, but I had planned to go to the farmers' market at Bird-in-Hand tomorrow. I understand some of the Plain People go there to shop and sell some of their wares."

Darla nodded. "Those Amish and Mennonites are quite the tourist attraction around here."

"Why don't you go to the market with me, and we can do some shopping there?"

Darla wrinkled her nose. "No way! I'd rather be caught in the middle of rush-hour traffic on the turnpike than spend the day with a bunch of farmers."

Laura giggled. "Those farmers do look pretty interesting."

"Maybe so, but they're not interesting enough for me to give up a day of shopping in Philly." Darla turned toward her own room, calling over her shoulder, "Whatever you do, Laura, don't let too much of that Amish culture rub off on you."



As Eli Yoder left Strasburg, where he worked at a store that made handcrafted Amish furniture, he thought about the conversation he'd had with Pauline Hostetler after church last Sunday. He had made the mistake of telling her that he planned to rent a table at the farmers' market this Saturday to sell some of the items he'd created in his wood shop at home.

"Oh, Eli," he could still hear her say, "*I was planning to go to the market on Saturday, too. Maybe the two of us could meet at noon and eat lunch together.*"

"Pauline's after me to court her," Eli mumbled, as he headed down the road toward home in his buggy.

His horse whinnied as if in response and perked up his ears.

"Are you sympathizing with me, boy?" Eli chuckled and flicked the reins to get his horse trotting a bit faster. It was fun to ride in his open buggy and go a little faster than usual. It made him feel free and one with the wind whipping against his face.

I won't be free for long if Pauline has anything to say about it. I think she's in cahoots with Mom to see me join the church so I can get married and settle down to raising a family. Eli frowned. It wasn't that he didn't want to get married someday. He just hadn't found the right woman yet, and he was sure it wouldn't be Pauline. He was in no hurry to be baptized and join the church until he felt ready to settle down. So Mom would have to learn to be patient.

"Why'd I agree to meet Pauline for lunch?" Eli fretted. "She's likely to take it to mean I have an interest in her, and

then she'll expect me to start officially calling on her."

He gripped the reins a little tighter. "I'll have lunch with her on Saturday because I promised I would, but I'll have to figure out some way to let her know there's no chance of us having a future together."



A ray of sun filtered through the window, causing Laura to squint when she opened her eyes. She peeked at the small clock on her bedside table. It was nearly nine o'clock. She had slept much later than she'd planned.

Jerking the covers aside, she slipped out of bed and headed for the shower. A short time later, as Laura studied the contents of her closet, she had a hard time deciding what to wear. She finally opted for a pair of blue jeans and a rust-colored tank top. She pulled her long, auburn hair into a ponytail and secured it with a navy blue scrunchie.

"Nothing fancy, but I'm sure I look good enough to go to the farmers' market," she said to her reflection in the mirror. "Amish country, I hope you're ready for me because here I come!"



Mary Ellen Yoder had just begun supper preparations when her husband, Johnny, stepped into the kitchen, holding a pot of pansies in his hands. He grinned at her and placed the pot on the counter. "These are for you. I got 'em from the Beachys' greenhouse."

She turned from her job of cutting vegetables for a stew and smiled. "Such a thoughtful husband I have. *Danki*, Johnny."

His smile widened, and he leaned over to kiss her cheek. "I still remember the first bouquet of flowers I bought for my special girl. Do you?"

She nodded. "That was way back when you were doing everything you could to get me to allow you to come courting."

He slipped his arm around her waist and gave her a squeeze. "And it worked, too, didn't it? We not only started courting, but you agreed to marry me, and now we've got ourselves four of the finest *kinner* around."

"*Jah*, I agree." Mary Ellen smiled and resumed cutting her vegetables.

"And let's not forget that spunky little *kindsbuh* our daughter gave us a few years back."

"Now if we can just get our three *buwe* married off so they can add more grandchildren to our family," Mary Ellen said.

"I think the chances of Lewis and Jonas finding wives might be pretty good since they've already joined the church, but Eli's another matter."

Mary Ellen sighed and glanced at Johnny over her shoulder. "It's hard for me to understand why he keeps saying he's not ready to settle down when he's got a fine woman like Pauline Hostetler interested in him. Eli's twenty-three years old already and has gone through his *rumschpringe* long enough. Wouldn't you think he'd be eager to end his running-around years and start courting a pretty girl?"

Johnny shrugged. "I don't want to get your hopes up, but I heard Eli talking to Jonas last night, and he mentioned that he's got plans to meet Pauline for lunch on Saturday when he goes to the farmers' market to sell some of his handmade wooden items."

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Despite her husband's warning, Mary Ellen's hopes began to soar. "Really? You heard that?"

"Heard it with my own ears, so it's not just say-so."

She smiled. "Now that is good news. Jah, the best news I've had all day."



When Laura stepped out of her air-conditioned car, a blast of heat and humidity hit her full in the face. She hurried into the market building and was relieved to find that it was much cooler than the outside air had been.

The first table Laura discovered was run by two young Amish women selling an assortment of pies and cookies. Both wore their hair parted down the middle, then pulled back into a tight bun. They had small, white caps perched on top of their heads, and their long-sleeved, dark blue dresses were calf-length, with black aprons and capes worn over the front. One of the women smiled and asked Laura if she would like to sample something.

She stared longingly at a piece of apple pie. They did look delicious, but she'd had breakfast not long ago and didn't think she needed the extra calories.

"No thanks. I'm not really hungry right now." The truth was Laura was always counting calories, and she figured one bite of those scrumptious pastries would probably tip the scales in an unfavorable direction. She moved on quickly before temptation got the better of her.

The next few tables were run by non-Amish farmers. The items they offered didn't interest Laura much, so she found another table where an elderly Amish woman sold handmade quilts.

“Those are gorgeous. How much do they cost?” she asked.

The woman showed her each one, quoting the prices, which ranged from four hundred to nine hundred dollars.

“I’m definitely going to buy one,” Laura said without questioning the price. “I don’t want to carry it around while I shop, though. Can you hold this one for me?” She pointed to a simple pattern that used a combination of geometric shapes done in a variety of rich autumn colors.

“Jah, sure. I can hold it.”

“Great. What’s this one called, anyway?”

“It’s known as ‘Grandmother’s Choice.’” The Amish woman’s fingers traveled lightly over the material.

Laura smiled. “I like it very much. I’ll be back for it before I leave, but I can pay now if you’d like.”

“Pay when you come back; that’ll be fine.” The woman placed the quilt inside a box, then slipped it under the table.

It was getting close to lunchtime, so Laura decided to check out one more table, then look for something nonfattening to eat.

The next table was loaded with a variety of hand-carved items. Laura glanced around for the person in charge but didn’t see anyone. She picked up one of the finely crafted birdhouses and studied the exquisite detailing. When a young Amish man popped up from behind the table, she jumped, nearly dropping the birdhouse. He held a box filled with more birdhouses and feeders. His sandy brown hair was cut in a Dutch-bob, and a lock of it fell across his forehead. His deeply set, crystalline blue eyes met Laura’s gaze with such intensity it took her breath away. Her cheeks grew hot, and she quickly placed the birdhouse back on the table. “I—I was just admiring your work.”

A hint of a smile tweaked the man's lips, revealing a small dimple in the middle of his chin. "I'm a woodcarver and carpenter, and I'm thankful God has given me the ability to use my hands for something worthwhile."

Though Laura had been to church a few times in her life, she wasn't particularly religious. In fact, the whole church scene made her feel kind of nervous. Nibbling on the inside of her cheek, she merely nodded in response to the man's giving credit to God for his abilities.

"Are you looking for anything special? I also have some wooden flowerpots and ornamental things for the lawn." He lifted one for her inspection.

Laura stared at the small, decorative windmill in his hand, and her gaze traveled up his muscular arm. Below his rolled-up shirtsleeve, his tanned arms were feathered with light brown hair. She moistened her lips and brought her wayward thoughts to a halt. "I . . .uh. . .live in a dorm room at the Lancaster School of Design, so I really don't have a need for birdhouses or whirligigs."

His dark eyebrows drew together. "Don't think I've ever heard of that school."

"I'm learning to be an interior decorator," she explained, drawing her gaze to his appealing face, then back to the items on the table.

When he made no comment, she looked up again and saw that he was staring at her with a questioning look.

"My job will be to help people decorate their homes in attractive styles and colors."

"Ah, I see. So do you live around here, then?"

She shook her head. "I'm from Minneapolis, Minnesota. I've already studied some interior design at one of our local

community colleges, and I'm here to complete my training."

There was an awkward silence as they stood staring at one another.

"Eli, well, there you are! I thought we were supposed to meet for lunch. I waited outside, but you never showed up so I figured I'd better come looking."

A young, blond-haired Amish woman, dressed similarly to the Plain women Laura had seen earlier, stepped up to the table.

"I'm sorry, Pauline," he said. "I got busy talking with this customer and forgot about the time." He considered Laura a moment. "Is there anything you're wantin' to buy?"

"No. I . . .uh. . .was just looking."

"Eli, if you're finished here, can we go have lunch now?" Pauline took a few steps closer, brushing her hand lightly against Eli's arm.

"Jah, Pauline." Eli glanced back at Laura. "It was nice chatting with you, and I wish you the best with your studies and all." He turned away, leaving his wooden items unattended.

Laura shook her head. *That man is sure trusting. And how in the world could someone as simply dressed as him be so adorable?*



As Eli and Pauline exited the building, he glanced over his shoulder. The young English woman still stood beside his table. *She's sure a fancy one. Fancy and very pretty. I wonder why someone like her would be interested in birdhouses?*

"Eli, where do you want to eat lunch?"

Pauline's question and her slight tug on Eli's shirtsleeve brought his thoughts to a halt.

"I thought you carried a picnic basket," he said peevishly.

“I did, but I wasn’t sure where you wanted to eat it.”

He shrugged. “It makes no difference to me.”

“Let’s go to the picnic tables out back.”

When Eli gave no response, she grabbed his sleeve again. “What’s wrong? You’re acting kind of *naerfich*.”

“I’m not nervous. I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

Pauline slipped her hand through the crook of his arm. “After you’ve had a few bites of fried chicken, you won’t be thinking about anything but my good cooking.”

Eli feigned a smile. “Kissin’ wears out, but cookin’ don’t.” Truth be told, he wasn’t really in the mood to eat just now, but he was sure Pauline had worked hard making the picnic lunch, and he’d promised to eat it with her. Besides, a few drumsticks and a plate of potato salad would probably make him feel a whole lot better.



Pauline smiled and set the wicker basket she’d filled with chicken, baked beans, cut-up vegetables, and chocolate cake on the picnic table. “You’re right about cooking never wearing out. My *mamm* and *daed* have been married twenty-five years, and Dad’s still complimenting Mom on her great cooking.”

Eli’s only reply was a quick shrug. Then he bowed his head, and she did the same. When their silent prayer was over, Pauline opened the basket and set out the food, along with paper plates, napkins, and plastic silverware. “I brought a jug of water for us to drink,” she said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Jah, sure; it’s fine for me.” Eli helped himself to a couple of drumsticks and some baked beans, and Pauline

followed suit, only she added some cut-up carrots to her plate.

“I was sorry to learn that you hadn’t taken the membership classes this summer so you could be baptized and join the church a week from Sunday,” she said.

He gave a noncommittal grunt and kept on eating.

“Will you take the classes next summer?”

“Maybe. It all depends on how I feel about things by then.”

Pauline pursed her lips. “You’re twenty-three years old already. Haven’t you had enough rumschprunge by now? Don’t you think it’s past time for you to join the church and settle down?”

“Now you sound like my mamm.” Eli frowned. “Maybe one of the reasons I haven’t made the decision yet is because she’s always hounding me about it.”

Pauline flinched, feeling like he’d thrown cold water in her face. Eli obviously thought she was hounding him, too.

Eli reached into the plastic tub filled with chicken and retrieved another drumstick. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not refusing to join the church because I have any ideas about leaving the Amish faith. I just can’t see the need of joining when I’m not ready to get married yet.”

Pauline felt as if her heart had sunk all the way to her toes. If Eli wasn’t ready to get married, then he obviously had no thoughts of marrying her. But he’d taken her home from a couple of singings, and he’d agreed to meet her for lunch today. Didn’t that mean anything at all? Wasn’t that a ray of hope worth clinging to? Pauline knew she would have to be careful not to push Eli too hard, but if she had her way, by this time next year they’d be planning their wedding.



When Laura returned to her dorm room later that afternoon, she placed the Amish quilt she'd purchased on her bed, making it a definite focal point in the room. For some reason, the quilt reminded her of the young Amish man who had been selling wood-crafted items. As Laura sat at her desk, trying to study, she found herself wishing she had bought one of his birdhouses.

She drummed her fingers restlessly across the desktop. As ridiculous as it might seem, she'd been attracted to the man. It was stupid, because she knew they were worlds apart. Besides, the young woman he'd been with had seemed awfully possessive, and Laura figured she might be Eli's girlfriend or even his wife.

Fighting the urge to fantasize further, she forced herself to concentrate on the monochromatic swatches of material on her desk. It wouldn't be good to get behind in her studies because of a passing fancy with someone she would probably never see again.