

Chapter One

LEAH FOLDED HER ARMS ACROSS THE SPIRAL NOTEBOOK and held it close to her thumping chest. She was late for supper. Again.

She eased her way up the front porch steps of the farmhouse and peered through the screen door. Her family was already seated at the long wooden table in the kitchen. She sucked in a breath and prepared for her father's wrath. Supper was always at five o'clock, and preparations usually began an hour before that. Leah was expected to help.

Her eldest sister, Edna, cut her eyes in Leah's direction as Leah closed the screen door behind her. Mary Carol scowled at Leah, too, and blew out an exasperated sigh.

"Sorry I'm late." Leah tucked her chin but raised her eyes enough to catch a sympathetic gaze from her youngest sister, Kathleen. Leah forced a smile in Kathleen's direction.

"Wash for supper, Leah." Marian Petersheim didn't look at her daughter but instead glanced at her husband, a silent plea for mercy on her face.

"Yes, ma'am." Leah rushed upstairs, stored her notebook in the top drawer of her nightstand, and quickly washed her face and hands. She tucked loose strands of brown hair beneath her prayer covering, smoothed the wrinkles from her black apron, and walked briskly down the stairs.

She slid in beside Edna on the backless wooden bench and bowed her head in silent prayer as forks clanked against plates. When she was done, she reached for the chow-chow and spooned a small

amount of the pickled vegetables onto her plate. She helped herself to a piece of her mother's baked chicken and then eyed her favorite casserole. Leah loved the way Kathleen prepared the green bean mixture with buttered Ritz cracker crumbs on top, but the casserole was on the other side of her father, and she wasn't about to ask him to pass it.

Daed didn't look up as he swallowed his last bite of chicken and reached for another piece on the platter to his right. The father of four teenaged girls—Edna, nineteen; Leah, eighteen; Mary Carol, seventeen; and Kathleen, sixteen—James Petersheim ran the household with steadfast rules and imparted strict punishment when those rules were disobeyed. Every one of the girls had been disciplined with a switch behind the woodshed at some point in her life. Leah wished she were still young enough for the switch. It would surely be better than what her father was about to unleash on her.

She pulled a piece of butter bread from the plate nearby and glanced toward him. Leah knew he would finish his meal before he scolded her for being late. She dabbed her forehead with her napkin, unsure if the sweat gathering on her brow was due to nervousness or the sweltering August heat.

“Abner's *mamm* is giving us her fine china as a wedding present,” Edna said after an awkward moment of silence. Edna and Abner's wedding was scheduled for November, after the fall harvest, and Edna often updated the family about the upcoming nuptials during supper. “It belonged to his grandparents.” Edna sat up a little straighter, and her emerald eyes shone.

“Wonderful news,” their mother said. “I've seen Sarah's china, and it's lovely.”

Leah waited for Mary Carol to chime in. Her wedding was scheduled to take place in December.

Leah recalled her father pointing his finger at her and Kathleen. “I reckon the two of you best not be thinkin' of marrying until at least next year,” he'd teased after hearing Mary Carol's news two

months ago—news that came on the heels of Edna’s announcement only one week earlier.

Mary Carol smiled. “I have something to share too,” she said, glancing back and forth between their mother and Edna. “Saul’s parents are giving us twenty acres to build a new home. Until that time, we’ll be living with his folks.”

Here we go, Leah thought. Jealousy is a sin, but Mary Carol was translucent when it came to her feelings about Edna. And if Leah were honest with herself, she’d admit that she, too, had often been jealous of their oldest sister. Edna was the prettiest of all of them, with silky dark hair and stunning green eyes. She’d gotten her figure early, too, and all the boys took notice of Edna by the time she was fourteen. The other three Petersheim sisters were much plainer, with mousy brown hair and nondistinctive dark eyes, and without the curves Edna was blessed with. And Mary Carol battled a seemingly incurable case of acne, always trying some new potion the natural doctor suggested.

“That’s very generous of Saul’s family.” Their mother nodded toward the green bean casserole. “Kathleen, could you please pass me the beans?”

Kathleen complied, putting Leah’s favorite dish within reach. After her mother scooped a spoonful onto her plate, Leah helped herself.

“Abner and I will be livin’ in the *daadi haus*, since his grandparents have both passed on. Then when Abner’s brothers and sisters are grown, we’ll move into the main house, and his parents will move to the *daadi haus*,” Edna said.

“Our *haus* will be new.” Mary Carol flashed her sister a smile.

“But we will be able to live in our *haus* right after we’re married,” Edna scoffed. “We don’t have to wait for a home of our own, and—”

“Girls . . .” Their mother’s voice carried a warning. “This is not a competition.”

They all ate quietly for a few moments. Leah could hear their dog, Buddy, barking in the distance, presumably tormenting the cows. The golden retriever was still young and playful and often chased the large animals unmercifully around the pasture, nipping at their heels. Several cows voiced their objection, which only caused Buddy to bark louder.

“Aaron asked about you,” Edna said sheepishly to Leah.

“Why?” Leah narrowed her eyes. Abner’s brother ogled her enough during worship service every other week. Now he was conversation for supptime?

Edna shrugged. “It’s the second time he’s asked how you are.”

“*Ach*. You can tell him I’m mighty fine.” Leah squared her shoulders and raised her chin, hoping that would put an end to the subject of Aaron Lantz. He was Edna’s age, a year older than Leah. He was Abner’s only brother, and Leah could smell a fix-up from a mile away. She’d had plenty of them lately. Just because Mary Carol was getting married before Leah didn’t mean Leah would end up an old maid at eighteen.

Just the other day, Amanda Graber had stopped by to personally invite Leah to attend a Sunday singing coming up this weekend at her home, mentioning that Abram Zook might be there. *Abram Zook?* No, no, no.

Her own mother had invited Stephen Dienner for supper two Sundays ago. What was she thinking? Stephen was a good six inches shorter than Leah. While her mother insisted that it was only a friendly gesture, Leah suspected otherwise.

“Aaron is such a fine boy,” her mother said. She smiled warmly in Leah’s direction. “And very handsome too.”

Leah swallowed a bite of bread. “You’ve always taught us that looks don’t matter.”

“That’s true, Leah. But we’re human,” her mother answered. Then she glanced at their father—a tall man with sharp features and brilliant green eyes like Edna’s. His beard barely reached the base of

his neck and didn't have a single gray hair amid the thick whiskers. He was handsome, indeed.

Her mother refocused on Leah. "I hear Aaron attends the Sunday singings. Maybe you should go this Sunday."

Leah rolled her eyes and immediately wished she hadn't. Her father's expression blazed with annoyance at her display. She dropped her head. "Maybe," she whispered.

"Actually . . ." Edna cringed a bit. "He's coming over with Abner for a visit later."

"Why? Do you and Abner need a chaperone?" Leah pulled her mouth into a sour grin.

"No, we don't. I thought maybe—"

"You didn't *think*. I don't care anything about dating. I never want to get married! Everyone needs to stop—"

"Enough!" When their father's fist met with the table, everyone froze. Leah didn't even breathe. They all watched as he pulled himself to a standing position. He faced Leah with angry eyes, but far worse for Leah was the disappointment she could see beneath his icy gaze. "Leah will clean the supper dishes," he said after taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly. "Every night this week."

"Yes, sir." Leah pulled her eyes from his and laid her fork across the remainder of her green bean casserole.

"I'll help you," Kathleen whispered to Leah when their father was gone.

"No. It's all right. I'll get it." Leah began to clear the dishes.

"You girls will learn not to behave in such a way during the supper hour." Their mother rose from the table and carried her plate to the sink. "Your *daed* works hard all day long, and he doesn't want to listen to your bickering during supper." She turned her attention to Leah. "Brew a fresh batch of tea for Abner—and Aaron."

After their mother headed upstairs, Mary Carol and Kathleen went outside to tend to the animals. Edna lagged behind.

"You know, you might like him," Edna said. She cleared the few

dishes left on the table and put them next to the sink. “Like *Mamm* said, he’s very handsome, and he seems to have taken a liking to you.”

“He stares at me during worship service. But other than that, he doesn’t even know me.” Leah rinsed a plate and put it in the drying rack. “He was shy in school, barely talked to anyone.”

Edna reached for a dish towel, then picked up a plate and started to dry it. “That was four or five years ago. He’s quite talkative when I have supper with their family.”

Leah sighed. She’d much rather spend her free time upstairs working in her notebook, not making small talk with Aaron Lantz. Her story was coming along nicely, and she was anxious to get back to work on it.

“You missed a spot.” Edna handed the plate back to Leah and grabbed another one from the drain. “Leah . . .” She put the plate back in the water. “This one is still dirty too.” Edna shook her head. “I’m going to go clean up before Abner gets here. Maybe you should clean up a bit too, no?”

Leah blew upward and cleared a wayward strand of hair from her face. “I’m fine, Edna.”

Her sister shrugged and left the room.

Leah finished the dishes with dread in her heart. Why couldn’t they all just let her be? Now she’d be spending the evening with Aaron, a young man she barely knew and didn’t really care to know.