

Plain Proposal

A Daughters of the Promise Novel

BETH WISEMAN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To Eric and Cory

Pennsylvania Dutch *Glossary*

aamen—amen

ach—oh

acenti—aunt

bruder—brother

The Budget—a weekly newspaper serving Amish and Mennonite communities everywhere

daadi—grandfather

daed—dad

danki—thanks

dochder—daughter

dumm—dumb

dummkopp—dummy

Englisch—a non-Amish person

fraa—wife

gut—good

guder mariye—good morning

batt—hard

haus—house

kapp—prayer covering or cap

kinner—children or grandchildren

kumme esse—come eat

lieb—love

maedel—girl

mamm—mom

manm—grandmother

mei—my

mudder—mother

nee—no

onkel—uncle

Ordnung—the written and unwritten rules of the Amish; the understood behavior by which the Amish are expected to live, passed down from generation to generation. Most Amish know the rules by heart.

Pennsylvania *Deitsch*—Pennsylvania German, the language most commonly used by the Amish

rumschprunge—running-around period when a teenager turns sixteen years old

schee beb—nice legs

sohn—son

Wie bischt?—How are you?

ya—yes

MIRIAM STEPPED BACK AND ADMIRING THE MATCHING quilts lying on the twin beds in her room. Gifts from her grandmother before she died. The pastel circles of yellow, powder blue, and pink were framed by a simple blue border in a traditional double wedding-ring pattern. They were finally making a debut—just in time for company.

“Your room looks nice.” *Mamm* walked in carrying a wicker basket filled with towels to be folded. “Your *mammi* would be pleased that you saved her quilts for a special occasion.” She glanced at the white vase full of pink roses on the nightstand and smiled. “*Ach*, fresh flowers too.”

Her mother unloaded the towels onto Miriam’s bed, and they each reached for one as *Mamm*’s eyes traveled around the room.

When her mother nodded an approval, Miriam grinned. “When will she be here?”

Mamm placed a folded blue towel on top of Miriam’s green one. “Not for a couple of hours. Your *daed* hired a driver, and they went to go pick her up at the airport.”

Miriam couldn’t wait to hear about her cousin’s travels and life in the *Englisch* world. Shelby was eighteen too, and for Miriam, it would be like having a sister for the summer. A nice change from

a house full of brothers. Even though Miriam was enjoying her *rumschpringe*, she'd done little more than travel to Lancaster to see a movie. Her *Englisch* cousin was coming all the way from Texas, a small town called Fayetteville.

"I'm excited about Shelby coming, *Mamm*. I can't wait to meet her." Miriam reached for the last towel to be folded as her mother let out a heavy sigh.

"I know you are, and we're glad to have Shelby come stay. But . . ." *Mamm* edged toward the nightstand, repositioned a box of tissue next to a lantern, then turned to Miriam. "We told you—times have been *batt* for Shelby. Her parents got a divorce, and Shelby got in some kind of trouble."

Miriam couldn't imagine what divorce would be like. It was unheard of in their Old Order Amish district. "What kind of trouble?" Miriam sat down on her bed, crossed her ankles, and leaned back on her palms.

"Her mother said that Shelby was spending time with the wrong young people." *Mamm* sat down on the bed beside her, and Miriam watched her mother's forehead crinkle as her lips tightened into a frown. She knew her mother was concerned about having a young *Englisch* woman come for such a long visit.

"Was she shunned by her family?"

Mamm shook her head. "No. The *Englisch* don't shun the way—" Her mother cocked her head to one side, then met eyes with Miriam. "*Ya*. I guess, in a way, Shelby *is* being shunned. She is being sent away from her family and friends for not following the rules."

Miriam sat taller and folded her hands in her lap. "I'm going to try my best to make her feel welcome here."

"I know you will, Miriam." *Mamm* patted her leg, then cupped Miriam's cheek in her hand. "Please tell me that I don't need to worry about you being taken in by Shelby's worldly ways."

Miriam looked at her mother and said earnestly, "I won't, *Mamm*."

Her mother gently eased her hand from Miriam's face, then let out another heavy sigh. "I remember when your father's cousin left here. Abner was no more than your age at the time. He chose not to be baptized. We were shocked." *Mamm* leaned back on her hands like Miriam.

"Did he go to Indiana?" Miriam knew that her great grandparents relocated here from Indiana. She'd been asked plenty of times what she was doing in Lancaster County with a name like Raber, an Indiana Amish name.

"No. Your *daed* said Abner went to Texas with three hundred dollars in his pocket and even took rides from strangers to get there. Evidently he had been corresponding with a man there about a job for months before he left. A job building Amish furniture." *Mamm* sat up and folded her arms across her chest.

"Have you seen Abner since he left?"

Mamm nodded. "Only twice, for each of his parents' funerals. It's a shame, too, because your *daed* and Abner were close when they were young."

"But you said he wasn't baptized into the community, so he wasn't shunned, right? He could have come to visit, no?"

"*Ya*." *Mamm* stood up and smoothed the wrinkles from her black apron. "But Texas is a long way from here, and things between him and his folks weren't *gut*. They never did accept his choices." *Mamm* paused for a moment, then looked down at Miriam. "I remember

that Abner met Janet not long after he arrived in Texas, and they were wed two years later. Then along came Shelby.” Her mother shook her head. “After that, we heard less and less from your *daed’s* cousin. But evidently his furniture was popular with the *Englisch* there, and he went on to own a big fancy store of his own. We got a letter every now and then, but . . .” *Mamm* picked up the stack of folded towels on the bed, then placed them in the laundry basket. “I met Janet, Shelby’s mother, when they came here for Sarah Mae’s funeral, which is when I met Shelby. But she was only four years old, so I doubt she remembers much.”

Miriam tried to think of what she remembered from when she was four years old. Not much.

“I liked Janet a lot, and we exchanged letters for a while after they were here. But I hadn’t heard from her in years until last month.” *Mamm* bit her lip and was quiet for a few moments. “Anyway, as you know, Shelby doesn’t have any brothers or sisters, and the only life she has known has included electricity and all the modern conveniences the *Englisch* have. Things will be different for her here.” She picked up the basket, then smiled at Miriam. “But God is sending her here for a reason. I think the *maedel* needs time for healing.”

“This is a *gut* place for that, I think.” Miriam gave a final glance around her room. She’d dusted her oak rocking chair and chest of drawers and swept the hardwood floors after putting fresh linens on the bed. She’d even slipped a sprig of lavender in the top drawer of the chest, one of two drawers she had cleaned out for Shelby to use.

She was excited for her cousin to arrive, but her thoughts drifted to Pequea Creek where she knew her girlfriends were gathering. On

Saturday afternoons during the summer, the older girls in her district met at the creek to watch the young men show off their skills by swinging on a thick rope from the highest ledge and dropping into the cool water below.

Saul Fisher would be there. He was always there. And just the thought of him made Miriam's heart flip in her chest.

"My chores are done, *Mamm*. Can I take the spring buggy to the creek for a while?"

Her mother was heading out the door but turned briefly. "I guess so. But I'd like for you to be home before Shelby arrives."

Miriam nodded. Once her mother was gone, she opened the drawer to her nightstand, then pulled out the thin silver ankle bracelet she'd bought at the market in Bird-In-Hand. She knew Leah and Hannah would be wearing theirs too, and she liked the way the delicate chain looked dangling from her ankle. She sat down on the bed and fastened the tiny clasp. Her father frowned every time he saw the inexpensive purchase, but Miriam knew her parents wouldn't say anything since she was in her *runschpringe*.

She stood up and walked to the open window. Through the screen, she could see the cloudless blue sky and the plush grass in the yard where her red begonias were in full bloom in the flower bed. Rays of sunshine warmed her cheeks, and she closed her eyes, feeling the June breeze and breathing in the aroma of freshly cut hay from her brothers' efforts the day before.

She looked down, wiggled her toes, and decided not to wear any shoes today, knowing that the cool blades between her toes would remind her of past summers, playing volleyball with her brothers in the yard or squirting each other with the water hose for relief from the heat. But today going barefoot was more about

Saul than her childhood memories. He'd said she had cute toes the last time they were at the creek, and since Saul Fisher wasn't big on conversation, Miriam hoped he might notice her ankle brace-let—maybe comment on it. Or her toes. It didn't matter. Any attention from Saul caused her insides to swirl with hope for the future. Saul didn't know it yet, but Miriam was going to marry him. She'd loved him from afar since they were children, and even though he was often withdrawn and had a reputation as a bit of a troublemaker, Miriam knew—*He is just waiting for the right woman to mold him into all he can be.*

Saul crept closer to the edge of the cliff until his toes hung over the smooth rock, a natural diving board that he had jumped from a hundred times. He tucked the thick rope between his legs and cupped his hands around the knot that met him at eye level.

Then he saw her. Miriam Raber. Sitting with her girlfriends on the bank. Her brilliant blue eyes twinkled in the distance as she watched him, and she was chewing the nail on her first finger—like she always did before he jumped. And his legs grew unsteady beneath him—like they always did when Miriam was watching him.

He pulled his eyes from her and gave his head a quick shake. He'd always felt confident about whatever he was doing, except when Miriam was around. She had a strange effect on him, always had—since they were kids. He recalled a time when he and Miriam were chosen as leads in the school Christmas pageant, playing Mary and Joseph. They were in the sixth grade, and Saul was still shocked at the amount of detail he remembered from that day. She'd worn a white sheet over her dress and belted it at the waist,

and her long brown hair flowed freely past her shoulders instead of bound beneath her prayer covering. Mostly he remembered the way Miriam looked at him when she spoke her lines. And the way he went completely blank and forgot his.

“Jump, Saul!”

He straightened when he heard his buddy Leroy yelling from the bank. Then he took a deep breath and swung out over the water. As he let go of the rope, he didn’t have more than a second before he plunged into the creek—but it was Miriam he saw the millisecond before his face submerged. He stayed down there longer than usual, enjoying the refreshing water and thinking about Miriam.

She was a good girl. The best. Every man of marrying age in Paradise had his eye on Miriam. Everyone except Saul. He’d known for as long as he could remember that one day he would leave Paradise. Leave *her*. So, despite their mutual attraction over the years, Saul had avoided her as best he could. But the older they got, the harder it was for him to keep his eyes from always drifting her way. And she seemed to have the same problem. She was always watching him.

He swam upward until his head popped above the water, and not surprisingly, his eyes found Miriam’s right away, as she smiled and clapped from the water’s edge. There were others around. But he only saw her.



“I don’t know why you like him so much,” Hannah said when she and Miriam sat back down on the bank, following Saul’s jump. “He never pays you much mind.” Hannah stretched her arms behind her and rested on her hands. “He never pays *any* of us much mind.”

“He will someday.” Miriam smiled. “He’s just shy.”

Hannah chuckled. “He’s not shy, Miriam. He’s a loner.” Hannah leaned closer and whispered, “Some say that he isn’t going to be baptized, that he will leave the community.”

Miriam snapped her head to the side to face her friend. “Where did you hear that?”

Hannah lifted one shoulder, then dropped it slowly. “I don’t remember. But he doesn’t seem to—to fit in.”

“I think he fits in just fine.” Miriam smiled as she turned her attention back to Saul. She watched him climb out of the creek in a pair of blue swim trunks, then join his friends down the bank.

“He never attends singings, he doesn’t gather with the other men after church service, and remember . . .” Hannah gasped. “Remember when he got in a fight on the school yard with that *Englisch* boy who passed by.” She shook her head. “Not fit behavior, I say. Not at all.”

Miriam swooned with recollection. “*Ya*. I remember. The boy called me a name as I walked across the school yard to get on my scooter.”

“So because he stood up for you, he’s your hero? That’s not our way, Miriam.” Hannah sat taller and folded her hands in her lap. “And that’s not the only time he’s been in trouble. There was that time with John Lapp when the bishop—”

“*Ya*, I know, Hannah.” Miriam knew Hannah was referring to the time when Bishop Ebersol reprimanded Saul and John Lapp for fighting. Saul had refused to shave just after his sixteenth birthday, and John told Saul that only married men could grow a beard—*rumschpringe* or not—and that he’d better shave it off. Their harsh words led to a fistfight. Bishop Ebersol told Saul that the beard

was not forbidden during *rumschpringe*, but the fighting was. Miriam couldn't understand why John made such a fuss about Saul having the facial hair, especially since the bishop wasn't very concerned. But John Lapp was married now, and he couldn't seem to grow a beard to save his life. Must have been a sensitive subject for him.

Miriam smiled. At least she'd had a small glimpse as to what her future husband would look like, his face covered with light-brown fuzz and sandy-red highlights.

"He's just a bit of a bad boy, Miriam." They both watched him laughing with his friends for a moment, then Hannah turned to her and grinned. "But he *is* a handsome bad boy."

"It's more than that." Miriam studied his back, the way he stood tall and straight like a towering spruce. His shoulders looked like they were a yard wide and molded bronze. She was glad when he put his shirt on. She took a deep breath. "He's just . . . *mysterious* in a kind sort of way."

Hannah narrowed her brows. "What does that mean?"

Miriam thought for a moment. How could she possibly put into words everything that she loved about Saul? His stunning good looks shouldn't matter, but his face kept her up at night, and the smooth way he spoke in a raspy voice, often barely above a whisper, caused her heart to flutter. He said very little, but Miriam was sure he was filled with goodness, even if his efforts might be misdirected from time to time.

She finally blew out a deep breath. "I don't know how to explain him. I just know that he's a *gut* person."

"How? Have you even been alone with him? You never even talk to him." Hannah's attitude was getting on Miriam's nerves.

"No. But I will."

“When?”

Miriam pulled herself up off the ground, brushed the wrinkles from her dark-blue dress, then put her hands on her hips and stared down at her friend. “I—I don’t know for sure, but—but I will.” She glanced toward Saul and the other men just in time to see Saul waving bye and leaving. He was nearing his spring buggy, and Miriam knew she would have to act fast. “I’m going to go talk to him right now.”

Hannah stood up beside her. “Really?” She tipped her head to one side.

“*Ya*. I’m going to go talk to him right now.”

“Well.” Hannah folded her arms across her chest and grinned. “Go, then. You better hurry. He’s leaving.”

“I am.” Miriam took a step, hesitated, then spun around to face Hannah. “I’m going.”

Hannah smiled. “I see that.”

“*Ach*, okay.” She forced one foot in front of the other until she was close enough to call out his name, and she had no idea what she would say.

Saul recognized the voice and spun around a few feet from his buggy, wondering what Miriam could possibly want. They admired each other from afar. That’s the way it had always been. He glanced down at her bare feet, then smiled as he remembered telling her she had cute toes not too long ago. He’d been walking by her at the creek, and she was alone, smiling up at him from her perch on top of a rock near the water’s edge. He didn’t know why he’d said it, except for the fact that it was true.

“Hi.” She hesitated when she got closer, and Saul saw a tiny chain around her ankle.

“Nice ankle bracelet.” It was easiest to look at her feet. If he took in the rest of her, he was afraid his mouth would betray him and say something *dumm*.

She kicked her beautiful bare foot forward. “This? *Danki*.” She clutched the sides of her apron with both hands, then twisted the fabric. “Um, where are you going?”

Her face took on a rosy shade of pink, and Saul briefly wondered if his did too. “Home, I guess.” He waited, and when she didn’t say anything, he asked, “Why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s a pretty day.”

“Then let’s go do something.” His mouth had betrayed him after all. No good could come out of getting to know Miriam better. He already liked what he saw and knew. Why build on that just to leave her in the end? But he had no regrets when her whole face spread into a smile.

“Okay.” She stepped closer, and Saul fought the urge to step back. Right now she was close enough to touch, and he wanted nothing more than to brush back a loose tendril of brown hair that had fallen from beneath her *kapp*. Then he locked eyes with her—those brilliant blue eyes.

“What do you wanna do?” He towered over her by at least a foot, and he rubbed his chin as he studied her. Her smooth skin glowed in the sunlight, the golden undertones evidence of the hard outdoor work everyone in their community did. Then, just like his mouth, his hand developed a mind of its own. Before his brain had time to realize what was happening, he reached up and pushed the wayward strand of hair off of her cheek. He didn’t think he’d ever

touched her before, and now he would lose sleep, wondering when he could do it again.

“*Danki.*” She avoided his eyes and lowered her chin as she spoke. When she looked back up at him, her eyes lit with excitement. “Let’s go fishing at the old Zook farm. No one lives there, and the pond is full of fish.”

Saul folded his arms across his chest. “You fish?”

“Of course. Don’t you?”

He pulled his straw hat off and wiped sweat from his forehead. “*Ya.* I just didn’t take you for the fishing type.”

She giggled. “The fishing *type*? I can handle a fishing pole.” The sound of her laughter made him want to hear it for the rest of his life. Then she grabbed at her chest with both hands. “Oh no!”

“What?”

“I can’t go.” She gazed into his eyes. “I’m sorry.” And the way her face folded into a frown, she seemed to mean it. “I forgot that my cousin is coming this afternoon. She’s staying with us for the summer.”

Saul tried to hide his disappointment but knew it was for the best. “Do I know her?”

“No. She’s *Englisch*. A cousin on my father’s side.” Her eyes brightened as she smiled. “She’s coming all the way from Texas. She’s our age.” She paused. “I’m sure you’ll meet her.”

Saul nodded as he looped his thumbs beneath his suspenders, then glanced down to see his wet swim shorts had soaked through his black trousers. “I guess I’ll see you around, then.” He turned to leave, not sure what else to say to her. Spending time alone with her was a bad idea anyway.

“Saul?”

He unwrapped the reins from the tree where he had his horse tethered, not turning around. “*Ya?*” Then he felt a hand tap him on the back. Her simple touch rattled him so much that he dropped the reins. He quickly reached down and picked them up. “What is it?” As he stood, he couldn’t look her in the face, so he stared at her toes again.

He watched her wiggle them, and he couldn’t help but wonder if it was for his benefit. She looked up, and Saul finally locked eyes with her. When she smiled, Saul knew things were about to get complicated.

“Maybe we could go fishing tomorrow after church?” Her long eyelashes swept down across high cheekbones before she looked back at him.

This was a bad idea. But there wasn’t one thing in the world that Saul could think of that he would rather do. So he nodded.

Tomorrow he would spend the afternoon with Miriam Raber. Alone. Something he had dreamed about for years but had put just as much energy into avoiding. His life, his plan, was set. And there was no place in any of it for Miriam.

But as she looked up at him with a smile that threatened to melt his resolve, he knew that he was going to do the unthinkable—date her for the summer. Then leave her in August. *God, forgive me.*