

# One



Charlotte watched the taxi until it was out of sight, then she left her luggage on the sidewalk and made her way up the steps leading to the porch of the farmhouse. Two side-by-side front doors stood open, and through the screens, the aroma of freshly baked cookies wafted outside. She took a deep breath. Based on her research, the Amish people knew how to cook, so that would be a perk while she was here.

She smoothed the wrinkles from her plain blue dress, put her sunglasses in the pocket of her black apron, and tucked a few loose strands of blond hair beneath the prayer covering she was wearing. Shaking her head, she eyed the black loafers and black socks that rose to just above her ankles, knowing she wouldn't win any fashion awards in this getup. She jumped when she heard footsteps, then took a step back when a woman about her

mother's age pushed the screen open and said, "You must be Mary." The Amish woman put her hands on full hips, smiled broadly, and extended her hand.

Charlotte nodded, acknowledging the name she'd chosen to use while she was here—Mary Troyer. "Lena?"

"*Ya, ya*. I'm Lena King." She looked past Charlotte, raised a hand to her forehead, and peered. "*Ach, mei*. A lot of suitcases, *ya*?"

Charlotte glanced over her shoulder at the three suitcases. "Yes, I guess so." She fought to mask the tremble in her voice, reminding herself to use the little bit of Pennsylvania Dutch she'd learned. "*Ya. Ya*. A month is a long time." She doubted she would stay anywhere near that long, but that's what Lena had insisted on via the letters they'd exchanged, so Charlotte had packed accordingly, just in case.

Lena scurried past her and quickly latched onto two of the suitcases. "Let's get these inside and get you settled. We are just so thrilled to find out that we have cousins down in Texas." She grunted a little as she carried the luggage. Charlotte grabbed the third one and followed her. "We'd heard rumor that there were Amish folks in Beeville, Texas, but to find our kin there . . . well, just so *gut* to know, even if it is cousins several times removed."

Charlotte recalled finding the small group of Amish people who had migrated to Texas from Tennessee. She'd built her secret identity based on information she'd gathered by spending time with them, and they'd directed

her to a resale shop where she'd purchased her Amish clothes. They'd been nice enough, if not a bit suspicious about all of Charlotte's questions.

Lena set the suitcases on the landing below the staircase, so Charlotte did the same with hers.

"Jacob can haul these upstairs when he gets home." Lena smiled again. Charlotte knew Lena was referring to her sixteen-year-old son. "You must be hungry from your travels. Come, come." She motioned for Charlotte to follow, and once in the kitchen, Lena pulled out a chair at the head of the table. Before them lay enough food to feed an army.

"I didn't know what you liked, so I made chicken salad, tuna salad, and egg salad." She pointed to three more bowls on Charlotte's right. "That's barbequed meatballs, cheddar meat loaf, and my special chicken casserole." She pressed her palms together and then pointed to the middle of the table. "That's bread I made this morning, and to the left is apple butter. Chowchow is in the other bowl." She spun around, rattled off something in their native language, then returned with a glass she set in front of Charlotte. This was going to be an area of concern, her inability to understand or speak much of the dialect, which she'd read was an offshoot of German. She offered up the best smile she could, hoping to fake her way through the conversation.

"Everything looks very . . . *gut*." She'd learned a handful of words most commonly used by the women

in Beeville. She'd camped out at a nearby hotel and visited the farmers' market daily for a couple of weeks in an effort to gain information. The women sold canned goods and homemade crafts. Charlotte always bought several jars of jams and jellies as unspoken payment for their help. She figured she had enough jellies for the next several years, but it had been worth it for the valuable information.

"I hoped that everyone could be here to welcome you, but it just didn't work out." Lena sighed as she sat down to Charlotte's left. "After dinner, you should rest. Tomorrow, Hannah and I are adding to the flower beds. We like to spruce things up with Tiger Eyes every August. They only bloom for about eleven weeks, but they are always a nice addition when some of our perennials finish blooming."

Charlotte stiffened at the mention of Lena's daughter, Hannah, but cleared her throat with a slight cough. "Hannah's a couple of years younger than me, right? Twenty-three or twenty-four?"

Lena nodded. "*Ya*. She's twenty-four."

That seemed old to still be living at home.

"Hannah had wanted to be here, but Widow Hostetler called and needed someone to cart her to the doctor. She doesn't drive her buggy anymore." Lena chuckled. "And we are all safer on the streets because of that."

Charlotte bowed her head when Lena did. The Amish

prayed silently before every meal, so Charlotte sat quietly with her eyes closed and waited.

“Did you say Widow Hostetler *called*?” Charlotte had seen the women in Beeville using cell phones, but she wanted clarification that she’d be able to use her phone while she was here. It was Charlotte’s understanding that some Amish districts allowed the use of cell phones, while others did not.

“*Ya*, our bishop allows portable telephone calls for emergencies.” She winked at Charlotte. “Funny how many emergencies pop up.” Lena frowned. “Oh, *nee*. Are you against the use of mobile telephones? Or does your district allow it?”

Charlotte swallowed a bite of bread, the tastiest she’d ever had. “Yeah.” She paused, kicking herself again. “*Ya*. We are allowed phones.” Lena handed Charlotte the bowl of chicken salad and Charlotte spooned a small amount onto her plate. Then she got two meatballs and a small scoop of chicken casserole.

“I hope you’ll eat more than that.” Lena sat taller, her eyes wide. “That’s not enough to feed a bird.”

To Charlotte, it looked like a ton, so she was a bit taken aback and not sure how to respond. “I-I’ve had a stomach bug recently.” One more lie to add to the collection.

Lena clicked her tongue a couple of times. “We’ve had something going around here too. Hannah took sick last week.”

Charlotte tensed again, knowing she would have to

stop reacting every time Hannah's name was mentioned, but she couldn't shake the idea that maybe Ethan's fiancée had something to do with his death. Or at the least, knew why her brother had killed himself.

"Save room for dessert," Lena said as she motioned toward a chocolate pie at the far end of the table.

Charlotte fought a yawn before she nodded. She wasn't sure how she'd eat one more bite, and for a brief moment, guilt nipped at her for enjoying the food so much. She forced the thought aside and decided her lies were justified.

Lena excused herself to the bathroom, so Charlotte took a good look around at the modest surroundings. The table was in the middle of a large kitchen, and as she ran her hand along the table's edge, she took note of the fine craftsmanship. Eight oak chairs were around the table. On the counters were canisters, paper towels, a pitcher of tea, and a platter of cookies. Nothing decorative.

Charlotte took her napkin and dabbed at the sweat beads on her forehead. In Texas it would be unheard of not to have air conditioning. She doubted it got as warm here, but she was already dreading her time here without it. At least she didn't have to worry about her makeup running down her face since her role as a well-bred Amish woman didn't include cosmetics. She glanced at the back of her hands and recalled having the nail tech remove her gel fingernails and file them short.

She piled more butter on the homemade bread and

let it melt in her mouth. She rarely ate bread at home, but it didn't taste like this. She closed her eyes and sighed, letting the warm, buttery taste settle onto her palate. If she kept eating like this, she would be huge by the time she went home. Opening her eyes, she saw Lena come through the living room and stop at the window.

"*Ach, gut,*" Lena said as she made her way back to the kitchen. "That's Hannah pulling in now. She's been eager for you to get here, to have someone close to her age to pal around with."

"And I've been looking forward to coming," Charlotte said, finding comfort in her truthful response. Running around with Hannah might shed some light on what happened to Ethan, but Charlotte bit her tongue and fought the tremble in her bottom lip as Hannah walked into the kitchen. She was just as beautiful as Ethan had said. On the outside, anyway.



Hannah wasn't in the mood to make small talk. She never was on the days she strayed off the beaten path. After she'd dropped off Widow Hostetler, she'd gone to her special place, the spot where she'd buried her memories of Ethan. He'd died almost a year ago, and she was sure she'd never find that kind of love again. But she was determined to be polite to this cousin they'd recently found. It seemed important to her mother

to have discovered relatives all the way in Texas, but a month's visit was a bit long.

"This is Mary," her mother said as she put a hand on Mary's shoulder. "It's her first time to Pennsylvania, so after we work in the garden tomorrow, maybe you can show her around."

"*Ya*. Of course." Hannah eased into a chair next to Mary and across from where her mother took a seat. She bowed her head and offered thanks before she reached for a slice of bread. "Welcome, Mary. We've been looking forward to your visit." She smiled at her cousin, but hoped she wouldn't be the only one entertaining Mary for a month. She was certain that was her mother's plan, for Mary to help Hannah find her way back into the world of the living.

"Tell us, Mary . . . what do you do best?" *Mamm* always asked this question, assuming everyone has a special talent. "Hannah is our seamstress. She sews much better than I do. Jacob tends the fields with his father, but he also takes care of the animals since he has a special knack for that. And *mei* husband is a masterful carpenter." *Mamm*'s eyes twinkled as she placed a palm on the table. "He made this table and chairs and most of our other furniture."

"And *Mamm* is probably the best cook in our district," Hannah added. "She comes up with her own recipes and shares them with the other women." Her mother waved a hand and shook her head. "She also has a green thumb."

"I believe the Lord blesses each of us with a special gift. What is your special gift, Mary?" Hannah's mother laid her fork across her plate and tipped her head to one side.

"Uh, well . . ." Mary glanced back and forth at Hannah and her mother. "Uh . . . I'm not sure. I guess I dabble here and there. I used to paint, but I haven't in a long time."

"Paint?" Hannah halted her fork in midair. "Paint what? Walls? Fences?"

"No. *Nee*. I-I used to paint pictures . . . landscapes." Mary's cheeks took on a pinkish tint.

Hannah nodded. "*Ach*, and you sold these paintings?" There was a man in their community who painted pictures of Amish homes. Word was that he sold them to the *English* for a lot of money. Hannah had heard her mother say she didn't approve of this, but Hannah didn't think it was much different from the ways that others in their community made an income. Handmade quilts and Amish furniture brought in a lot of money.

Mary shifted her weight in the chair, her cheeks still rosy. "Um. No. It was just for fun." She shrugged. "A hobby."

*For fun?* Hannah managed a smile as she wondered what Mary could contribute while she was here, how she could ease their workload for a month. But Mary was a guest, so Hannah shouldn't expect too much. Maybe

such hobbies were encouraged in Mary's district. "You have a nice accent. Very southern."

"Yeah. *Ya*. People from Texas get that a lot. We have a drawl. And some of us say *y'all* a lot."

*Even the Amish folks?* Mary fidgeted with her fork and shifted her weight in the chair again. Hannah had an urge to straighten Mary's *kapp*, but her cousin was already blushing, so she didn't want to embarrass her further. It was strange that Mary had the strings from her prayer covering tied under her chin. She'd never seen anyone tie theirs before. "Where are *Daed* and Jacob?"

"They went to the lumberyard this morning and said they would eat in town." *Mamm* turned to Mary. "Most days, *mei* husband and *sohn* eat lunch with us."

Mary nodded as she scooted her chair back and stood up when Hannah and her mother did. "I think I'll take a nap, if that's okay. It was a long flight."

Hannah glanced at her mother. Even guests would offer to help with cleanup after a meal. But traditions and rules varied from state to state, even district to district.

"I told Mary she should rest," *Mamm* quickly said as she dried her hands on the dish towel. "Why don't you go help her get settled while I clean the kitchen? I told her Jacob could haul her suitcases upstairs later."

Hannah would have rather done cleanup, but she nodded and walked with Mary to the stairs and picked up the third suitcase after Mary latched onto two.

Apparently their cousin didn't want to wait on Jacob. "Lots of luggage."

Mary looked over her shoulder and smiled. "I probably overpacked."

*I'll say.* When they got to the top of the stairs, Mary stepped aside so Hannah could walk ahead of her down the hallway. "My room is the first one on the left. Jacob's is on the right." She paused at the third door. "This is your room. We share the bathroom at the end of the hall. *Mamm* and *Daed*'s room is downstairs; they have their own bathroom. The mudroom on the first floor is set up as our sewing room."

Hannah set the suitcase down, walked to the window, and rolled up the green shade, then lifted the window. "I bet our weather seems very pleasant to you. I've heard it's miserably hot in Texas—and humid."

"It is. Thank God for air conditioning." Mary chuckled, but stopped when she caught Hannah's expression.

"You have indoor cooling?"

"No, no, no." Mary shook her head. "I meant . . . you know . . . like in the malls. In public places. Hair salons. Places—places like that."

"Things must be very different where you are from." Hannah had never been in a hair salon, and they avoided the malls. Everything they needed could be purchased nearby at the fabric store or the market.

Mary walked to the window. “There’s a guy out by the barn.”

Hannah joined her cousin at the window, noticing Mary’s scrutinizing gaze. “Everyone is excited when they lay eyes on Isaac Miller for the first time.” She allowed her cousin a few more moments to take in Isaac’s well-portioned, muscular body and wavy, dark hair peeking from beneath his straw hat. If her cousin looked hard enough, she might get a glimpse of Isaac’s kind eyes, as blue as a robin’s egg. “Twenty-seven years old and never married.”

“He’s gorgeous.” Mary’s eyes were fixed on Isaac. Luckily she didn’t notice Hannah’s scowl. *Gorgeous* seemed a strange word to describe a man. “Why hasn’t anyone snagged such a hunk?”

Hannah narrowed her eyebrows. She wasn’t sure she liked this Texas slang. “Many have tried but Isaac shies away. Maybe he just hasn’t found the right girl. Plus, his father is ill.”

“Hmm . . .” Mary kept her eyes on him. “What’s he doing out there?”

Hannah leaned closer to the window, squinting against the sun’s glare at the tall, dark-haired man she’d grown up with. “He comes by once a week and leaves *Daed* an envelope of money. Isaac’s family owns a furniture store in the touristy part of Lancaster County. *Daed* has some of his furniture and other things he’s made on consignment.”

“Why does he leave the money in the barn?” Mary also shielded her eyes from the glare.

“I’m not sure. He’s always done that.” She tilted her head slightly. “*Mamm* said he probably doesn’t want to disturb us, which he wouldn’t be.” Hannah paused. “By the way, tomorrow is worship, and it happens to be at Isaac’s house.”

“Does he have his own house or does he live with his parents?” Mary continued to look out the window.

“He lives with his parents. I think mostly because of his father’s cancer. Isaac does most of the work on their farm.” Hannah stepped away from the window, hoping her cousin would do the same. But Mary didn’t move, so Hannah cleared her throat. “Do you want me to help you unpack?” She waited, then said, “Mary?”

“Uh. No. It’s okay. I can get it.” Mary joined her by the bed, and again Hannah had an urge to straighten her cousin’s *kapp*.

“Please let me know if you need anything.” She folded her hands in front of her, hoping she could sneak off to her room and have a few moments to herself. It was exhausting to act normal when she was dying inside. Her grief still came in waves, and today the tide was high.

“Okay. Thanks.” Mary smiled, and Hannah chose not to question Mary about her use of so much *Englisch*. And she promised herself she was going to try to have a good attitude about their cousin’s visit. Maybe Mary would provide a nice distraction and eventually become

a friend. She gave a quick wave, then hurried to her bedroom.



Charlotte sat down on the bed and fumbled through her purse until she found her cell phone. She scrolled through her contacts until she found Ryan's number. He answered on the first ring.

"You there, all settled in?"

"Yep. I'm here." She spoke softly as she pulled off the prayer covering and tossed it beside her on the bed, then she pulled out the bobby pins holding her hair in a tight bun. She shook her head, her blond waves falling to the middle of her back. "And it's pretty much like I thought it would be." She sighed. "Hot, no air conditioning. But they seem nice, I guess. It's hard for me to imagine that these people choose to live like this, though." She eased out of her black loafers, then her black socks, wiggling her toes. "And it's even harder for me to imagine that Ethan wanted to live like this."

As her brother's best friend, Ryan was just as anxious to find out what happened to Ethan. When she was younger, Charlotte had a crush on Ryan, but he was a few years older than her, and he and her brother had run around with an older crowd. Since Ethan's death, Charlotte had met Ryan for lunch a few times, and they'd put their heads together trying to figure out what would

cause Ethan to take his life. A couple of times, Charlotte caught Ryan staring at her in a way that could have been mistaken for romantic interest, but she was pretty sure he would always see her as Ethan's little sister. She thought about how Ethan would have turned thirty this year.

"Maybe you'll get some answers while you're there."

"I'm going to try," Charlotte said as she propped the pillow up against the headboard. "Right now, I just want to take a nap." She sighed. "Although, it's so hot in here, I'm not sure that's possible. But I'm pooped."

"Okay. Well, glad you made it there safely. Keep me posted if Hannah or the others shed any light about what happened."

Charlotte swung her legs onto the bed and closed her eyes as she thought about her brother. They'd had a hard life growing up, and Ethan had battled depression over the years. But she'd thought he had found happiness here. It wasn't the ideal situation—him living with the Amish—but all she'd ever really wanted was for Ethan to be happy. Obviously, something had gone terribly wrong.