

Plain Perfect

A Daughters of the Promise Novel

BETH WISEMAN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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Scriptures taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To René Bissmeyer,
my best friend.

Glossary

ach—oh

Aemen—Amen

appetitlich—delicious

baremlich—terrible

boppli—baby or babies

daadi—grandfather

daed—dad

danki—thanks

Deitschi wege—Dutch ways

Die Botschaft—a weekly newspaper serving Old Order Amish communities everywhere

dippy eggs—eggs cooked over easy

eck—special place for bride and groom at the corner of the wedding table

Englisch or *Englischer*—a non-Amish person

fraa—wife

guder mariye—good morning

gut—good

haus—house

bochmut—pride

in lieb—in love

- Kapp*—prayer covering or cap
kinner—children or grandchildren
kinskind—grandchild
mamm—mom
mammi—grandmother
mei—my
naerfich—nervous
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
redd-up—clean up
riewe—red beets
roasht—traditional main dish at an Amish wedding, consisting of cut-up chicken and stuffing
rumschpringe—running-around period when a teenager turns sixteen years old
rutschich—squirming
schnitzboi—snitz pie
schnuppich—snoopy
verbuddelt—confused
wedding nothings—dessert reserved for weddings; fried pastries sprinkled with confectioner's sugar
wunderbaar—wonderful
ya—yes
yummasetti—a traditional Pennsylvania German casserole

LILLIAN PEELED BACK THE DRAPES AT THE FRONT WINDOW and squinted against the sun's glare. She'd called the taxi almost an hour ago. If her ride didn't show up soon, she would have to forego her plan and spend another night with Rickie. Biting her lip, she worried if she had enough cash to change her flight if she didn't make it to the airport on time.

She lowered the drape and paced the living room in Rickie's house, silently blasting herself for ever moving in with him in the first place. Her stomach writhed at the thought of one more day under the same roof with him. And yet her window of time for her departure was closing, she realized, glancing at her watch.

She tugged at the drapes again. Relief fell over her when she saw the yellow cab pull into the driveway. Snatching her red suitcase and purse, she bolted for the door, shuffling toward the driver as he opened the trunk.

"Please hurry," she said to the driver, handing him her suitcase.

The driver stowed her luggage without comment and was climbing into the driver's seat when she saw Rickie's black Lexus rounding the corner and heading up the street. Her heart sank.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"Bush Intercontinental Airport," she answered. "Hurry, please."

As the driver made his way down Harper Avenue to make the long drive to the northwest side of Houston, Lillian watched out the rearview window. Rickie's car slowly neared the house.

The cab driver turned at the corner. She'd made it. A clean getaway.

Irma Rose Miller couldn't help but notice the bounce in her husband's steps. The cancer kept him down and out on most days, but not today. Today Lilly was coming, and his anticipation and joy were evident.

"*Danki*," Jonas said as Irma Rose poured him another cup of coffee.

"You're welcome."

Her tall husband, once muscular and strong as an ox, sat hunched over the wooden table between them. His healthy load of gray locks and full beard were now thinning and brittle. Dark circles under his eyes and sunken features revealed the many sleepless nights of pain he had endured over the past few months. God had given her husband of forty-eight years a challenging road to travel, and he was making the trip with dignity and grace.

"Our Lilly will be here this afternoon." Jonas smiled and raised the cup to his mouth. His hands trembled, but his eyes twinkled with a merriment Irma Rose hadn't seen since the first mention of their granddaughter coming to stay with them. She hoped he wouldn't be disappointed. They hadn't seen the girl in seventeen years, since she was ten years old.

Irma Rose stood to retrieve some doughnuts from a pan atop the wooden stove.

“It will be *wunderbaar gut* to have her here.”

Irma Rose placed two doughnuts on her husband’s plate. “Ya, that it will. But, Jonas, you must keep in mind how different our ways are. We will seem like foreigners to our *Englisch* granddaughter.”

“These doughnuts are *appetitlich*,” Jonas said.

“*Danki*. But, Jonas, you need to prepare yourself. Sarah Jane raised Lilly in the outside world. We don’t know her. As a matter of fact, we don’t know exactly how Sarah Jane raised her.”

The thought twisted Irma Rose’s stomach in familiar knots. It had been hard enough when her daughter chose to leave the Old Order Amish community at the age of eighteen, but even more difficult when she wrote to tell them she was in a family way soon thereafter . . . with no husband.

“She was a glorious child,” Jonas said. “Remember how quickly Lilly learned to ice-skate? What a joy she was. What a *gut* Christmas holiday we all had.”

Irma Rose shook her head at her husband’s ignorance of the obvious. Lilly wasn’t a child anymore. She was a grown woman. Jonas had talked about that last Christmas together until the next season came and went. When Sarah Jane and Lilly didn’t show up the following year, he merely shrugged and said, “Maybe they will visit next year.” And each Christmas thereafter Jonas anticipated a visit that never happened.

Jonas never uttered a negative word about Sarah Jane’s choices. But she’d seen the sadness in his eyes when their daughter left home, and she knew the pain dwelled in his heart over the years. But he only said it was impossible to always understand God’s direction for His children—their child. Their *only* child. The

good Lord had only seen fit to bless them with one. A beautiful daughter who had chosen a life rife with hardship.

Irma Rose had prayed hard over the years to cleanse herself of any discontentment with her daughter. Sarah Jane's choice to leave the Amish faith was prior to her baptism and church membership. Therefore the community never shunned her daughter. She had chosen to avoid visits with her parents. From the little Irma Rose gathered over the years, Sarah Jane and Lilly had lived with friends and moved around a lot.

An occasional letter arrived from her daughter, to which Irma Rose always responded right away. More times than not, the letters were returned unopened. It was less painful to assume Sarah Jane had moved on and the postal service returned the letters. Although sometimes it cut Irma Rose to the bone when she recognized her daughter's penmanship: *Return to sender*.

She was thankful her last letter to Sarah Jane wasn't returned. She couldn't help but wonder if the news about Jonas's cancer had prompted her granddaughter's visit. When Lillian's letter arrived over a month ago, Irma Rose had followed her instructions not to return a letter but to call her on the telephone if at all possible. She wasted no time going to the nearby shanty to phone her granddaughter. The conversation was strained and the child seemed frantic to come for a visit.

"I'm a teacher and when school is out in May, I'd like to come for a visit," her granddaughter had said on the phone. "Maybe stay for the summer. Or maybe even longer?" There was a sense of urgency in the girl's tone.

Irma Rose feared her faith was not as strong as her husband's and that a tinge of resentment and hurt still loitered in her heart

where Sarah Jane was concerned. She didn't want any of those feelings to spill over with her granddaughter. She would need to pray harder.

As if reading her mind, Jonas said, "Irma Rose, everything will be fine. You just wait and see."

It wasn't until the plane was high above the Houston skyline that the realization of what she'd done hit Lillian. After landing in Philadelphia, she caught a train to Lancaster City and hopped a bus to Paradise, which landed her only a few miles from her grandparents' farm. She was glad there was a bit of a walk to their property; she wanted to wind down and freshen up before she reacquainted herself with her relatives. Plus, she'd had enough time on the plane to wonder if this whole thing was a huge mistake. Her mom hadn't wanted to be here, so why think it would be any better for her?

Not that she had much choice at this point. She had no money, no home, no job, and she was more than a little irritated with her mother. When her mom had begged Lillian to loan her money, Lillian reluctantly agreed, with the stipulation she got her money back as soon as possible. But her mom had never repaid a loan before. Lillian didn't know why she thought it would be any different this time, and she was determined to move away from her "boyfriend" Rickie. So Lillian quit her job and made a decision to distance herself from her mother and Rickie by coming to a place where she knew neither of them would follow: Lancaster County.

Lillian shook her head, wondering if she was making a bigger

mistake by coming here. She didn't know if she'd ever understand what ultimately drove her mother from the Plain lifestyle. From what she read, it rarely happened—Amish children fleeing from all they'd ever known. The circumstances must have been severe to drive her mother away.

Although . . . it didn't look so bad from Lillian's point of view, now that she was here. Aside from having a dreadful wardrobe, she thought the Amish men and women strolling by looked quite content. They seemed oblivious to the touristy stares. The women wore simple, dark-colored dresses with little white coverings on their heads. The men were in cotton shirts, dark pants with suspenders, and straw hats with a wide brim. Box-shaped, horse-drawn buggies were abundant.

Ironically, it all seemed quite normal.

She took a seat on a bench outside the Quik Mart at the corner of Lincoln Highway and Black Horse Road and watched the passersby. Clearly, Paradise was a tourist town, like most of Lancaster County, with everyone wanting to have a look at the Amish people. Watching them now, she wondered if the Amish were all as peaceful as they appeared. Despite her initial thoughts, she decided they couldn't be. Everyone had stress. Everyone had problems. Surely the Plain People of Lancaster County were not an exception.

But they could have fooled Lillian.



Samuel Stoltzfus gave hasty good-byes to Levina Esh and Sadie Fisher and flicked his horse into action, hiding a smile as his buggy inched forward. The competitiveness of those two widow women! First Levina had presented him with her prize-winning

shoofly pie. Not to be outdone, Sadie quickly offered up her own prize-winning version. Stalemate. The two of them had stood there glaring at each other while he tried to think of ways to escape unhurt . . . and unattached.

He might have to rethink his shopping day. Both women knew he went to the farmer's market on Thursdays . . .

Once he cleared town, he picked up the pace. The road to his farm near the town of Paradise was less traveled, and he was particularly glad of that on this day. It was a glorious sunny afternoon, perfect for a buggy ride through the countryside. Pleased he had chosen his spring buggy instead of his covered one, he relished the warmth of the late afternoon sun. Rachel had loved this time of year, when spring gave way to summertime and all the world felt full of promise.

God's soil was tilled, and he had planted corn, alfalfa, and grain. Life would be busy as he awaited the bountiful rewards of spring's labor. There was the garden, with peas to pick. The strawberries would be ready. Lots of canning and freezing. Much time went into preparing a garden for harvest.

And Rachel's garden had always been lush and plentiful. Gardening was work for the womenfolk, but Samuel had done the best he could the past two years. He was thankful his sisters took care of most of the canning and freezing.

He closed his eyes, his shoulders lifting with his sigh. He missed Rachel the most this time of year.



Lillian felt like a fool. Didn't "down yonder a spell" mean right down the road? The friendly Amish boy had pointed down Black

Horse Road and uttered those exact words when she'd asked for directions to her grandparents' farm. She'd thought the walk would do her good—help her shed some of the calories she ingested while sitting at the Quik Mart with a large cinnamon roll and cola.

Evidently, she'd mistranslated “down yonder a spell.” There wasn't a farmhouse in sight.

She really should have considered the strappy sandals she was wearing before opting to venture down the road to nowhere. Her capri blue jeans and short-sleeved, pink-cotton shirt were good choices, however. The clement sun mixing with a soft breeze made for a perfect day. An excellent day for a walk . . . if only she'd worn better shoes.

Setting her red suitcase on the grassy shoulder of the paved road, she plopped down on top of it and scanned the farmland surrounding her. It was so quiet. Peaceful. She could only hope that some of the peacefulness the Amish were known for would rub off on her during her stay. She needed it. Life had not been easy on her the past few years.

Her mom's idea of parenting had left much to be desired—jumping from one man to the next, looking for something she never seemed to find. All the while she'd toted Lillian along. Lillian had grown up changing schools, saying good-bye to friends, and continually hoping Mom's next boyfriend would be better than the last. At the first chance, Lillian had bailed on the situation, telling herself she could do better.

Despite her good intentions, she'd ended up close to following in her mother's footsteps. After putting herself through college while living with three other girls in a small apartment,

she'd landed a teaching job. There were boyfriends, and she'd definitely made her own share of mistakes.

But always, something had whispered to her that there was another way to live. Sometimes she'd listened, sometimes not. But she never felt comfortable enough to ask herself just where that voice was coming from—she just didn't know enough to form an opinion. She didn't listen to the voice when it cautioned her not to move in with Rickie. But when the voice became too strong to ignore, she knew it was time to get out of that situation.

Despite the complete lack of religious upbringing, she always suspected there might be a God looking down on her. But in light of her mom's thoughts on church, she couldn't ask her about it. Her mother seemed angry at religion. While she heartily encouraged Lillian to attend various churches with her friends when she was a child, she herself would have no part of it. It was a huge contradiction in parenting, and Lillian didn't understand it to this day.

Now, knowing the Amish to be solid in their faith, Lillian decided it might be best to keep her suspicions about God to herself around her grandparents.

"Guess I better get moving and find out how far 'down yonder a spell' really is." She jumped off the suitcase, gave it a heave-ho, and started back down the paved road, gazing to either side where the acreage stretched as far as she could see. The sun pressing down on the horizon left her a tad worried about how much farther the farm was.



"Whoa, boy!" Samuel yelled to his horse. The animal slowed his pace to a gentle trot, bringing the buggy alongside an *Englisch*

woman clumsily toting a bright-red suitcase. She was minus a shoe . . . if you called a flat-bottom sole with two small straps a shoe. Certainly not a good walking instrument.

“Can I offer you a ride?” He pulled back on the reins and came to a complete halt, as did the small-framed woman. When she turned, he was met by radiant green eyes in a delicate face. Delicate, that is, until she grimaced and blew a tendril of hair out of her face.

Then she smiled, and her face transformed, lighting up like the morning sun. He was momentarily struck dumb.

It didn’t matter. The woman was focused on his horse. Deserting her suitcase on the side of the road, she stumbled over to Pete and reached out to stroke his nose without so much as a “May I?” Thankfully, Pete was a gentle giant.

“He’s beautiful,” she said, glancing briefly in Samuel’s direction, eyes sparkling.

He cleared his throat. “*Ya*. And a fine work horse too.”

What an interesting woman this was. Unafraid. And beautiful, he had to admit. He watched as her long brown hair danced in the wind, framing her face in layers. She wore no makeup and seemed lacking in the traditional *Englisch* look, although her brightly colored blouse and calf-length breeches certainly gave her away. A tourist, most likely. But a tourist walking alone down Blackhorse Road?

The woman’s mouth curved upward in delight as she cooed over Pete. The horse gently snorted, nudged her, and she laughed heartily, her head thrown back. It was a thoroughly enchanting scene.

Suddenly uncomfortable at his thoughts, he straightened

and coughed. It was enough to bring the woman's attention back to him.

"I would love a ride!" With a final kiss on the old horse's muzzle, she went back for her suitcase. "Where should I put this?"

"*Ach*, my manners." Samuel jumped out of the buggy and made his way to the woman. "Let me." He took the suitcase from her, quite surprised at how heavy the small bundle was. After stowing it behind the double seat, he offered his hand to assist her into the buggy.

"Thank you." Now she was studying him . . . seemingly from head to toe. At her open glance, he felt a flush tint his cheeks.

"I'm Samuel Stoltzfus," he said, extending his hand but avoiding her questioning eyes.

"I'm Lillian Miller."

Her hands were certainly that of an *Englisch* woman, soft and void of a hard day's work. The Plain women in Lancaster County tilled gardens, shelled peas, kneaded bread, and a host of other necessary chores uncommon to *Englisch* women from the city. City women's hands were not only smooth and manicured, but pleasing to the touch.

Returning to his seat, he started up the buggy again. The woman was obviously tired and happy to be resting; with a slight groan she stretched her legs out. He found his eyes wandering her way and silently remonstrated himself.

"Where are you from, Lillian? Or, more important, where are you going?"

"I'm from Houston."

"*Ya*, Texas," he said, slightly surprised. They didn't usually get

Texans walking the roads out here. “Lots of farms in Texas. What brings you to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania?”

“I’m coming to stay with my grandparents for a while.” She smiled. “They’re Amish.”

Amish? He was once more at a loss for words. Not to worry—the *Englisch* woman wasn’t.

“Actually, I guess I’m Amish too,” she added.

Discreetly glancing at her *Englisch* clothes, he wondered how that could be so.

“My grandparents are Irma Rose and Jonas Miller. I’ll be staying with them for a while.” She looked his way as if waiting for a response that never came. “I’d like to adapt myself to the Amish ways. I need a peaceful, calm lifestyle away from the city. Anyway, I’ve decided to be Amish for a while.”

Samuel had been trying to connect this vivacious outsider with the staunch Irma Rose and Jonas he knew, but these words jostled him out of his musings. “You’d like to be Amish for a *while?*”

“Yes. Although I don’t plan to wear one of those dark-colored dresses or white caps like the women I saw strolling by earlier.”

In spite of himself, Samuel chuckled. “Do you even know what being Amish means?” He didn’t mean the remark as harshly as it sounded.

Lillian slanted her eyes in his direction, as if slightly offended.

Unexpectedly, the buggy wheel hit a rut. With an *oomph*, his new friend bounced in her seat. She was a tiny little thing. Luckily, she didn’t catapult right off the seat and onto the pavement.

“Yikes!” she said when her behind returned to the seat. And then she giggled. As Pete’s ears swiveled back to catch the

commotion, Samuel couldn't help but grin. The woman's enthusiasm was contagious.

He decided to drop the subject. He knew Irma Rose and Jonas well enough to figure they'd set her right about being Amish and what it really meant. Samuel reckoned they'd have their hands full with their granddaughter.

As Samuel righted the buggy, he asked, "When is the last time you saw your grandparents?" He hadn't even known Irma Rose and Jonas had a granddaughter.

"When I was ten. Seventeen years ago. It was the first time I saw snow. *Real* snow." Her eyes twinkled from the memory. "Anyway, I know things will be different from what I'm used to. But I can live without television. There's too much bad news on TV anyway. And I know Amish women cook a lot. I'm a great cook." She shrugged. "I'm a hard worker in general. I know Amish get up early and go to bed early. I know they work hard during the day. And if that's what it takes to feel peaceful and calm . . . I'm in!"

Samuel found her enthusiasm charming, no matter how misdirected it was. "Lillian, I'm sure Irma Rose and Jonas will appreciate you helping with household duties, but it will take more than chores and giving up worldly things to provide you with the peacefulness you're lookin' for."

"Well, it's a start," she said, sounding optimistic.

As for that . . . who was he to argue?



Lillian remembered the Christmas visit with her grandparents at their farm, especially the snow. Unlike the icy mix of sludge

found rarely in her hometown state, snow in Lancaster County glistened with a tranquil purity. Almost two decades later, she could still recall the towering cedar trees blanketed in white and ice skating on the crystalline pond in her mother's old ice skates.

There were few presents. She remembered that. And while she recollected her grandparents as warm and loving, she also remembered the tension between them and her mother. Her grandfather had kept the mood festive, suggested the ice-skating, and seemed to make it his mission for Lillian to have a good time—even carting her to town and back in his gray, horse-drawn buggy. It had been the highlight of her trip.

“I remember liking the way my grandparents talked,” she recalled to Samuel. “I didn’t understand a lot of things they said. Things like ‘*Outen the lights until sunrise when we’ll redd-up the house.*’ And ‘*It wonders me if it will make wet tomorrow.*’ Mom translated those to mean ‘*Turn out the lights until in the morning when we’ll clean up the house*’ and ‘*I wonder if it will rain tomorrow.*’”

“That would be right,” Samuel said.

Grandma and Grandpa both spoke another language she’d later found out was *Pennsylvania Deutsch*. Lots of times they would comingle their language with English. “*Danki, Sarah Jane, for bringing our little kinskind for a visit,*” her grandfather told her mother that Christmas. To which Sarah Jane Miller forced a smile and nodded.

“*Grandma, why are you and Grandpa wearing those costumes?*” Lillian recalled asking her grandparents.

Grandpa had just laughed and said, “*It is our faith, my kinskind.*”

We wear these plain clothes to encourage humility and separation from the world."

At ten, Lillian had little understanding of what that signified. Except somewhere in the translation she knew it meant they couldn't have a television or a phone. Several times after their one and only trip, Lillian had asked her mother if she could call her grandparents. Mom reminded her that Grandpa and Grandma did not allow phones at their house.

"Evidently, my grandparents came to Houston a couple of times before our visit at Christmas, but I don't remember," she told Samuel. "That Christmas was my last trip to Lancaster County and the last time I saw my grandparents. Until now."

"I reckon Irma Rose and Jonas are really looking forward to seeing you."

"I hope so."

Lillian tried to keep her gaze focused on the road in front of her. But her eyes kept involuntarily trailing to her left. Samuel Stoltzfus was as handsome a man as she had ever seen in the city. His plain clothes did little to mask his solid build and appealing smile each time she glanced in his direction. But it was his piercing blue eyes Lillian couldn't seem to draw away from.

"So, how long have you been married?" *Nosy, nosy.* The astonished look on his face confirmed her worry. She was crossing the line. "I'm sorry. I just noticed that you have the customary beard following marriage." She'd done her research before arriving here. "And . . . I was just . . . curious." *And curious why? He's Amish, for heaven's sake.*

"I'm not married. I'm widowed."

“Oh,” she said softly, thinking how young his wife must have been when she died. “I’m so sorry. When did your wife die?”

“*Mei fraa*, Rachel, passed almost two years ago,” he answered without looking her way.

“Again, I’m so sorry.”

Samuel continued to stare at the road ahead. “It was God’s will.”

There was no sadness or regret in his tone. Just fact. Lillian knew she should leave it alone, but . . . “I’m sure you miss her very much.”

He didn’t glance her way. “There’s Irma Rose and Jonas’s farm,” he said, pointing to their right. “I better take you right up to the house.” He coaxed Pete down a long dirt drive leading from the road to the white farmhouse.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I can walk.” She wondered if Samuel Stoltzfus was ready to be rid of her.

His eyebrows edged upward beneath his dark bangs and he glanced at her shoeless foot.

Point taken. “A ride to the house would be great.”

As Pete trotted down the dirt driveway toward the farmhouse, reality sank in. This would be her new home for the summer—or however long it took to accomplish her goal. At first glance, everything seemed lovely. Neatly mowed, prodigious fields were on either side of the lane, and the white fencing in good repair. But unlike the farms she passed on the way, there were no signs of new life planted. It wasn’t until they drew closer to the farmhouse that she spotted a small garden off to her left enclosed by a wire-mesh fence. Parallel rows of greenery indicated vegetables would be forthcoming.

There was a large barn off to her left, the paint weathered and chipping. Another smaller barn to her right also was in need of a fresh paint job. She recalled the barns they had passed on her journey down Black Horse Road. Most were a bright crimson color.

The white farmhouse appeared freshly painted, but with flowerbeds absent of flowers or shrubs. They must have been beautiful at one time. But now they—and the rest of the yard—lent an air of neglect to the farm.

A wraparound porch with two rockers looked inviting. But while the idea of curling up with a good book in one of the rockers was appealing, Lillian knew it was the inside of the house and its inhabitants she feared most. Her grandma had seemed pleasant enough on the phone, but what if she and her grandfather were too set in their ways to make room for her? And what if she couldn't adjust to their ways? No electricity meant no hair dryer, curling iron, or other modern conveniences she considered necessities. How would she charge her cell phone? And she couldn't imagine a summer without air conditioning.

Grimacing as the thoughts rattled around her head, she reminded herself why she'd come. She'd had a month to consider all of these factors. She thought she had. But as her fantasy of leaving everything behind for *this* became absolute, her tummy twirled with uncertainty.

She was still attempting to envision her new way of life when Samuel brought Pete up next to a gray buggy parked on one side of the house. Samuel moved quickly to get her suitcase from behind the seat and extended his hand to help her out of the buggy. Towering over her, he promptly released her fingers.

"Thank you for the ride. Maybe I will see you again." She

could only hope. But his lack of response as he quickly jumped back in the carriage left her wondering.

Lillian waved good-bye and watched until horse, buggy, and man were back on the paved road. She knew she was stalling. Her grandparents would be strangers to her, and she would be a stranger to them. Yet they had encouraged her to come and stay with them. "*For as long as you like,*" her grandmother had said.

Striving to cast her worries aside, she turned around, picked up her suitcase, and headed up the walk toward what would be her new home . . . for a while.