

Chapter One

Emily stood next to her husband on shaky legs as they peered out their living room window, each with a hand to their forehead, blocking the setting sun.

“He’s smaller than I thought he would be.” Dylan was cheek to cheek with Emily, the curtain parted barely enough for them to see the Amish woman and boy step out of the black buggy. “Should I go help her tether the horse to the fencepost?”

Emily shook her head. “No, she’s done it hundreds of times, I’m sure. She’ll be done by the time you get to the street.” Dylan quickly put the curtain back in place when Caroline Yoder and Noah Jansen started up the sidewalk.

“I’ve only seen him twice.” Emily bit her lip until it throbbed like her pulse. She and Dylan both stood on the other side of the front door, waiting for the woman and Emily’s nephew to knock. “When he was born . . . and at Lauren’s funeral.”

Dylan put a shaky hand on Emily’s back as they looked at each other wide-eyed, when the knock came. In less than a week, Emily had lost her sister and gained a child. She opened the door, forced a smile, and she and Dylan stepped aside so that Caroline and Noah could come in. The woman carried a small red suitcase.

A man from social services had called two days ago and asked if Emily and Dylan would be willing to provide foster care for Lauren’s six-year-old son, then possibly adopt him. Emily and Dylan had fostered children before, so they were already registered and in the system. Although, the last time they fostered a child, they both agreed they wouldn’t do it anymore. They grew too attached to each little person in their care. It was always a blessing when a child could return to a safe environment with their biological parents, but the emptiness for Emily and Dylan was almost too much to bear, and it often lasted for months. But this was different.

Emily and Dylan introduced themselves to Caroline, an Amish woman who looked to be about Emily’s age, maybe mid-thirties. Emily had carefully planned what she would say in an effort to make the transition go as smoothly as possible, but she couldn’t seem to find her voice. Even though she’d seen her nephew at the funeral, she’d been so distraught about her sister that she hadn’t noticed how much Noah looked like his mother. The boy had Lauren’s dark hair and eyes, but most telling was the shape of his

mouth. Emily's sister had been blessed with full lips and a gorgeous smile. But Noah wasn't smiling. Emily reminded herself to be strong, not to cry over regrets, but to embrace this opportunity for her and Dylan to finally be parents. It was hard, though, since the tragedy of Lauren's death stayed with Emily like a dark cloud that hovered overhead everywhere she went.

After Dylan closed the door he took the suitcase and set it down. Emily leaned down until she was at eye level with her nephew.

"Hi, Noah." She cleared her throat, aware her voice was shaking. "I'm your Aunt Emily, your mother's sister." Nodding toward her husband, she said, "And that is your Uncle Dylan."

"*Wie bischt,*" the boy said softly, his eyes cast downward below the traditional cropped bangs. He wore black slacks held up by suspenders, a blue short-sleeved shirt, and he held his straw hat by his side.

Caroline put a hand on Noah's shoulder. "Remember what we talked about Noah? Use your *Englisch*." The woman waited until Emily stood up and she had both hers and Dylan's attention. "Children speak Pennsylvania *Deitsch* first. They don't start learning *Englisch* until they are five, so Noah tends to bounce back and forth between your language and the *Deitsch* dialect. We've told him to do his best, but to try to speak in *Englisch*."

School had just let out the day before. "We'll have lots of time to get to know each other over the summer."

Noah stared at his black shoes, one with an untied lace. Instinctively, Emily squatted down and began to tie his shoe, but before her hand even reached his foot, Noah stepped backward, turned to Caroline, and lifted his eyes to her. He spoke to her in their native dialect. Emily couldn't understand his words, but the emotion was clear. He didn't want to stay.

Caroline's bottom lip trembled as she blinked her eyes, moist with tears that threatened to spill at any moment. "You are going to be fine, *mei* little man. And I will visit as often as I can." She looked up at Dylan and Emily. "As long as that's okay with your new parents."

New parents. Now, it was Emily who might not be able to hold back her tears. She

dabbed at one eye as she nodded.

“Of course. Come visit any time.” Dylan pointed over his shoulder to a platter of cookies Emily had laid out on the coffee table. “Noah, do you want a cookie?”

But the child didn’t even turn around, only clung to Caroline’s black apron.

“We’ve talked to Noah about this, but it will take some time for him to adjust.”

“Don’t leave me.” Emily’s precious nephew threw his tiny arms around Caroline. “Please, please.” His cries grew louder, and as a tear slipped down Caroline’s cheek, she pulled Noah close.

“*Mei* sweet boy, I will be by to see you very soon.” She tried to ease Noah away, but he only held onto Caroline even more, sobbing.

Emily wondered what the relationship was between Caroline and Noah. All she’d been told was that an Amish woman would be delivering Emily’s nephew today.

“You must stay with these nice people.” Caroline tried again to detach herself from Noah, but he wailed. “You will just have to take him,” she said to Dylan.

Emily had a hand over her mouth as she blinked back tears and turned to face her husband. Dylan had a hand on his forehead as he took a deep breath. But he didn’t move, his feet seemingly rooted to the floor.

Dylan finally put a hand on the child's back, but Noah screamed even louder.

Stupid, stupid. Why didn’t they foresee this? As Lauren’s only living relatives—with the exception of Noah’s unknown father—Emily had thought Noah would want to live with them. Why didn’t she think about him being close to other Amish people?

“Please,” Caroline said to Dylan with pleading eyes and tears that streamed down her face.

“How will we reach you?” Emily had lived in Montgomery long enough to know most of the Plain people didn’t use a phone. There were exceptions for business purposes and emergencies, but avoiding landlines and mobile devices was the general rule.

“This is *mei* address.” Caroline handed Emily a crumpled up piece of paper she had in her hand. Sniffing, she still had a hand on Noah’s head and spoke loudly above his cries. “It is always suitable to write to me, but you can be at our *haus* in ten minutes by car.”

Emily took the small slip of paper as she wiped away a tear.

Dylan's eyes were moist as he tried to reach for Noah, but he hesitated.

"Please, take him," Caroline said barely above a whisper. Then she forcefully grabbed the boy's arms and held him away from her enough that Dylan was able to wrap his arms around his waist.

Noah kicked and screamed as Dylan carried him away from the entryway, through the living room, and toward the kitchen.

Caroline wept openly. Emily wanted to hug her, but some of the Amish were funny about affection. Instead, she continued to wipe away her own tears.

She opened her mouth to ask what the relationship was between Caroline and Noah, but Caroline spoke up first.

"Take care of him." Then she spun around, opened the door, and rushed down the sidewalk.

Emily took a couple of steps to follow the woman but stopped. She bent at the waist, put her hands on her knees, and tried to corral her own emotions as Noah continued to wail inside.

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Caroline's hands shook as she flicked the reins and set her horse in a steady trot. She would cry all the way home, then put on a happy face for Abraham. At least she'd try to. Her husband was hurting as much as Caroline.

If there was one saving grace in all of this, at least Emily and Dylan lived out in the country. Maybe they raised chickens, or pigs, or had a pet of any kind. Caroline wished she had asked since Noah loves animals.

By the time she got home, Caroline should have been all cried out, but when she saw Abraham standing on the front porch, she exited the buggy, loosely tethered her horse, then ran across the yard. Disregarding all of her predetermined notions, she hurried up the steps and into her husband's arms.

"It was horrible." Caroline grabbed his suspenders as she buried her face against his chest and sobbed. "He screamed and screamed, and finally the *Englisch* man had to pry Noah off of me." She looked up at her husband whose eyes were filled with emotion. "Lauren would have wanted us to have him. She was my best friend, and she didn't have a relationship with her *schweschder*."

“*Ya*, I know.” Abraham held her, rubbing her back. “But the law sides with family members.”

Caroline stepped back from her husband. “*We* are her family. We’ve been around Noah since he was born. Lauren’s sister showed up at the hospital to see Noah when he arrived, then not again until the funeral. “That’s *not* family, Abe.” She shook her head, which only caused her temples to throb even more. “If Lauren had been sick, and not died suddenly, she would have made plans for Noah, and she would have wanted for him to be raised here, by us, and grow up in the faith Lauren wanted for him.”

Abraham ran his hand the length of his beard, which reached almost to the middle of his chest. They’d been married fourteen years, but God hadn’t blessed them with any children. Caroline’s stomach cramped up every time she thought about Lauren and the horrible buggy accident that had killed her instantly. But leaving Noah with strangers was shredding her insides.

“We talked to the social worker, and the *Englisch* couple—Noah’s aunt and uncle—they haven’t been able to have *kinner* either. And they have lots of experience, apparently, since they’ve taken in and cared for a lot of little ones.”

Caroline folded her arms across her chest and looked down. “They don’t have experience with Noah. They don’t know him.” She covered her face, shaking her head. “He’s in an unfamiliar world he won’t understand.”

Abraham wrapped an arm around Caroline and led her into the house. She walked to the counter and eyed the box that she’d forgotten to take to Noah’s new parents. It contained his favorite books, the cup he liked, a plastic horse, and a few other toys Caroline had brought from Noah’s house. A new couple in the district was already interested in buying the place. Things were moving too quickly for Caroline, and as she put a hand across her stomach, it grumbled. She hadn’t eaten today.

Her husband poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. “Here *mei lieb*.”

She took a sip of the hot beverage and set the cup down on the counter. Another tear trickled down her cheek, but there wasn’t anything else to be said. Noah would be living with his English aunt and uncle, and there wasn’t anything she or Abraham could do about it.

The void in her heart and the emptiness in her womb had never felt heavier. She

missed her friend so much it made her physically ill. And when she pictured Noah being pried from her body, screaming, she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to banish the memory. But his cries resounded over and over again, echoing in her mind until she thought she might collapse.

Caroline sat down at the kitchen table and held her head in her hands. Her husband pulled out the chair across from her and eased into it. His tired eyes drooped beneath his bushy eyebrows as he slid his suspenders over his shoulders, then sighed.

“Did you tell the *Englisch* woman about the problems Noah has at night?”

Caroline rubbed her eyes as she shook her head. “*Nee*. I was so upset. And Noah was screaming. I didn’t think about it.” She nodded to the box on the counter. “I forgot to take his box, and his medicine is in there.”

Her husband frowned as he shook his head. “It will be a long night for the new parents.”

Caroline hoped so. Maybe they would choose to send Noah back where he belonged.