

A Little Bit of Charm

by Mary Ellis

CHAPTER ONE

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound

Randolph County, Missouri

“Whew, it’s already the middle of September and it’s still hotter than blazes.

Rachel looked at her younger sister in horror. “Shush, before someone hears you. What will the Gingerichs think of us?”

Beth peered up with an innocent expression. “Is ‘blazes’ a bad word? I’ve heard *daed* say ‘build a blaze in the woodstove’ or ‘a blazing sunset.’”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Just hush on general principles. Soon you’ll be on your way back to Lancaster County. Then you can revert to your normal self. But let’s put our best foot forward while we’re still visitors here.”

Beth’s green-eyed focus turned wary. “What do you mean by *I’ll* be on my way back to Pennsylvania?”

Rachel ignored a question she wasn’t yet ready to answer. “Look, here comes the blushing bride and groom.” She grinned with a heart swelling with joy and love for their sister.

“Who would ever guess Nora would get hitched to Lewis Miller? Surely, not me.” Beth’s words were a very audible whisper. “I thought she’d end up with that wily fox Elam Detweiler.”

Rachel shifted her weight to her other foot, which she then placed directly atop Beth’s. No other admonishment proved necessary.

Nora and Lewis approached with glowing faces that only a wedding day can inspire. “Well, my dear *schwestern*, did you enjoy yourselves at our wedding?” Nora wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders, drawing them close.

The three-way hug brought a rush of moisture to Rachel’s eyes. “Truly, I did. I’ve never seen you looking so pretty...or so happy.” Tears cascaded down her cheeks with the realization the four King siblings would not only be in four different districts, but different states as well. A couple years ago, they were like any other Old Order Amish girls living with their parents with their grandparents next door. They dreamed of a future around the corner, married to boys they’d known their entire lives. But a house fire during the dead-of-night changed everything. It took their parents to the Lord and her two older sisters to where their hearts led them. Amy, the eldest, settled in Harmony, Maine, where her fiancé’s brothers lived. Nora, however, didn’t find the ultra-conservative district to her liking. So when the handsome, fence-sitting Elam Detweiler, Amy’s new brother-in-law, took off with his secret driver’s license and his secondhand red Chevy, Nora followed soon after. New beginnings are often hard to predict. Not long after moving to Missouri, Nora’s independent streak began to fade. And for the first time she longed to fit in, to be part of a loving supportive community. If Nora’s facial expression can be trusted, she had found what she was looking for in a town called Paradise.

A frisson of anxiety spiked up Rachel's spine. Was she making a big mistake? Would she cause her *grossmamma* grief and worry for nothing? Shaking off the notion, she joined Beth in cleaning up after the wedding meal while the happy couple walked guests to their buggies, expressing gratitude for the gifts and good wishes, thanking them for sharing in their most special day.

Later that evening, while fireflies lit up the backyard with a thousand twinkling lights, Rachel sat on the Gingerich porch. Sleep wouldn't come—that much she knew. But she didn't wish to pace the bedroom floor and keep Beth or her gracious hosts awake. She tried to pray, but the only words that came to mind were the rote prayers learned as a child. After several "Our Fathers" she clenched her eyes tightly shut. "Please, Lord, grant my sister a long life with many *kinner* and much joy." Unbidden tears started anew. Her emotions seemed to be a roiling kettle of soup, rattling the lid, threatening to overflow.

"Why are you out here crying?" Nora pulled her *kapp* ribbon before slipping into the rocker next to hers.

"A better question would be what are you doing out here on your wedding night?" Rachel wiped her face and arched an eyebrow. "Don't you and Lewis have some business to attend to?"

A pretty blush rose up Nora's neck. "Don't speak of things you know nothing about." She pinched Rachel's arm. "Besides, I'll join him in a little while. We're both too nervous to sleep much tonight. Tomorrow we move to our new home. It's not much, but it's ours." She rocked with the satisfied assurance of a woman with her life laid out like a well-organized quilt.

Rachel knew no contentment. Her future looked like an early spring sky—patchy clouds, intermittent rays of sunshine, with the smell of a coming storm. "I wish Beth and I could stay longer to help you pack."

"Worry not. My friend Violet Trask has arranged everything for our move and hers, before she and Seth leave on their wedding trip to see the Gulf of Mexico. Violet might not be able to run but she still maneuvers at the speed of light. She absolutely refused to use her crutches at her marriage ceremony. Her poor *daed* kept hovering like she might fall over." *Creak, creak, creak.* For several moments, the only sound came from the rolling wooden slats on the porch boards. Then in a hushed tone, Nora asked, "Care to tell me what's troubling you? And don't say 'nothing.' You've been weepy-eyed all day. That isn't like you, Rachel King. You know we'll take a wedding trip in November, after the harvest is in. We'll visit Amy and John in Harmony and then come to Lancaster County to see you, Beth and *grossmamma*."

Rachel debated only half a second. There was no point in withholding the truth any longer. "When you get to Pennsylvania, you might only find one sister." She stared into total darkness as the moon slipped behind a cloud. "I've decided to take the bus from St. Louis to Louisville after I put Beth on the train to Chicago."

Nora stopped rocking. "Who on earth do you know in Louisville?"

"Not a soul. Once in Louisville I'll board a bus to Elizabethtown. Then I'll arrange for a hired van to take me to Charm."

"You're planning to visit Cousin Sarah? But you hate chickens."

Rachel laughed. "I do not hate chickens as long as they're in a pot with celery, onions and dumplings." They shared a chuckle. "The fact that Sarah and her husband

operate a free range chicken farm doesn't deter me. Kentucky is known for only one thing and it isn't Rhode Island Reds. The Blue Grass state raises the prettiest horses in the world."

"Prettier than Old Smokey after you braided his mane and tail with ribbons?"

A pang of nostalgia filled her heart. Old Smokey was her father's favorite Belgian draft horse, now relegated to light work with *grossdawdi* in his twilight years. "*Jah*, even prettier than him if magazines and library books can be trusted."

"If you've decided on visiting Sarah on your way home, why not take Beth?"

A long minute spun out in the humid evening air while Rachel chose her reply carefully. In the end she chose the short, honest answer. "Because if I find living on a chicken farm tolerable I intend to stay permanently."

"Whatever for? I know you love horses and have read more about them than any Amish person in the country. But horses are big business in Kentucky. What would a Plain gal who's never held a paying job in her life do there?"

Somewhere a faraway train blew its whistle while a neighbor's dog howled, maybe at a critter creeping through the yard. "I haven't the slightest idea. All I know is Lancaster County is a lonely place since *mamm* and *daed* died. I love our grandparents and I'll miss little Beth something fierce, but I can't see myself sticking around anymore than Amy...or you could. Too many sad memories." A lump the size of a rock rose up her throat, threatening her composure.

"Me of all people cannot find fault with your plan, but I hate the idea of us spread across the eastern United States."

"Missouri is certainly not the East. Have you checked a map lately?"

"Truly, it is not," agreed Nora with a laugh. She flicked away a mosquito.

For several moments, they rocked and listened to tree frogs and crickets fill the air with a late summer serenade. Each of their hearts grew heavier as the irrevocable future closed around them like heavy fog. "No matter where I end up, you will always be my *schwester*," murmured Rachel.

"And I, yours." Nora clasped her hand in the shadows as they savored memories of their shared childhood. Impulsively Nora leaned over and kissed her cheek. "*Gut nacht*, Rachel. I believe I've kept my new *ehemann* waiting long enough." After a nervous giggle, she fled inside the house, leaving Rachel alone with her thoughts and fears for the future. When she fell asleep that night, frolicking colts, majestic stallions and gentle mares filled her dreams, giving her the best sleep she'd had in weeks.

The next day, Rachel and Beth accepted tearful hugs and a packed lunch that would feed far more than two, and climbed into the back of a hired car bound for downtown Columbia. After paying their driver, they boarded the bus to St. Louis—a frightening city in terms of the amount of fast-moving traffic. Rachel waited almost until the bus pulled into the terminal to drop her bombshell of news.

"What do you mean you're only buying one train ticket to Chicago?" demanded Beth. "How do you intend to get home?"

"After I put you on the correct train, I'll take a cab back to the Greyhound station. I'm traveling by bus to Louisville." Patiently she spelled out the sketchy details as she'd done the night before to Nora.

Beth listened to the explanation without interruption and then wailed, "Fine and dandy, but why can't I go too? I've never been to Kentucky either."

“Because if all goes well and if cousins Sarah and Isaac allow it, I will stay and work. You’re too young to move away from *grossmamma* and Aunt Irene yet.”

“Will you court boys there?” Beth turned toward her on the seat.

The unexpected question caught Rachel by surprise. “I’m not thinking about courting now. I just want to find a job.”

“But you’re already twenty.” Beth sounded aghast.

“That’s not that old in this day-and-age. People are waiting longer to marry.”

“Why can’t I come with you? If you decide to stay longer than a visit, you could put me on a bus home then.”

Finally, the question she had dreaded. “Please don’t be hurt, but I truly wish to try this out by myself.” With a shaky hand, she pulled a printed sheet from her purse. “I wrote out directions on how to change trains in Chicago to catch the Capitol Limited to Pittsburgh and then the Pennsylvanian on to Harrisburg. There you’ll catch the bus to Mount Joy. It’s all spelled out very carefully. It’s exactly what we did on the way here in reverse.”

Beth shrugged. “*Grossmamma* is going to be miffed, even more so than she was about us attending the wedding unchaperoned.” She shivered, as though picturing their grandmother’s seldom displayed temper.

“True enough. That’s why I wrote her a long letter to explain as best as I could.” Rachel withdrew a sealed envelope from her purse. “Would you give her this when you get home?”

Beth stared at the white envelope and nodded. “*Jah*, I suppose. But maybe I’ll just lay it on the kitchen table and hide in the barn until the steam clears. What about Amy up in Maine?”

Rachel patted her bag. “I wrote her a letter too. I’ll post it the first chance I get. I told Nora last night after the wedding. She seemed to understand.”

Beth lifted and dropped her thin shoulders. “Then it’s all decided.”

Her plaintive words of resignation cut Rachel like a blade. She wrapped her arms around her, enfolding Beth in a hug. “You can come visit me some time, once I’m settled. And I promise to come home to Mount Joy too. We’ll always be sisters. Never forget that.” The rocking bus, the chatter from other travelers, the scenery passing at breakneck speed, all faded away. Rachel was only aware of the skinny fourteen-year-old she held in her arms and how much she would miss her.

“St. Louis,” the bus driver barked into the loud speaker.

Everyone jumped up to pull luggage from overhead bins and collect belongings from the seat and floor. Rachel felt Beth shrink by her side. “Don’t be frightened. You’re a smart girl. You have your directions, plenty of food and money in your purse. Just remember what *mamm* used to say: You’re never alone in life. God is always with you. So close your eyes and let Him fill your heart.”

Whether her words did any good, Rachel would never know. Beth was quiet during their walk to the train station and said little as they sat eating sandwiches and fruit, waiting for the next train to Chicago—the hub of the Midwest.

Feeling as low as a crawfish on a river bottom, Rachel walked her sister to the turnstiles. She handed her the tote bag of sandwiches and snacks. “Don’t lose your ticket. And don’t be afraid to ask questions of kind-looking ladies.”

“Promise me you’ll write.” Beth’s green eyes were round as silver dollars and just as shiny.

“Twice a week, every week. Plus Sarah has a phone in her house since she’s Old Order Mennonite, not Amish. I wrote her number on your directions. You could always call from the phone shed if you’re dying to hear my voice.”

Beth laughed. “Most likely twice-a-week letters will fill my need for sisterly companionship. Don’t go too sappy on me.”

True to the youngest sibling’s style, Beth had already adjusted to the change, disappointment rolling off her back like rain on a duck. So Rachel was able to watch her board the train for home without melting into a puddle of sorrow and indecision. Home—Mount Joy, Pennsylvania—didn’t feel much like home since she’d spotted flames leaping high into the starry sky and smelled the acrid smoke, which had filled her lungs and then her soul. That night, she dozed fitfully in the train station’s lounge, per the advice of Jonas Gingerich. There would be more people milling about than in the bus station, where she returned at first light. She washed her face and hands and brushed her teeth in the rest room. She bought a bagel and cream cheese and pint of cold milk.

By the time Rachel boarded the bus to Louisville, excitement had built in her blood like an herbalist’s tonic. She couldn’t keep from grinning as they crossed first into Illinois, then Indiana and finally into Kentucky. Even the air smelled differently, or perhaps it was the bus’ air freshener. But Rachel King was ready to make her own new beginning.

She arrived in Elizabethtown by late afternoon and called the number provided by her cousin Sarah. A hired driver, a sweet woman named Michelle, picked her up within two hours and drove through Charm before arriving at the Stoll’s farm. A historic courthouse with clock tower soaring into the clouds dominated the town square. Stately elms and oaks spread their limbs far and wide, shading the stone walkways and park benches where elderly men reminisced and young mothers pushed baby strollers. There was a second new courthouse, too, along with the Sheriff’s Department, café, furniture shop, post office, pizza shop and an ice cream parlor. What more did a body need? Two white church steeples loomed above the housetops. Rachel wished she could take a photograph to send to Beth, but of course, she’d never used or owned a camera in her life.

Charm—the name said it all. And Rachel was so eager for a fresh start she almost broke into song.

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Jake climbed up on his favorite gelding and spent the early morning riding the fence line—his favorite chore. But any time spent in the saddle wasn’t a chore to him. He loved to ride, enjoying his solitary time away from siblings while checking the boundaries of their twelve hundred-fifty acre horse farm. Up and down the hills and valleys he rode, while the sun warmed his back and a sweet breeze cooled his skin. Acre upon acre of thick grass rolled for as far as the eye could see. Green grass—not blue, no matter how he squinted or gazed sideways. He wondered if the large thoroughbred operations around Lexington and Louisville used certain fertilizers or maybe bought special sunglasses at the mall. Because regardless of the season, the pastures at Twelve Elms Stables were the same green as those in Indiana or Ohio.

No matter. Grass color wouldn't make an ounce of difference considering the yearling his family now owned. That colt showed more spirit and heart than any horse he'd ever bred and raised. With the right trainer, Twelve Elms could have a contender. In another year, they could race him at Keeneland in a stakes race for two-year-olds. It would begin the grand march leading up to the Kentucky Derby on the first Saturday in May—every May since 1875. Jake felt a jolt of electricity in his belly each time they watched the race on TV. Lately, he'd been going to the Derby and camping out in the infield with his friends. Sitting in lawn chairs they would study racing forms and stats for hours to pick their personal favorites. His dad, a devout Baptist, frowned on gambling, but every now and then Jake placed a two-dollar bet to win. Always to win, never to place or show. Second or third place wasn't good enough. Folks only remembered the names of winners. With Eager-to-Please, they would have their chance to make history. And with what they had to pay in stud fees to sire the colt, it would be the only chance they would ever get.

Jake showered in the bath off the utility room and strolled into the kitchen, whistling, with a ferocious appetite. He was also dying for a second cup of coffee. Ken Brady sat at the kitchen table, hunched over his ledgers. "How's it going, dad?" He made a beeline to the coffeemaker.

"Morning, son. All fencing secure?"

"Right as rain." He added two sugars and a bit of milk and then settled across the table. Twelve Elms had miles of fences, split rail along the roadways—pleasant to look at but hard to maintain—and solar-powered battery-fed electric wire everywhere else.

"Your mom left sausage gravy and pan of biscuits before she left for work. Just needs to be heated."

Jake scrambled up to light the burner under the skillet and pulled the pan of buttermilk biscuits from the oven. "Aren't you eating?" he asked, biting into one flakey, crisp piece of heaven.

"Not much appetite today." His father pushed his reading glasses up the bridge of his nose, but his focus remained on the ledgers.

Jake noticed dark circles beneath his eyes and a neat row of furrows across his forehead. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Business as usual." Ken met Jake's gaze over his coffee cup. "The Harts and the Lanskys won't be boarding their horses here after the first of the month. Mr. Lansky got transferred to California, so the family will be moving. And Nick Hart lost his job at the lumberyard. They've already been having trouble paying their bills since his wife took sick. Now they've decided to sell their daughter's Saddlebred and stop her lessons."

"Little Maddy will throw a fit. That child is used to getting her own way." Jake made polite conversation while devouring his favorite meal of the day—breakfast.

"English saddle and dressage are luxuries families can't afford on unemployment compensation. Little Maddy will have to get over it." Ken gazed out the kitchen window where hired help were cutting a field of oats to be ground into winter horse feed. His blue eyes looked even paler than usual, as though worry had bleached the color right out of them. His father was ageing before his time.

"People move away and new folks come to take their place. Little girls will always love horses and talk their dads into lessons and then a horse of their own." Jake tipped up his mug to drain the last drop of coffee.

Ken walked to the stove for a refill. “Yeah, but all that costs money. Trouble is when a factory closes its doors in Casey County and lays off workers no other business opens up to take its place. Without jobs people don’t move here. And without our boarding, riding lessons and trail ride income, we’ll be forced to cut our own staff.”

Jake swallowed down a sour taste in his mouth. Why did his dad always have to look on the negative side of everything? You didn’t see those big-time owners and trainers creeping around the horse auctions with hang-dog expressions. They held their heads high, walked with confidence and left the bean-counting to their accountants. They’d learned the cardinal rule—success breeds success. If you acted like a winner and had faith in what you were doing, you had a chance at the garland of roses. But if you fretted and moaned and dealt with your peers like a scared rabbit, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. “Like the preacher tells us every Sunday morning, you gotta have faith, Dad.”

Ken turned his watery blue gaze on Jake “My faith in the Lord never wavers. I’m just not so sure about our recent business decision.” He took one cold biscuit from the pan and slathered on some soft butter. “We paid a king’s ransom to have Pretty-in-Pink bred with Man-of-his-Word. We’re very lucky that the insemination took hold. That kind of money and no guarantees.” Ken clucked his tongue.

“The best things in life seldom come with one.” Jake mopped up the last of the sausage gravy with his third biscuit. “But now that we’ve got Eager-to-Please, it’s time to step up to the plate.”

Ken scraped the pan onto a small plate. “I’m not sure I understand your baseball analogy, son.”

Jake sucked in a deep breath. “That colt is strong with more spirit than any horse in the stable. He practically eats his body weight every day and grows stronger by the week. But I’m no skilled horse trainer, Dad. I know my limits. Bloodlines like that colt’s deserve a professional trainer that can take Eager-to-Please all the way to the top in two years.”

“Did you drink some bad apple cider? Big buck horsemen work out of Louisville and Lexington for a very good reason. Those owners have check book balances in the six-figures. In case you haven’t noticed, we give tours to busloads of senior citizen groups to generate income, and your mom has signed up to work weekends for the extra pay.” Ken ate his gravy with a spoon, laughing, as though Jake had told a good joke. “You’re a fine trainer, don’t sell yourself short. Maybe one of those big names has written a book filled with pointers. But you’d better check the book out at the library instead of buying it at Barnes and Noble. Our checkbook balance is barely three figures.” He rinsed his cup and plate and placed them in the dishwasher. “I’ll be on the computer in my office if you need me.” Ken shuffled toward the door.

Jake bit back his comment and rose to his feet. Losing his temper with his mild mannered father had never gotten him anywhere in the past and wouldn’t help now. He grabbed his hat from the rack and went in search of his sister. If he couldn’t win Jessie to his side, he didn’t stand a chance. And Eager-to-Please would never win anything better than Best in Show at the Casey County Fair.

“Let me get this straight. You want Mom and Dad to take out a second mortgage on this farm to hire somebody to do *your job*?” His twenty-year-old sister, the second

oldest sibling, stood in a horse stall in knee high rubber boots with shovel in hand, and a suspicious looking smear on her cheek.

Jake thought it wise to grab another shovel and start filling the cart with soiled wood shavings as well. "Let's call it a business loan, not a mortgage. Only a pro-trainer will know the ins-and-outs of the national racing circuit. He'll know which races are mandatory for a two-year-old to enter and how to get our colt ready to compete." Jake kept shoveling while he talked, not daring to meet Jessie's eye. "We don't have to hire a top level trainer, but it takes money to make money. Cinderella didn't go to the ball wearing her homespun sackcloth. She was dressed and ready to take her shot at winning the prince." He grinned, pleased that he alluded to his sister's fondness for fairy tales. When he glanced over, Jessie was leaning on her shovel, smirking.

"Nice try, but Cinderella had a fairy godmother with one of those handy wands. I leave for college on Sunday. I'll come home on weekends to give tours if the demand remains high, but I really don't want to." Her smile faded. "Competition is tough to get into Vet School. I need to maintain my grade point average. I hate leaving campus every weekend."

Jake's stomach wrenched with guilt and disappointment. "Am I the only one who wants this? I thought we were in agreement when we had Pretty-in-Pink bred with a sire with champion bloodlines."

Jessie softened. "We are in agreement, big brother. I would love to go to the Derby as an owner. I would even go out and buy one of those fancy hats. But there's a limit to what this family can do, especially with me in college. Payments have to be made on that second mortgage. We can't tell the bank to patiently wait to see if the colt finishes in the money. I wish Keeley was old enough to take over the tours but she still can remember the details. Who wants to listen to a guide who says "and-stuff-like-that" every other sentence?" She swiped at her forehead with the back of her hand.

Jake shifted his body weight. "If I have to take a night job away for the farm to help pay training expenses, I will. This is Twelve Elms only shot." He resumed mucking out the stall with renewed energy. "Please take my side during the next family business meeting. Otherwise I'll be outvoted."

Jessie sighed. "All right, Jake. I'll vote with you but you'd better come up with a plan that doesn't involve finding a magic wand in the oat bin."

"I plan to say plenty of prayers between now and the meeting."

"You down on your knees in prayer?" She raised a skeptical brow.

"As you can see, I'm desperate."

She smiled with tenderness. "He hears the pleas of the desperate. Hopefully, He'll also like our motives as well." Jessie picked up the handles of the garden cart and wheeled it toward the door.

Jake was left wondering if God cared one iota about the outcome of a horse race.