

BOOK ONE

THE FRIENDSHIP LETTERS

Letters *of* Trust

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Dedication

To each of my dear Amish friends who keep in touch with
me often, even though we live miles apart.

I appreciate each of you, and the wisdom and prayers you
have offered when needed.



*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*

PSALM 46:1

Prologue

Grabill, Indiana

“I can’t believe that Vic and I will be moving to Pennsylvania in the morning.” Eleanor Lapp choked back tears as she stood in the Schwartz family’s yard and gave her friend Doretta a hug. “You and I have been good friends for such a long time, and I’m going to miss our special times together.”

Doretta teared up. “Oh, my dear friend, I shall miss you too, but a new adventure awaits you and Vic in what I’ve heard is the beautiful state of Pennsylvania.” She paused to wipe the moisture on her cheeks. “Our friendship will remain strong, because we’ll keep in touch through lots of letters and some phone calls. I’ll write to you often, I promise.”

“I will send you letters as well, but it won’t be the same as getting together for long chats and doing fun things together, the way we have since we were *kinner*.” Eleanor glanced toward the barn, where her husband of one week had gone to say goodbye to Doretta’s brother, Glen.

Days prior, Vic and Eleanor had packed up all their belongings with some help from her family. With the exception of their wedding gifts and Eleanor’s personal things, the newly married couple didn’t have a lot of items to bring along on their move. But maybe that was a good thing, since it would make moving easier and a little less stressful. Soon after Eleanor accepted his marriage proposal, Vic had purchased a home for them in

Paradise, Pennsylvania, and he'd recently bought a few pieces of furniture, so that when he and Eleanor arrived they wouldn't have to sleep or sit on the floor. He had taken care of that when he'd gone home for a few weeks before his and Eleanor's wedding. Eleanor looked forward to helping her husband pick out the rest of their furnishings, which they planned to do within the first few days of their arrival.

Doretta gave Eleanor's back a few gentle pats. "Your place is with Vic now, and you knew before you married him that his plan was always to return to the area where he grew up."

Eleanor gave a slow nod. "I'm excited to go and start my new life, but it's going to take a little time to adjust to being apart from my family and friends. Don't worry about me," she quickly added. "I'm sure I'll be fine once we get there and have settled into our new home. I love Vic very much, and I won't let anything about this move come between us."

Chapter 1

Paradise, Pennsylvania

Three months later

Colorful red, gold, and pale green autumn leaves crackled beneath Eleanor's feet as she made her way down the driveway to the mailbox in front of her and Vic's new home. Although it had two stories and four bedrooms, the house was smaller than many other Amish homes in their area, where couples with large families lived. Someday when children came, Vic would no doubt want to add an extension out the side or back of their house that would include more rooms.

How quickly the time had gone since Eleanor and her husband stood in the presence of their families and friends and responded to Bishop John's questions. Eleanor still got choked up when she thought about the sincerity behind their wedding vows. She loved her husband with all her heart and wanted to be the kind of wife he needed. Eleanor looked forward to the years ahead, and hopefully to raising a family here together. It wouldn't matter whether they had one child or ten. The bishop had reminded Eleanor and Vic during the wedding service that as long as they put God first in their marriage, their family unit would be strong. He also stated that whatever happened in the years ahead—the good or the bad—with the Lord's help, they would be able to face it together.

Redirecting her thoughts, Eleanor stopped in front of the mailbox and opened the flap. While pulling the mail out, a gust of late September wind came up, causing the top envelope to blow off the stack of letters, magazines, and other correspondence. Keeping a firm grip on the rest of the mail, Eleanor bent down and picked up the envelope that had fallen. She smiled, noticing that the return address was Doretta's.

Oh good. I can hardly wait to see what my dear friend has to say. I miss her and my family so much, but I won't let Vic know that I've been feeling kind of homesick. He might believe that I want to return home, and I would never want to disappoint Vic or plead with him to move back to Indiana.

At times Eleanor wished she and Vic had remained in Indiana instead of moving here, but she never allowed herself to dwell on it. Her responsibility as Vic's wife was to him now, and that meant living in the state, town, and home he had chosen.

Eleanor hurried back to the house, shivering as the wind continued to blow. Although she wasn't pleased to see the colder weather setting in, at least it was no longer hot and muggy, the way it had been this summer. Even though there was something about each season that she liked, there were unpleasant aspects as well. She particularly didn't care for frigid temperatures, but there were some winter outdoor recreations that she enjoyed. Eleanor looked forward to the pond at the back of their property freezing well enough that they could ice-skate on it. It would also be fun to build a snowman or make snow angels, the way she had done with her three older brothers when they were all children. Sometimes their winter frolicking had ended up in snowball fights. Of course, Eleanor, being the youngest, had taken the brunt of things when Gabe, Sam, and Larry ganged up on her. It had evened things out a bit when Doretta came over and joined in the fun, but if Doretta's brother Glen came along, he'd always sided with Eleanor's brothers. Four against two was hardly fair, but Eleanor and her friend had done their best to hold their own against those rowdy boys.

Eleanor's musings ended when she entered the house and placed the mail on the narrow table inside the entryway. She removed her sweater and

hung it on a wall peg, then picked up Doretta's letter and took it to the kitchen table. Eagerly, she tore the envelope open and read the letter silently.



Dear Eleanor,

Thank you for the lovely card you sent me a few weeks ago. The butterfly stamp you used to make it made me wish it was summertime again. Just think—in two months it will be Thanksgiving, and we'll be thinking about pumpkins and turkeys. Do you have any rubber stamps for either of those?

It would be nice to come visit you sometime and see your new place, but with my teaching position, it's hard to get away. I do miss getting together with you and sharing our thoughts on different matters.

I was wondering if you will be looking for a job to provide some extra income, or have you decided to stay at home at this time and concentrate on being a homemaker?

I hope things are going well for you there, and that you've established a friendship with one or both of Vic's sisters, or perhaps someone in your church district.

I'm keeping busy with my teacher's position, and my relationship with William Lengacher has gotten stronger. I'm sure it's just a matter of time before he asks me to marry him, and when he does, I'm prepared to say yes. William is so kind and polite. He gets along well with my dad, and they have a shared interest in hunting. Mom likes him too, and so do all of my siblings. Even though William has a good job at the Farm Building Supply, he's thinking about partnering with his twin brother in a new business venture.



Eleanor stopped reading and set her friend's letter aside, after noting that the rest of it appeared to be mostly about the weather they'd been having in the Grabill area, along with some local news, which she could read about later. She focused instead on a brief note from her mother, and that led to Eleanor thinking about how her parents had disapproved of Vic soon after they'd met him. When he'd first showed up in Grabill, to attend a friend's wedding, Eleanor had been attracted to him. He was good-looking and outgoing and took an interest in her right away. Vic had made her blush when he'd said the minute he'd laid eyes on her, he had told himself, *She's the girl for me. I am going to marry her someday.*

Vic had returned to Pennsylvania a few days after his friend's wedding, but he'd written letters and made phone calls to Eleanor and gone back to Grabill several times so they could get better acquainted. As their relationship progressed, Vic had taken a job working for one of the Amish men in Grabill who owned a carpentry shop. It had been wonderful having him living so close, and during that time her love for Vic had grown deeper. Soon after he'd proposed to Eleanor and she'd said yes, Vic had made it clear that once they were married, he wanted them to live in Pennsylvania. She had agreed with that, because the thing Eleanor wanted most was to be with Vic.

During Vic's time in Grabill, he had done a few things her parents hadn't approved of. Mom had stated that Vic seemed to want things his own way, and Dad had commented that Eleanor's boyfriend had been seen smoking cigarettes and drinking beer with some of the other young fellows his age. Eleanor had told her parents that they had nothing to worry about. Vic would set his days of doing worldly things behind him when he quit *rumspringe* and joined the church. And he had done just that.

Eleanor let her musings go and finished reading her mom's letter, as well as the rest of Doretta's letter, and then she went through the remainder of the mail. Once her morning chores were complete, she would take the time to respond to her friend with either a letter or one of the pretty cards she'd made, using one her favorite rubber stamps—a cardinal sitting on the

branch of a tree, which she had stamped with red ink. Cardinals were one of her friend's favorite birds. Of course, Doretta was a bird-watcher when she wasn't teaching school, so she liked many feathered species, especially the more colorful ones.

Eleanor smiled, remembering the day she and her friend had graduated from the eighth grade and gone for a leisurely walk to look at birds. They'd had a wonderful time, laughing, talking, and taking turns pointing out birds that appeared to be unusual or sang pretty tunes. Eleanor looked forward to buying a few feeders so she could be entertained this winter while watching the birds that would find their way into her and Vic's yard in search of food.

Eleanor thought more about her special friend, and she teared up a little bit as she reflected on some of the wonderful times they had spent together. She wondered if it might be possible for Doretta to come to Pennsylvania for a visit sometime next summer. It would be wonderful to see her again and have time to do some catching up. She had to admit, planning for that day would be a way of making this transition easier, and it would be ever so nice to see a familiar face from home for a little while. Of course, next summer was several months away, but when the time drew closer, Eleanor would talk to her husband and see if he was okay with the idea. Maybe it wasn't good to plan this far ahead, but if Vic agreed, Eleanor would invite Doretta to come, which would give her something to look forward to. Her and Vic's home had enough room for guests, so that wouldn't be a problem.

Eleanor had been working on decorating the rooms in the house, and she liked the colors she'd chosen for each one. Pale blue for the bathroom, a light shade of yellow for the kitchen, and an off-white for their living room, dining room, and all four of their bedrooms. Eleanor seemed to be gifted with a green thumb of sorts and had put in plenty of flowering plants in the sunny places around the yard. She looked forward to planting their vegetable garden early next spring, once the temperatures warmed. Until then, Eleanor was content to keep busy with cooking, cleaning, and doing whatever inside chores needed to be done. But the thought crept into her mind, based on what Doretta had mentioned in her letter, that she could

consider working, at least part-time, for extra money. In fact, being away from the house for a while might help her feel less lonely.

Perhaps I should bring that idea up to Vic, she told herself. It might be nice to get out and work again. Even if I didn't make a lot of money, it would be fun if I could find a job where I could socialize with others.



Eleanor had finished washing her lunch dishes and was about to get out her card-making supplies when a knock sounded on the back door. Since it was the entrance that neighbors, friends, and family normally used, Eleanor figured it must be someone she knew. The mailman, whenever he had a package, always came to the front door. The same held true for someone trying to sell something, or people from their church district whom Eleanor didn't know very well. Since Eleanor was the newcomer to this area, there were many folks, even from their church district, whom she was not well acquainted with yet.

After wiping her damp hands on a dish towel, Eleanor left the kitchen and opened the back door. She was greeted by her ever-cheerful mother-in-law, Susie. It seemed like every time Eleanor saw the brown-eyed brunette, she wore a smile. At age forty-eight, the large-boned but by no means overweight woman always seemed to have a cheerful attitude. Susie was the mother of five children, ranging in ages from twenty-seven to eight years old. Vic was the oldest, followed by Clara, age twenty-two; Kate, who was eighteen; fifteen-year-old Stephen; and Eddie, who would turn eight later this week. Susie was an excellent quilter and often sold her quilted items to some of the local quilt shops in Lancaster County. She had given Vic and Eleanor a lovely wedding-ring-patterned quilt as a wedding present, which they used on their bed. Vic's father, Ethan, was a kindly man type who enjoyed telling jokes and humorous stories. He owned a small shop on his property in Strasburg, where he made doghouses, birdhouses, picnic tables, and a variety of lawn furniture. Vic had told Eleanor once that he had begun working for his dad when he graduated from the eighth grade, but after a

few years he'd quit and sought employment at a few other places that dealt in handmade wooden items. Vic had also stated that he wouldn't be happy doing any kind of job unless it involved wood and working with his hands. His new position at a local company that was based in Lancaster specialized in custom-built homes, additions, decks, garages, and remodeling of barns. Vic had stated several times that working at the new business was by far his favorite place of employment. He'd also explained that he liked building larger items and didn't think he could ever go back to working for his dad. Eleanor had no problem with that; she just wanted her husband to be happy.

"Good afternoon, Susie. Please, come inside." Eleanor opened the door wider, and after Vic's mother stepped in, Eleanor took her mother-in-law's outer garments from her, hung them up, and then invited Susie to join her in the kitchen.

"Something smells real good in here." Susie tilted her head back and sniffed the air. "Have you been doing some baking?"

"Just a bit this morning. I made Vic's favorite, chocolate chip pie." Eleanor motioned toward the pantry and then gestured for her mother-in-law to take a seat at the table. "Would you like a cup of *kaffi*, or some *tee*, perhaps?"

"If I weren't in a hurry to get to the quilt shop in Bird-in-Hand, I would take you up on the offer for either coffee or tea. After I leave the quilt shop, I'll get a bite of lunch before heading back to Strasburg."

"I've already eaten my noon meal, but I'd be happy to fix you something," Eleanor offered.

"*Danki* for the invitation, but I've made plans to meet my friend Lavina Beiler at the Bird-in-Hand Family Restaurant." Susie fiddled with the long white ties on her heart-shaped *kapp*—the type of head covering Eleanor felt she must wear now that she lived among the Lancaster County Amish. It was quite a bit smaller and shaped differently than the cone-style, pleated-at-the-back coverings worn by Amish women in Indiana. Eleanor had determined before her wedding that if she was going to live in Lancaster County, she would dress in the same style of clothing as other Amish women

whose homes and families were here. She certainly did not want to stand out among these Plain people as looking, or even acting, different than them.

Susie's hands moved from her covering ties to the front of her black apron, which concealed most of her dress. "The reason I came by was to invite you and Victor to Eddie's birthday supper that we'll be hosting at our home this Friday evening. I mentioned it to Victor a week or so ago, but he may have forgotten to tell you."

Eleanor pursed her lips to keep them from forming into a broad smile. It seemed so strange to hear Vic's mother refer to him as "Victor." However, that was his given name, and if his mother preferred to call him that, instead of Vic, it was certainly her choice.

Susie's cheeks turned crimson as she gave a slow shake of her head. "That son of mine can be so forgetful at times. From the time he was a young child, he got preoccupied easily and would forget important things, even with my constant reminding. Did he, by any chance, mention the birthday gathering to you?"

"No, he did not, but I will tell him that you came by and make sure he knows we are invited." Eleanor pulled a paper napkin from the wicker basket in the center of the table and wiped a damp spot where she had set her water glass during lunch. She didn't know how she had missed it when she'd cleared her lunch dishes from the table. Hopefully Susie hadn't noticed. Eleanor didn't want her mother-in-law to think she was a slovenly housekeeper and hadn't cleaned the table.

"It's no surprise to me that he forgot, which is why I came here to tell you about the plans." Susie leaned slightly forward and gave Eleanor a genuinely warm smile. "I'm so glad my son chose a sweet woman like you who can make sure he stays on the straight and narrow—if you get what I'm saying. Victor is a hard worker and quite talented when it comes to working with wood, but he can be a bit scatterbrained sometimes and needs someone to help him remember certain things."

"I hope he won't see my reminding him as pestering. I doubt that any man would appreciate a *gebeller* wife."

“It’s not nagging, dear. It’s loving.” Susie winked. “Seriously, though, if Victor didn’t have someone to remind him, he probably wouldn’t remember his own birthday, let alone his youngest brother’s.”

Eleanor sat quietly for several seconds before responding. “I’ll do my best, Susie, but only if I can see that it doesn’t irritate my husband.” She shook her head slowly. “I would never want to say or do anything that might drive a wedge between us.”

Susie rose from her chair and came around to give Eleanor a hug. “I don’t believe you have to worry about that. My son loves you very much, and I can’t imagine him letting anything disrupt your marriage—especially not something like a few gentle reminders when needed.”