

CHAPTER 1



"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." Philippians 2:1-2 (NIV)

There was disdain in what she does, but she loved it. The only daughter of the baker in Gap Road has a job, and that was something the community could not quite well grasp. They weren't exactly hostile towards it, but the idea challenged their beliefs. She wasn't making a stand like how "English" women fight for their various rights. She never meant to counter the traditions of the community either. Accounting was just something she never thought she would love. And she loved it far more than the designated roles of an ordained Amish woman.

Behind countless books and columned sheets she worked, her hand speeding in clean, precise scribbles on the balance sheet. She was in a tiny cramped office of the sort, crowded with rows of waist-high wooden cabinets. It would have been dark and suffocating inside, but because the window before her was proportionately too big, sunlight and fresh air freely poured in.

With a sigh, she set her pencil down. She was done. Work was never finished until everything was checked and reviewed, so with the sheets still on her desk, and the bundles of receipts and vouchers on her left hand, she began from the top.

The effort and detail she invested in her work wasn't entirely necessary for the Amish way of doing business, but she did it all the same. Marianna's compensation was more than generous, hence the obligation to return the kindness.

Marianna had a talent for numbers. And she only realized this when she opened her world to the scholarly ways of Englishmen during her Rumspringa. There was no need for algebra or calculus in the community. So instead, she opted to learn and master accounting.

It was the most complex form of arithmetic allowed among her people, and it was only so because Amish adults weren't exempted from income tax laws. Same with Englishmen, they were required to declare annual incomes and pay the corresponding taxes. As a result, despite the discouragement of taking up a job, she had one. There were so few accountants in the community that businessmen had no choice but to make the most out of her skills.

Her bright blue eyes flicked from the paper in her hands to the paper on the desk, scanning every entry, number and sum. As she reached the bottom of the page, Marianna's brows furrowed. There was something wrong. Or rather, there was something odd -- something she was not used to -- despite the certainty that she made no mistake. To ascertain her work's accuracy, she redid every computation from the top, and this time, in deliberate slowness. The total she arrived on, was still the same.

"Could it be?" she whispered to herself. It was not impossible, but she found it hard to believe. She stood from her little desk, gathered the necessary sheets and books and strode out of her office.

The building it was in was equally small. It was more of a house actually, but the workshop it housed was spacious. Buggies, modern farming equipment, and even cars filled the shop all the way to the field across. Opposite her office -- at the main house -- was the store where various metal parts were sold, and Marianna headed for it.

Walking to the shop meant crossing the busy, noisy workshop. Normally, two or three gentlemen would greet her a good day, but not today. It was an exceptionally busy day. Everyone was occupied with something. If they weren't under a car or a buggy or buried between the shelves of metal supplies and tools, they were talking to a customer.

She continued her short stroll, and through a back door, she entered the store. A few men in suspenders and straw hats flocked the aisles, looking for the right size of bolt nuts, checking the varying qualities of steel wires, and browsing through the lines of metal parts for horse harnesses. Behind the checkout counter was another door, hidden from sight. She knocked.

"Come in!" said a deep, muffled voice.

Marianna opened the door and entered. There was nothing special about this office except perhaps the unimpressive computer and telephone sitting on the desk. Compared to hers, it was less cluttered and more spacious. There was no window and it made the supposedly bright room darker.

The Amish were uncomplicated people, and they had no need for framed pictures to hang on the walls, or vases with flowers to sit on the shelves. The idea of beautifying houses (and the body) was, from their community's perspective, trivial. But this room, at this very moment, enclosed beauty. And he was standing before his desk, talking on the phone.

Reuben gestured for her to sit on the wooden chair by the door, his eyes apologetic as he pointed to the receiver by his ear. She nodded in answer and gave him a gentle smile, letting him know it's alright. He never liked the idea of having a lady wait.

Transactions weren't part of her expertise -- not with this type of business -- so there wasn't any point in listening. What she could deduce from the conversation was that Reuben was dealing with a client from far across the country, and by the sound of his voice, it was something exciting.

Since there was nothing to do or keep her occupied to pass the time, she did what she does best -- adore her beautiful Reuben.

Their families, the King's and Hostetler's, were close friends, and it was this relationship that bound her and Reuben since they were babies. Girls envied her for that. They would remind her every day how lucky she was to have him for a childhood friend.

Reuben was one of the handsomest boys in the community, and not only by Amish standards, but also by Englishmen standards. She recalled how tourists would ask permission to take his photo. Posing for the camera was against their practices, so even though his father allowed it, little Reuben would always look away or continue with his task.

Marianna was a curious little girl, and she would always ask the outsiders to show her his picture. Only one capture stayed in her memory, and it was taken during their stroll to the church. It clearly showed his adorably plump and unsmiling face, his light brown eyes and dark brown hair glinting in the bright summer sunshine. If angels had been flesh and blood, she could have easily mistaken Reuben as one.

She never looked at him romantically back then and the feeling was mutual. They were close and there was love that much was evident, but it was nothing more but the love between *bruder* and *schweschder*. It was only when she arrived home from Rumspringa when this affection blossomed into something more.

Reuben entered puberty and found a new set of friends, and Marianna followed three years after. This change in their lives caused them run on separate ways, and for six long years, they barely felt the absence of each other. Upon their reunion, the sight of his now manly face brought a special kind of happiness and fondness she never felt before. And the feeling was, again, mutual.

Reuben's warm brown eyes traveled to her direction. The conversation was coming to an end, and she can't help but smile at him. Whether he was grinning in return or because he was bidding the other person a good day, she could not tell. Either way, it only reminded her how much she loved him.

"How can I be of service today, Marianna Hostetler?" he playfully said as soon as he hung up, the smile still lingering on his lips. It seemed it was her, after all, who was bringing sunshine to his world.

Marianna cleared her throat as she stood from the chair, then said, "Well, for starters, I unraveled something odd with your company's assets." She tried hard to keep a serious and concerned tone, but she can't help adding a dash of sweetness and affection.

"Let's see it," he said lightly, as he walked to her side.

Marianna set the sheets of paper on his desk. With all seriousness back on his face, Reuben leaned down and analyzed her work.

What distinguished him from the rest of his family was his comprehension of numbers. He could, to some extent, understand what these lines of digits meant, and he knew how to harness the power of this information. In other words, he was both smart and wise.

Passing down properties to younger sons was customary in their community, and people believed this was the reason why Reuben came to own his father's business. But she chose to believe it was more because he had the capabilities of a good entrepreneur. And judging by how their business had flourished since Reuben took over, she was correct.

Marianna quietly sighed. *How could a person be so perfect?*

Many times in the past had the feeling crashed over her like the waves of the ocean. And more often than not, she would submit to this desire without hesitation. At that very moment, with Reuben standing so close -- with his warmth emanating like the sun -- the same crashing feeling consumed her like fire. She itched to wrap her hands around his slim waist and rest her head on his strong wide shoulders.

But the act was something he could never appreciate. It was not proper for unmarried individuals to share such intimacy. Many had, of course, broken this rule, but Reuben was a proper Amish man.

She tore her gaze from him and fought this urge -- this craving for human touch. She was as proper as he was, she remembered. But somewhere along the way, precisely when her puberty reached its peak, this Amish decency was taken away and torn. And now, she was left to battle this unholy desire on her own.

Have you not learned enough? She thought, disgust crawling from her heart like ice.

The face of someone she would rather forget occupied her mind, and along with this came regret -- regret for all the things she had allowed herself to do for the sake of what she believed then was undying love. And same as always, when the sound of his voice and his words began ringing in her head, all the happiness in her disfigured world would drain to pain and repentance.

“Are you certain your computations are correct?” asked Reuben, pulling her from contemplation.

“Yes. Completely certain. I checked my work three times -- a first in my record -- and the total I arrived in remained the same,” she answered, all the affection in her voice gone.

There may be a shortage of physical contact in their relationship, but Reuben didn't need to hold her tight to know something was wrong. He took notice of the sudden change in her tone, and concern began etching in his eyes.

He didn't say anything for a short while. Then in a soft voice and careful tone, he said, “This isn't something that called for concern, Marianna. On the contrary, it demanded celebration.” He grinned, “For the first time since its conception, King Metal Products and Repair achieved a five digit profit before taxes.”

Marianna gave a weak smile, and in an equally weak tone she said, “I am aware of that. I only wanted to make sure there were no mistakes. My perspective of the company is limited to numbers, you see. There is no way for me to be certain if these are accurately reflected by tangible assets.”

Reuben nodded in answer, then said, “I see.” When she didn't utter a response, he let out a sigh and expressed his concern. “Marianna, I know when something is bothering you. We'll be married in two weeks, and you can tell me anything -- everything. You know for sure that I will listen and be whatever you need.”

Trying her best to push the unwanted memories away, and summoning back all the confidence she lost, she replied, “Reuben, you have been everything I had ever wanted and needed. I apologize for the sudden change of mood, but please save your worries. There is nothing to worry about, I assure you.”

Everything she said was true, except perhaps her last claim. But it was something Reuben shouldn't bother himself with. It was her own battle, and she would endure it on her own if she had to.

He measured her expression, then in equal confidence, he said, “I trust you.”

Marianna gave him a warm smile in answer, but said nothing.

“But just the same,” Reuben continued, “I want you to remember that you can ask me for anything.”

“Yes, I know. You remind me every day,” Marianna replied thoughtfully.

He grinned, “I had to. You are the most independent girl I know. If I don't make an effort to remind you, you'd go on ahead and do things without me.”

“If I have been myself before Rumspringa, that would have been true,” Marianna said, chest jokingly out in pride. But then she eased back, and added, “But don't worry, Reuben. I've changed. It may not seem apparent to you and to the community, but I have matured.”

“That much is apparent to me, Marianna.”

“And I thank you for that, Reuben,” she answered all affection back in her voice. “By the way, since you are my boss,” she changed the subject. “There is this one thing I need to ask from you.”

“Please, do tell,” he urged.

“I need to take the rest of the day off. I still have a wedding dress and four bridesmaid dresses to sew.”

Amish weddings required that the bride personally sew her wedding dress along with her bridesmaids' dresses. For the average Amish woman, the task would only require a week at most. She would have an entire day to work on it anyway. Marianna, on the other hand, may need more than two weeks for it. And the reason extends beyond the fact that she was employed.

Reuben chuckled, then teased, “Are you sure an afternoon is all you need to finish those? Considering your skills with anything related to crafting?”

Marianna furrowed her brows in offense. She knew she shouldn’t have given him a handmade jacket on his last birthday. She parted her lips, hoping for something witty to come out... but failed. In utter defeat, she shut them and pouted. Reuben knew her sewing skills all too well.

Her husband-to-be let out a hearty laugh. “I was just teasing, Marianna.”

“Of course you are. And you’re also just expressing *honest* thoughts,” she argued as she crossed her arms and turned her face away from his direction.

Reuben scratched the back of his head, unsure now how to handle the situation.

It wasn’t the first time this happened. They habitually tease each other, and Marianna loved how Reuben would always end speechless when she started acting hurt. He was so sensitive, he would always be too careful not to hurt her feelings. But it would take a lot more than that to do so. She had six brieder, and she was the only daughter. To make things worse, she was the eldest. Every day, they would gang up on her, and she would then have to endure several nasty -- *really* nasty -- remarks on everything else she does from her brieder, and all of which were mere ‘jokes’.

“Anyway,” started Reuben, defensive. “You can take the rest of the day off. If you want or need it, you can also take the rest of the week off. And not because I don’t have faith in your skills. I just want you to not overwork yourself. An ordained Amish woman shouldn’t be employed in the first place. And I’m really sorry about earlier, Marianna. I was only kidding with you.”

Her shoulders shook with silent laughter and then turned her head back to face Reuben. “I was also just kidding with you, Reuben! Come on! It’ll take something worse than that to really hurt my feelings.”

With an exhale of relief, Reuben smiled. “Thank God! I really thought you got mad for a second there.”

“You are fully aware how bad my sewing is, and yet you don’t know that about me?” said Marianna between giggles. “We tease each other almost every day. You should already know I was merely acting.”

“I know. But I had a talk with my father, you see, right after our marriage was announced. He told me that women, when turned into wives, become more sensitive. I was only heeding his warning,” Reuben answered with a shrug.

Marianna laughed harder. “Oh, Reuben! What he truly meant was, ‘when women get pregnant’. You see, when a woman conceives, and the father is not treating her well or that he’s not giving her enough attention, she’d end up crying every day.”

Like a child who was told of the difference between a man and a woman for the first time, he nodded his head. And in complete awe, he said, “Wow. You know so much about married life.”

Pause. For a moment, Marianna didn’t know what to say. The first thought that entered in her mind was the fact that she didn’t know much about married life. She just knew about pregnancy and how needy a woman becomes during. “I do. I met a few people with such problems when I wandered off a while outside the community,” she said, eyes locked on the wall behind Reuben.

He nodded. Then at the least of her expectations, his face lit up. “I forgot to tell you. My mother dropped by earlier. She said dinner at home would be special tonight, and she wanted you over.”

“Wow! That was surprising,” Marianna answered. “But jah, of course. I’d love to come over and sample that special dinner your mom will make. It’ll give me how you want your meals cooked,” she grinned.

“I do recall cooking is another skill you’re not good at.”

“Whoa! Cooking is something I’m not *that* bad at! There’s a difference.”

Reuben chuckled. “Anyway, I’d be in your house at around five-thirty. Is that okay?”

“Five thirty? Alright. But I should get going then. I still have a lot to do at home. And like what you said, an afternoon isn’t enough for me.”

“And I was also serious when I said you can take the rest of the week off. You work really hard, Marianna. But you should start focusing now more on womanly roles.”

Marianna scrunched her face at the thought of ‘female roles’. The image of her washing the dishes in one hand and holding a child in the other came to mind, and it was dreadful. She thought how horrible it must be for her child to have her as a mother.

She shook her head. Before any more ridiculous thoughts come to her head, she bid farewell to Reuben.