

MISSING
YOUR
SMILE

Jerry S. Eicher



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CHAPTER ONE



Susan Hostetler drew in her breath, her eyes drawn down the crowded street to the odd sight. *Why on earth would Amish people be coming to the Oyster Festival in Asbury Park?* she wondered. Hadn't she moved far enough away from Indiana and her Amish roots?

She resumed slicing the roast beef as an older man and his wife in front of the concession stand stared at her, waiting for their sandwiches.

"Sorry about that. Something just gave me a start," she said. "I'll have this ready in a minute."

The couple turned in the direction of Susan's gaze and then exchanged glances.

"I don't see anything," the woman muttered. "Unless it's those Amish folks."

The man shook his head. "They're pretty harmless. They're not murderers on the loose or anything." He laughed.

Susan kept her eyes away from them, laying pieces of roast beef on the bread before adding lettuce and tomatoes. Let them laugh, and let the two think what they wanted. Sure the Amish weren't murderers, but there was one of them back home who murdered the heart, but that likely didn't count in the *Englisha* world. The sad thing was, it hadn't counted much in the Amish world either. She should have burned her wedding dress instead of burying it in the cedar chest at home.

Her *mamm* had said, "It's each one's choice whom to marry." Well, Thomas had chosen, and she could also choose, regardless what anyone said about it.

“There,” she said, wrapping the two sandwiches and shoving them across the temporary counter. “You can pay at the register.”

They both raised their eyebrows and looked sideways at each other before moving toward Laura, who was working the register at the moment.

Across the street, the Amish couple was moving closer to the sandwich stand. The man was tall, his beard coming down almost to his fourth shirt button. His wife stood beside him holding a little girl. The mother was in her white *kapp* and the girl in a black bonnet—dressed just as the Amish women had done for many years. Her people would never change. But she would. And change would help the pain go away.

The crowd shifted and another young Amish couple appeared, following closely behind the first. He was round, like a short barrel, his wife skinny as a rail behind him. Neither of them carried a child. Susan caught herself hiding her face behind her hand, but then she realized how foolish it was. She no longer looked Amish without her *kapp*, and what would it matter anyway?

“We’ll take two roast beef with all the toppings,” a girl’s voice said in front of her, bringing Susan back to the booth. “*Yah*...coming right up!” She glanced at the two girls before her and tried to smile as she began the sandwiches. *What is wrong with me? Amish talk is supposed to be out of my system by now! And here I am saying yah again at the mere sight of Amish people.*

“So how are you two girls doing?” Susan asked as she laid out the bread. At least she could try being *Englisha* again.

“Okay, I guess,” one said with a shrug. “Just the usual stuff life gives you. Most of it stinks.”

The girl beside her giggled. *They can’t be out of middle school*, Susan thought. She finished wrapping the sandwiches and said, “Well, maybe these will make the day go better for you.”

The girls smirked at each other and moved down to pay Laura.

Down the street, the Amish couples were coming closer. Surely they wouldn’t stop at Laura’s stand. Susan really didn’t want to see Amish people up close right now. There were dozens of vendors lining the street. It would be the luck of the draw either way, but she was the only

one selling roast beef sandwiches, and all the Amish Susan knew sure liked roast beef.

I'm trying to be Englisha now. Even if they stop here, they won't know I used to be one of them, Susan reminded herself.

"Are you okay?" Laura asked, walking over to stand beside her.

"Oh *yah*...*yes*...of course," Susan said. "Why do you ask?"

"You were a little short with the older couple. I know this festival brings a lot of business, and we're all tired. Still, it's not good manners to be abrupt, even if we won't ever see these people again."

"I'm sorry," Susan said. "I really am. I'll try to do better."

"That's okay." Laura smiled. "You did better with the two girls. I know we can't talk with everyone, especially when things get busy, but it's a nice service touch when we can."

"I know," Susan said. And she did know. Her life so far had taught her that much.

The Amish couples paused across the street, now standing close together, their heads leaning toward each other. *How like home, so natural and at ease they are.* Susan forced herself to glance away. It would do no good to think about such things. She had left all that behind. This was her new life.

In spite of herself, she looked their way again. They were talking, their lips moving and motioning with their hands. None of them looked aware of the looks they drew from curious people around them. *Insulated, that's what they are,* Susan thought. She no longer was. The world they were so guarded against, she had welcomed. At least there was comfort in the fact that they didn't know who she was, and she didn't really know who they were.

Susan brushed the strands of her long hair back over her shoulder, tucking them under her collar. There was no time to tighten the hair band, and it would make no difference anyway. A girl without a *kapp* would be *Englisha* to them, even with her Amish-looking dress. No questions would be aroused unless they thought she looked like a Mennonite girl. And what would an Amish or Mennonite girl be doing in a concession stand in Asbury Park?

The Amish were crossing the street now, coming straight toward her.

Susan clasped her hands, daring to look at them only in the last seconds before they stood in front of her.

“Hi,” she said as casually as she could. “Can I help you? It’s a nice day, isn’t it?”

They ignored her questions as they searched the sandwich menu above her head. Quick glances between them followed, but no words.

“We’ll take four roast beef sandwiches,” the older man finally said. “With everything you have on them.” His face was younger than she’d thought now that he had come up close. It was framed by his large beard. His eyes were a piercing blue.

Susan turned and busied herself with the bread and roast beef. She reached for the lettuce, peppers, onions, tomato, and mayonnaise. *Why did the man have blue eyes? And why did they cut so deep into her? Was he a relative of Thomas’s? No, of course not. And besides, many of her people had blue eyes.*

She could tell he was watching her as she worked. She suddenly asked, “How do you want your lettuce? I can add extra pieces. And the tomatoes?” What questions. Why had she asked them?

The man didn’t seem to notice anything strange. He simply replied, “*Ach*... that’s plenty.”

“You from around here?” the large man’s wife asked with a smile.

Susan tried to keep breathing, the warning racing through her brain. *Don’t be tricked into speaking their language.*

“I live in Asbury Park for now,” she said. “I’ve been here for a few weeks.”

“You do know how to make a *gut* sandwich,” the portly man with the piercing eyes said. The large man next to him was silent, still eyeing the sign above him.

“I’m glad you think so.” Susan slid the first sandwich across the counter and turned to wrap the others. “We also have drinks. Laura will ring you up.”

“*Yah*, a Pepsi is what I want,” the large man said, pushing back his hat.

“You should drink water, that’s what I say,” his wife said.

They all laughed.

“He’s a big one,” piercing eyes said, glancing at Susan again. “We don’t work him hard enough on the farm.”

“That would be the cabinet shop,” the large one said. “We’re from Lancaster County. We’re spending the day visiting the ocean. Thanks for the sandwiches.”

They nodded, moving on toward Laura, piercing eyes producing a well-worn billfold from his front pocket. Susan watched out of the corner of her eye. They mustn’t notice her interest, but really there was no way they could even imagine the truth.

As the two couples paid and then walked away, Laura turned to Susan. “You know those people?”

“No,” Susan said, her eyes still following them.

“Nice people, the Amish are,” Laura said, watching Susan’s face. “You look frightened.”

“I’m not. Really I’m not.” Susan forced a smile, pulling her eyes away from the bonnets bobbing in the distance. She had to get over this. Wasn’t making a clean break from the past part of her plan?

“You wouldn’t know them from Indiana?”

“No.” Susan shook her head.

“I thought they might be from your home community.”

“Oh,” Susan laughed, “there are Amish all over the place.” She turned to face an approaching older couple. “Good afternoon! Are you enjoying the festival?” she asked.

“Everything except the oysters,” the man said as he ran his hand through his hair.

“He’s not much for oysters,” his wife explained. “Fix him a big, fat roast beef sandwich, if you would. No mustard and no pickles.”

“Coming right up!” Susan said. “Wheat or white bread?”

“Make that wheat,” the wife said, reaching up to run her hand over her husband’s cheek. “It’s better for him.”

“She’s just like that. A real health case of late.” He laughed, his eyes on her face.

“Well...” the wife said, stroking his cheek again.

Susan sliced the roast beef, trying not to glance at them. Her mom and dad would never act like that in public.

“Have you been married long?” she asked, laying a slice of roast beef on the bread. Another dumb question that was, but it just slipped out.

A broad smile spread across the man’s face. “Longer than you can imagine, dear.”

“It was fifty years ago, last week,” the wife said, still stroking his cheek absently. “And we just had to come back to Asbury Park to celebrate.”

“Even with the oysters.” He laughed again.

“We used to bring the children here for the festival,” the wife said, the words flowing out of her. “They always wanted to see the ocean. All three of them did. Not for swimming mind you, but just seeing the water. That’s why we never came in the summer when everyone else comes. We’d rent rooms for the day, right on the beach, and stay up most of the night listening to the waves rolling in. For farm kids, it was the highlight of their year. We’d walk the boardwalk the next day, buy sandwiches, and little things. We couldn’t afford much in those days, but we did what we could. The trip was expensive enough.”

“We have a farm well north of Philly,” he said. “Retired now. We rent out the place, and the kids are all gone on to bigger and better things. I guess farming isn’t too profitable, so I can’t blame them.”

“We decided to come back this year, just the two of us,” the wife said. “And it’s a full moon tonight. You ought to go and watch it rise yourself. There’s something special about the light on the water, almost like heaven opens up its gates for just a few minutes and lets us see inside.”

“We’re a little religious,” the man said, bobbing his head. “Hope that doesn’t offend you.”

“Oh, not at all,” Susan said, adding tomato to the sandwich. “I’m glad you told me that. I’ve never watched the moon come up over the ocean before.”

“Are you a farm girl?” he asked.

“*Yah...*” Susan felt the red run up her neck.

“I thought so,” he said, reaching for the sandwich.

“Oh, the sandwich,” Susan said, handing it to him. “I’m sorry. I was distracted for a moment.”

“Thanks for listening,” the wife said. “It was good to talk to you.”

They nodded and moved toward Laura. The man handed the sandwich to his wife before pulling out his billfold. Susan noticed it was worn and well used, the leather scuffed and even broken in spots. His fingers trembled as he extracted the bills.

“Nice talking to you,” he said, with a backward glance. Susan nodded, and they moved down the street. The woman hung onto his arm, and he slipped his hand around her waist. They disappeared into the throng.

“A nice couple,” Laura said. “The salt of the earth type. You handled them well. You’re a good listener. You’d make a good counselor. People warm up to you and spill their secrets.”

“No,” Susan said with a nervous laugh. “They probably needed someone to talk to at the moment. Besides, I couldn’t be a professional counselor. I only have an eighth grade education.”

Laura raised her eyebrows. “You dropped out? That’s too bad. You really need to finish school if you want to make a go of things. I know you like the job at the bakery, but there’s more of the world out there than what I can offer. And you need an education for it. How old are you? Twenty? I can’t remember what you told me.”

“A little more than that.”

“Well, I know a woman doesn’t like to give her age. But you do look twenty or less. It must be the farm life.”

Susan took a deep breath. “I’m not a dropout. I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“So what do you call it then? Is there an Amish word for skipping school?”

“An eighth-grade education—that’s all they give us.”

“Around here it’s called dropping out. It’s also a little more serious. Really, Susan, you ought to look into completing your schooling. You could take your GED test; study for it in your spare time. You could go from there once you passed. I might even be able to convince Robby to drive you to the community college for night classes.”

“You’ve already been more than kind,” Susan said. “But really... I don’t know about more schooling. It’s not well looked upon by the community.”

“Oh. It’s our choice, though, what each of us chooses to do with our lives,” Laura said. “And you don’t have to talk to me about your past or what you’re running from. I’m more than willing to help you get on your feet again. I don’t think the Amish community has much say in our world, do they?”

“No,” Susan said, her eyes searching the mass of people on the street. “The community’s eyes are hard to get away from though. It’s not easy.”

“I suppose not,” Laura said. “But I’ll do what I can to help. Someone once helped me when I was young and trying to start over.”

“I appreciate it more than you know,” Susan said. “I’m sure you’ve wondered why I’m here.” It was the opening Susan felt she had to give her employer. Laura deserved to be told more than what she’d confided already. Laura didn’t have to give her a job. Sure, Laura’s sister had given her a recommendation, but that didn’t mean Laura had to hire her... or rent her the little apartment above the bakery.

Laura smiled. “No, I don’t need to know, Susan. I remember what it was like trying to get a fresh foothold. Bonnie assured me you’d be a good worker, and you have been. I don’t want to pry. I’m just glad I can help.”

“I was seeing a boy. For a few years...” Susan said in spite of Laura’s words. “I loved him a lot.”

“Yes?” Laura encouraged, her voice sympathetic.

“Then he fell head over heels for my best friend, Eunice,” Susan continued, keeping her eyes on the street. “I caught them kissing each other one Sunday night when I walked out to ride home with him.”

“Lord, help us all,” Laura sighed. “So that’s the big dark secret. Here I thought—my sister notwithstanding—that you might be a murderess running from the law. Thank goodness I followed my instincts and not my fears.”

“You didn’t really think...?”

“Of course not, dear. It was a joke.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s just that, well I had to get away from the situation.”

“So why Asbury Park?”

Susan shrugged. “I worked for your sister and really liked her. After the...situation...happened, I confided in her. She suggested I come here if I wanted to start over. I thought about it, and it seemed like

a good idea. I couldn't stay at home anymore. I couldn't bear to see Thomas. The more Bonnie told me about Asbury Park, the more I thought the place sounded good—the city, the possibility of a job, the ocean nearby. Then Bonnie called you, and you said yes to interviewing and possibly hiring me.”

“Bonnie didn't tell me all that, but I guess people make big life decisions for even lesser reasons. Sorry to hear about the boyfriend. So you were in love with him?”

“More than I wish I had been.”

“Is he dating this Eunice now?”

“I don't know,” Susan said.

“He won't be showing up here some dark night looking for you?”

Susan's eyes got big.

“I'm *kidding* again!” Laura laughed.

Susan smiled. “No, I doubt Thomas would ever do that.”

“He must have been something,” Laura said. “Really, for a girl to uproot her whole life to get away. But you shouldn't feel alone. Others have gone through the same thing and thought the same things. I'll be here to help you through this if you need me.”

“I don't want to be a bother. Really I don't.”

“I know you don't. And you're not, dear. Trust me on that.”

“I'm not going back to Indiana anytime soon.” Susan turned to meet Laura's gaze.

“Then on to your new life in Asbury Park,” Laura said. “And here comes someone for a sandwich, so I think we'd best stop gabbing.”

“Hello,” Susan said as she turned to face a young man. “Can I help you?”

It is the right thing to do, she told herself, the staying in Asbury Park. It's the perfect place to start over. She had been certain since the night she arrived.

“A sandwich with all the trimmings,” the young man in front of her said.

“White or wheat bread?”

“That would be white, please.” He smiled. “White bread goes down easier.”

“I suppose so,” Susan said, returning his smile.

I really need to stop thinking about boys, Susan thought. But how does a person do that in the English world? Is merely talking with a nice boy okay? The rules seem scarce out here.

She sliced the bread, feeling the boy’s eyes on her face. He seemed decent, but she was obviously not a good judge of such things. She had thought the best about Thomas—and what a mistake that had been. She had believed him when he said their love was a pure one, placed in their hearts by God. He had called it a sanctified love.

Ha! She trembled to think that it was so sanctified as to be cast aside and trampled underfoot when his heart longed for someone else. How stupid she had been. What was it the preachers talked about Sunday morning in church? The stories of people who cast pearls in front of swine. Well, one thing was for sure—she would never look for love again. Not among her own people, at least. Thomas had cured her of that.

“Thank you,” the boy in front of her said when she handed him the sandwich. He turned to pay Laura, pulling out his billfold. It was shiny, the leather new, and even the bills inside seemed pressed and crisp.

Like my new start in life. It will be much better this way, she thought, watching him disappear into the crowd.

“Things should wrap up soon around here,” Laura said.

“The festival goes until seven, doesn’t it?” Susan asked.

“Yes, but there won’t be much call for sandwiches from now till closing time. People will start drifting into the restaurants for supper.”

“You have to stay open though.”

“But not you,” Laura said with a firm look. “Robby will be here by five. We can handle things, including cleanup.”

“But I can stay, really.”

“Thirty more minutes and then you’re gone,” Laura said. “Take some time to walk the festival or whatever else you wish to do. After all, it’s your first time, and Asbury Park is at its finest during the festival.”

“I guess it would be nice to have some time off. Perhaps I can walk out to the ocean,” Susan said.

A man approached and, after a brief look at the menu, said, “Two roast beefs.” A woman, obviously his wife, came up beside him.

“White or wheat?” Susan asked. “And what would you like on it?”

“White,” the man said. “And we’ll take just the roast beef and salad dressing. Nothing else.”

Susan watched them out of the corner of her eye, as she sliced the meat. They didn’t look happy—not like the earlier couple. Was it the farm perhaps that created love between people? Were these city people? Did love perhaps not grow in the city? They did look like city people—the man’s blue-checked shirt freshly ironed, the woman in black dress slacks.

She spread the salad dressing, glancing at them as she worked.

“That’s too much dressing.” The man’s voice was sharp. “You’ll choke us to death, not to mention what will happen to our arteries.”

“Lettuce helps the arteries—and the rest of the body,” Susan said, forcing a smile. “Shall I put on a few pieces?”

“What are you, a dietitian? Just take most of the salad dressing off.”

Susan removed most of the salad dressing, scraping it with her knife. She shook the residue into the wastebasket.

“Are you two from a farm?” she asked casually.

The man stiffened.

The woman with him laughed, punching the man in the ribs.

“There you go, Herbert. So much for incognito. The young lady sees right through your disguise.”

The man snorted. “We can’t even get into town for a day without someone smelling the barnyard on us.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that,” Susan said. “I come from a farm myself.”

The woman laughed. “We’re dairy farmers, dear. And thanks for popping Herbert’s bubble. I told him we didn’t need to spiff up, that we might as well come in our regular farm clothing.”

“Right!” he snorted, reaching for the sandwiches.

Susan pushed them across the counter, and he grabbed them with both hands. Callused hands, now that she looked.

“Sorry, I asked,” she said. “I meant no harm.”

“Don’t you worry, dear,” the woman said. “It was good for him.”

“You do keep life interesting,” Laura said, as the couple left. “I don’t think Asbury Park’s had an Oyster Festival quite like this one before.”

“I didn’t mean to offend him,” Susan said. “The question just came out.”

“You’re doing fine.” Laura patted her on the arm.

“It’s the clumsy Amish in me.” Susan’s voice quivered. “I intend to get rid of all my Amishness.”

“Now why would you want to do something like that?” Laura asked. “It’s kind of cute, if you ask me.”

“I’m getting rid of it exactly for that reason.” Susan clipped off the words. “I don’t want to be cute anymore. I don’t want to be taken advantage of and have my heart pulled out by its roots.”

“That boy must have been some heartbreaker,” Laura said, shaking her head. “Can’t say I blame you though. But don’t go trying to change too much of yourself. We need all kinds in the world, even the Amish. They are good people.”

“I’m going to change!” Susan snapped. “Whatever it takes, whatever it costs. It will be worth it. And I don’t want to ever see Thomas again.”

“Isn’t that a little violent? I thought you people were the nonviolent type? Like Martin Luther King.”

“We are—except when it comes to matters of the heart. Then you can have it torn out by the roots.”

“Well,” Laura said, “it’s not the first time a girl’s heart has been broken. Take things a little easy, and don’t be too hard on yourself. It could have been worse. You could have married the guy and found out all of this afterward.”

Susan drew in her breath at the words.

“Now here comes Robby,” Laura said. “So I guess you can go. Enjoy yourself for the rest of the afternoon. I’ll see you at the bakery tomorrow at five, as usual. Bright and early.”

“Even that’s Amish,” Susan muttered.

Her comment produced another laugh from Laura.