

The Stranger

Linda Maran

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Dedication

To my Creator, the Source of all creativity and to the late Charles D. Farrell, for all the times at your piece of the Jersey Shore.

What People are Saying

Kristen loved everything about New Jersey , especially the ocean. But life as she knows it changes. In a tragic accident she loses everything—including her identity when she finds herself living with unknown Amish relatives. In this sweet romance, Linda Maran takes a hurting girl, a heroic man, and brings them together even as the girl struggles to find herself. If you love Amish fiction, you won't want to miss this sweet tale of love and hope.

~Laura V. Hilton author of *Awakened Love* and *The Birdhouse* -Amish of Jamesport Series #3.

1

The car turned down a long dirt road that ran through a wide expanse of farmland. Silos, barns, and cows dotted the area as far as the eye could see. The road sign read, *Dillenback Road*. They made a left down a lane past a weathered black mailbox with the number, thirty-two, and the name *Wagler*, painted on it in white. Panic rushed through Kristen Esh and she turned to the driver, who'd introduced herself as Angela.

"No, no. I can't do this. Can you please drive me back? Now?"

"I'm sorry, honey. I can't. Your Aunt Elizabeth hired me to bring you here from your foster home. She said you're to be met by a family member." She stopped the car in front of a large weathered, white wooden house. "Ah, there's her son, John, on the porch. They're really nice people. You'll see."

They exited the car.

Kristen hesitated, heart pounding, and stood back with her suitcase as Angela walked over to the blond man who waved. He wore a blue shirt, patched dark blue pants, suspenders, and a straw hat. His black shoes were covered with dried mud.

Angela motioned for Kristen to come over as John walked down the porch steps.

"You're all set, Kristen. I hope to see you again soon. Bye, John." She got into her car, waved, and drove off.

"Hullo, I'm John Wagler. You must be our cousin, Kristen. Your *mamm's* attorney said you'd be here today. Are you hungry?"

Kristen was tempted to bolt and run, but the kind expression of welcome on this man's tanned handsome face made her abandon the idea. For the time being.

"Uh, hi. No. I'm not very hungry, but I guess I need to eat something. Is this where I'm going to live?" Kristen took in the farmhouse, vegetable gardens, a big whitewashed barn, and corn fields rustling in the breeze beyond it. She noted the mountains in the far background. They were the color of limes; a light new green on this bright, late June day. Storybook scenic, but not her beloved Jersey Shore. She didn't belong there.

"*Jah*, this is where you'll be living. Let me take that." John took Kristen's suitcase and led the way inside. He removed his hat and hung it on a peg in the foyer. A mass of mussed golden hair sprang free from under it.

"Sorry that my *mamm* isn't here to *velkum* you. She was called to help Irma Stoltzfus deliver her baby. She left me to wait for you." He placed the suitcase on the floor to the side of the door.

Kristen diverted her gaze from John's hair to his smiling blue eyes. "She delivers babies in homes?" Who delivered babies that way these days?

"Just helps the midwife every now and again."

She entered the kitchen, and John pointed to a chair at the large, rectangular wooden table. Kristen sat and watched as he washed his hands at a sink pump and then opened what looked like a large pantry closet that revealed a big ice chest.

"Mamm said to offer you lunch. She made

sandwiches and potato salad to go with it." He placed both on the table, and then went back to the chest and brought out a sealed pitcher of what looked like lemonade.

Kristen did a quick three sixty scan of the kitchen. "Where's the refrigerator?"

"*Daed* never got around to getting us a propane powered one. Says this way has been fine ever since he can remember. I think he just likes to cut ice in winter for our ice *haus*. Mamm's working on him though."

"Propane?"

"Jah, natural gas. No electric. We're Old Older Amish. *Ach!* We need plates, glasses and forks, jah?"

Kristen nodded, hoping her disbelief wasn't too obvious. Seemed he had some kind of an accent.

"You can use the pump here to wash up or the one in the wash room at the back of the *haus*."

"Where is the water pumped from?" When she stood to head for the one at the sink, he looked at her as if she had four heads.

"Where else? From the ground. It's plenty cold, too."

He wasn't kidding. Kristen pumped the icy water onto one hand then onto the other. She used the lump of soap that resembled colorless play-dough next to the pump, lathered, rinsed, and dried her hands on a towel hanging nearby. "Thanks. Maybe later I can take a shower?"

"Sorry, cousin. We don't have any running water. It's just the two water pumps. That's the way it is in this district. We take a weekly bath and clean up at the wash room pump in between."

"No running water? Um, so, there's no indoor bathroom?"

"*Nee*. We set up the basin in the kitchen and fill it with heated water, and..."

"No, I mean a bathroom...for when nature calls...you know..."

"Ah, the *briwwi!* Jah, we have an outhaus."

Out. House? As in outside? She'd used one when she was ten years old on a school weekend camping trip. Kristen winced. She sat again and tried to absorb what John had told her. Derick would have to rescue her from this place.

A sandwich with a dollop of potato salad on a white paper plate was set before her. She lifted the top slice of bread and frowned.

John cocked his head. A furrow tunneled in the center of his brows. "Something wrong?"

"Sorry, I don't eat ham. I'm a vegetarian."

He reached over and took her sandwich. "Here, I'll fix that."

He removed the ham and stuffed it into his own sandwich. Then he placed hers back on her plate. "Now you have a cheese sandwich instead of ham and cheese."

"But..."

"Can't be wasting food, you know." He lifted his fattened sandwich to his mouth and looked up briefly with a hint of a smirk on his face.

Kristen stared at her flimsy sandwich. "Hold on a minute. Give me your cheese then. That would be a fair trade for my ham."

John studied her with a glint in his blue eyes. "Jah, it would be." He lifted his bread, took out the cheese, and placed it on her plate. "Fair enough, then?"

"Yes, thank you." She put the cheese into her sandwich and took a bite.

John watched her. Then he chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"You said you weren't hungry."

"I'm not. But what's fair is fair."

"You are a gutsy one, Kristen. The *dochter* of an Esh for sure and for certain."

"Why is that?"

"Vell, your mamm, my mamm, and two more of your *aenties* on the Esh side all have some headstrong traits." He lifted his sandwich and peered inside it. "And to think how much I was looking forward to ham and cheese all *morgen*."

Kristen glared at him.

He burst out laughing.

"Just teasing, cousin. Enjoy your sandwich as I will mine." Kristen couldn't help but warm up to him, but she didn't feel like laughing. Not at all. She picked up her sandwich again.

"So, were you born here?" Might as well make some small talk so as not to think about the water issue and the dreaded outhouse.

"Nee. I was born in Ohio and brought here to Stone Arabia as an infant after my mamm died bringing me into the world."

Her heart tugged. She couldn't believe her own mom was gone. "I'm sorry about your mother. You're adopted then?"

"Vell, my daed had farming to tend to and there was no time to care for a *boppli*. Daed had no dochtors to do women's work and no female relatives in Ohio. I'm his first born. Your Aenti Elizabeth took me in. She was my mamm's closest friend and widowed only a year earlier. In the long run, the *gut* Lord saw to it that my daed and your aenti joined as man and wife. He

sold his farm, moved here to upstate New York, and took on this place. She became my mamm for keeps. That was nearly twenty years ago. Nee, I don't consider myself adopted."

"Then that means that you and I are not really related." He seemed like someone nice to be related to. Sort of the big brother she'd never had. Though his good looks and humor could make a girl want him for much more. She shook the thought from her mind. She didn't want to be here with him or with anyone else. Period.

John emptied his glass of lemonade. Then he cocked his head. His sky-blue eyes twinkled a hint of amusement as he jangled the ice cubes around in his empty glass.

"We aren't related by a single hair. But we'll be called cousins just the same, being that we are part of the same *familye*. That OK with you? Cousin?" His smile seemed a natural part of him as his gaze locked into hers.

"Yes. Cousin," she shot back.

John stood and began to clear the table. "Mamm will be here soon enough to show you up to your room. I have to get back to the fields now."

"OK. Thanks for the lunch." Kristen handed him her plate. John took it, nodded, and placed it in the trashcan. He grabbed his straw hat from the peg and twirled it in his hands as he walked backward until he reached the screened door, his large eyes upon her the whole time. Then he turned and darted out the door like a school boy at the ringing of the dismissal bell.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Her emotions were running high. Here she was in an unfamiliar place that would now be her home. And a

complete stranger, nice as he was, yet still unknown to her, had just fed her lunch. At least her temporary guardians had been people she'd known all of her life...her best friend's parents. But these...

The sound of footsteps rushing up the porch steps stopped Kristen's thoughts. As she stood to see who it was, two women entered the kitchen.

They both stopped short and stared in her direction.

"You must be Kristen. I'm your Aenti Elizabeth and this here is your Aenti Miriam. Ach! You're the spittin' image of your mamm when she was your age. Ain't so, Miriam?"

Aunt Miriam gave a nod.

"I trust that John velkumed you and gave you some lunch? He seemed in an awful hurry. I thought he'd wait for us."

"He gave me the lunch you prepared. Thank you. He said he had to get back to work."

Aunt Miriam motioned for Aunt Elizabeth to step back out on the porch, her light blue eyes wide on Kristen.

Kristen stared back, amazed that these women dressed in long dresses, aprons, and head coverings were her mother's sisters. Why had Mom never told her that she was Amish? All she'd ever said was that her dad had gone off not long after they'd been married and never returned. Was he Amish, too?

Aunt Miriam wore gray and Aunt Elizabeth, blue, both with brown aprons. For now the gray and blue helped Kristen keep their identities straight.

Her 'gray' aunt spoke hushed words to her 'blue' one, but her whispers rose loud enough through the screened door for Kristen to hear. Although she didn't

understand the German-like language, the disapproval was evident in Aunt Miriam's tone.

Tears welled up in Kristen's eyes. Her mother and Ross were killed in a boating accident the day after school let out, three months before her eighteenth birthday, and now one of her aunts, Miriam in gray, obviously spoke about her as if she had the plague.

The feeling of being passed off to unknown relatives her mom didn't have anything to do with wasn't a good one. She'd been totally accepted while she stayed with Cindy's parents and was so happy that Social Services approved her temporary residence there. *Temporary*, being the key word.

Aunt Miriam and Aunt Elizabeth walked back into the house.

"Come, Kristen, let's get you settled while Aunt Miriam starts on dinner. She comes over a couple times a week and makes our childhood favorites. Ach, such a gut cook!"

Kristen followed Aunt Elizabeth up the stairs to a small, modest bedroom down the hall. It contained one bureau of drawers, a twin sized bed covered with a pretty green and yellow quilt, and a nightstand holding what looked like an oil lamp. An opened screened window adorned with a simple, sheer white curtain tied to one side faced the fields. Just about the same size room she'd had at Cindy's, except this room didn't have a TV.

"This is your room. We'll be getting a small desk in here for letter writing and such."

And for her laptop.

"Thanks. It's a nice room." But why would her mom want her in a place where she wasn't welcome?

"Now, you rest up, and I'll call you for supper. I'm

making something special *tonacht*." Aunt Elizabeth fluffed up the pillow on the bed, and then turned to her with bright hazel eyes.

Such pretty eyes. The same shape as Mom's, only Mom's were brown, like hers.

"Will the others be here soon?" Kristen took a seat on the bed and discreetly wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans.

"Jonas, your *onkel*, is working with John out in the fields. Mary is working at the Farm Style Diner. And Daniel is helping out at Joseph Beiler's woodworking shop just outside of town 'til four o'clock. Then he helps his daed and *brudder* with the farm work. They'll all be home for the evening meal. Our little Anna is over at her friend's haus the next farm over. Ach! She is so excited to meet her *Englisch* cousin."

Not like Aunt Miriam. How could Mom do this to her?

"Is there a fan? It's kind of hot." That was an understatement.

"We have a battery one. I'll bring it up. No electric in our haus. You know that, don'tcha?"

"Oh, right. John mentioned that at lunch. How come you guys can't use electricity?"

"It's our way. You'll learn more about it in time. There's a wonderful, gut breeze through the open window. Now, let me bring you that fan and a *nachtgown* for *tonacht*. You'll be cooler once the sun goes down."

Aunt Elizabeth returned quickly with a small fan, a long, white cotton nightgown, and an armful of dresses.

"Being that you're part of the familye now, it's best if you wear some of these dresses around here.

Mary sewed them up for you. Slacks are not fitting for Amish *maidles*."

"But I'm not Amish! I brought my own clothes. There's nothing wrong with them where I come from. I have some dresses, too, if that'll be better." Kristen was downright insulted.

"Jah, sure, you can wear your own dresses, so long as you don't wear those tight jeans. Best to keep these dresses here just the same. You might need them if you come with us to Preaching, and it will make Mary happy to see them put to gut use."

She wouldn't be caught dead in those dresses. No girl her age would. At least, not a non-Amish one.

"Do I have to go to Preaching? Is that church or something?"

"Jah, it's our church service every other Sunday, held at the haus of a different familye each time. We'd like to have you join us as part of the familye. Even if you don't understand the High German, you'll be with the People on the Lord's Day. And you'll be meeting girls your age afterward, at the common meal."

Like she'd have anything to talk about with them! Mom, *what were you thinking?*

"Maybe one day," was all Kristen offered. Just enough to let Aunt Elizabeth know that she wasn't interested. Not now. Not ever! "If you don't use electricity that must mean that computers are off limits, too, right?" Kristen could barely control her mounting panic. Her laptop was in her suitcase.

"Vell, we can speak to Bishop Ebersol about that. Maybe he can arrange for you to go to an English neighbor to use a computer, or you can use one at the public library in town. We cannot have one in our home. It's *verboden*."

“Ver-what?”

“Verboden. Forbidden.”

“But I have...” *one in my suitcase.* “Never mind.” Unreal. How could she be happy living here? She probably had a hundred notifications on Facebook already. Maybe this was all a dream, and Mom would wake her from the sofa when she turned off the TV on her way to bed. In air conditioning. After Kristen’s nightly swim in the ocean...with Derick.

~*~

A gentle nudge on the shoulder gave Kristen pause as to where she was. “Mom? OK, I’ll go up to bed.”

She received another nudge. This time she sat up and looked over at the source of the gentle push.

A small girl with honey-blonde braids stood there, wearing a sheer white head covering and a blue dress and apron. A miniature version of Aunt Elizabeth, except that her hair wasn’t tucked into a bun, and her dress was a lighter shade of blue.

Oh, no! This wasn’t a dream.

“Hi, I’m Anna. And you’re Kristen, my English cousin. Mamm said to wake you from your nap for supper.”

The little girl’s eyes shone with excitement and wonder.

“You have a pretty smile, Anna.” Kristen felt a pull on her heart. No one ever made a big deal about her before. She wouldn’t take her mood out on her sweet, young cousin.

The girl blushed, took Kristen’s hand and tugged. “Let’s go downstairs. We’ll be eating soon, and I

helped prepare the meal. Mamma said we can sit next to each other. Do you like fried chicken?"

"Um, I'm sure it'll be good." No need to explain her eating habits. She had no intention of staying long enough for them to question her choices. At least at Cindy's house, she was still able to see Derick. She'd text him later. He'd rescue her from all of this. He had to.

2

As Kristen and Anna entered the kitchen, two strapping men pulled out chairs and sat themselves at the table. Both wore blue shirts with the sleeves rolled up, darker blue overalls, and black work shoes.

Kristen looked toward the door and saw their straw hats hung on the pegs.

Aunt Elizabeth gave both the older and younger man wet cloths to wipe their faces and hands and then motioned for Kristen to sit across from them.

“Velkum, Kristen Esh, Emily’s dochter. I am your Onkle Jonas, and this here is your cousin, Daniel.”

Kristen nodded, not too comfortable having Uncle Jonas and her cousin looking her over as if she were some kind of oddity. Not to mention Aunt Miriam’s ongoing glances of disapproval.

“Forgive the staring, niece, but we never had an Englisch relative that we know of. Your Mamm left these parts many years ago, when she was just a couple years older than yourself. We never heard from her after that.”

“So, why would she want me to live here if she didn’t stay?”

“Better left unsaid,” Aunt Miriam muttered.

Aunt Elizabeth paid no mind to the remark, not even looking Aunt Miriam’s way to acknowledge it. She simply said, “Because we are your relatives, and your mamma knew we’d still be in Stone Arabia since

our familye has been here for three generations now.”

Kristen shrugged, her question still not answered.

“Did your *vadder* have any relatives?”

Aunt Miriam got up and walked toward the pantry, shaking her head back and forth as Aunt Elizabeth waited on Kristen’s reply.

“I don’t know anything about him. Mom told me he left before I was born, and they were married only for a short time. One day I might look into finding out who he is.” She’d thought they’d know something. Guess her dad wasn’t Amish. What a relief.

“Vell, no matter,” Aunt Elizabeth was quick to say. “You’ve been through a rough patch, and it’s time to get you on the mend. A gut meal is a start, jah?”

Kristen nodded.

John walked in.

Butterflies swarmed Kristen’s stomach at the sight of him. Odd.

“Sorry I’m late. I lost track of time finishing the mending of the fence behind the barn.” His blue eyes momentarily locked on to Kristen’s gaze.

“It’s gut that the rain held off. Did you bring the tools back then?” Uncle Jonas gave John a lopsided frown as if he knew the answer.

“Nee. I have to get back out there right after supper to gather them up. I won’t let them rust if it rains, Daed.” Uncle Jonas nodded and unfolded his napkin, apparently a signal for them to bow their heads and say grace.

As Kristen bowed her head with the rest of them, she found herself wishing her father hadn’t left them so she could have witnessed similar displays of family gatherings at her home. She remembered how she’d even hoped that Ross and her mom would fall in love,

and how sad she'd been that it hadn't happened that way. What had she expected? He was the employer, and her mom was the live-in help. Nothing more to it, other than a friendship of sorts.

Someone cleared their throat and broke Kristen's reverie.

Then Aunt Elizabeth began passing the food.

Anna offered the platter of chicken to Kristen. She took it and held it for a long moment.

John looked over at her. No hint of teasing this time. "Kristen is a vegetarian."

Everyone looked over at him and then at Kristen.

"She told me at lunch today," he explained. "She traded her ham for my cheese. It worked out gut."

"Vell then, you'll enjoy the creamed potatoes and stewed zucchini." Aunt Elizabeth didn't seem affected by the news one way or another.

Kristen passed the platter back to Anna.

"Seems to me that the gut Lord gave us animals for our food. Why do you not eat them, Kristen?" Unlike her aunt, Onkle Jonas looked at her with both curiosity and what seemed like disapproval.

"I think if less people ate meat, we would have more land to grow other foods and be able to feed hungry people in the world that way. Cows and sheep take up a lot of land for grazing and to grow the food they're fed if they're factory farmed."

"Jah, in the Englisch world, but not these chickens," John told her. The teasing returned.

"And I coated all the pieces," Anna chimed in.

A twinge of guilt coursed through Kristen for disappointing Anna. She hadn't been a vegetarian 'til Derick urged her to join the Green Team at school.

"OK. Being that it's different with these chickens,