

Trading Secrets

a novel

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Melody Carlson, *Trading Secrets*
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1

How am I supposed to get out of this mess?” I stare glumly at the letter lying open on my best friend’s unmade bed. I came to Lizzie for some helpful advice, or at the very least some sympathy, but now I wonder why I even bothered.

“Just tell him the truth,” Lizzie says for the second time. Her focus has switched from me to her fingernails. Hunched over like a troll, she applies a sleek coat of turquoise polish, then pauses to examine her work as she puffs on them.

“Seriously?” I stand up and wave the neatly written one-page letter in the air with dramatic flare. “Do you not get that Zach is this really sweet and sensitive guy who thinks I’m a—”

“If he’s sweet and sensitive, he should understand.” She looks up at me with a blasé expression.

“Understand?” I begin to pace back and forth across the small space of her cluttered bedroom floor. Why doesn’t she get how serious this is?

“Uh-huh.” Lizzie nods as she stands. She goes over to the mirror above her dresser and starts to primp.

“No, you don’t understand.” I hover behind her, watching

impatiently as she brushes her dark caramel-colored hair into place. She recently had it relaxed and it looks really sleek. Much sleeker than my messy curls that haven't seen a hairbrush since yesterday. The two of us are best friends, but we look nothing alike. While Lizzie's skin is the color of latte, and her eyes are golden amber, I have brunette hair and dark brown eyes that stand out in stark contrast to my pale Irish complexion. Where she's delicate and petite, I am tall and athletic.

"Don't you get this?" I demand. "Zach is absolutely certain that I'm a boy, Lizzie! For more than six years he has completely believed my little myth. This whole time he's been writing to me—conversing with me like I'm his best friend—like *I'm a boy*."

"Okay, I get it. So he thinks you're a boy." She reaches for a hot pink tube of mascara, clearly more concerned over her appearance than her best friend's awkward predicament.

I slump back onto her bed in defeat. "That's not all," I mutter hopelessly. "I mean, Zach has really, really trusted me. He's shared all kinds of stuff with me. It would be so awkward for him to find out . . ." I pause as I realize my mistake of oversharing.

"What kind of 'stuff'?" Lizzie turns to me with highly arched brows and way too much interest. I have no doubt I've said too much.

"Never mind." I divert my eyes as I refold the letter.

"Come on, Micah." She eagerly sits back down on the bed next to me. "Tell me what a teenage Amish boy writes about. Please? I'm dying to hear this. What kind of stuff? I mean, I know a little about the Amish, but what exactly does Zach write to you about? Some deep dark Amish secrets?"

“Why don’t you ask your own Amish pen pal for Amish insider information?” I challenge her.

“Very funny.” She folds her arms across her front, glaring at me like she’s enraged even though I know she’s faking it. Just the same, I give it right back to her—engaging in a stare down just like we used to do when we were ten. So mature.

As we silently stare at each other, I remember how Lizzie and her pen pal quit writing each other shortly after our fifth-grade assignment began. In fact, most of the kids in our class never wrote more than a letter or two to our new friends in Holmes County. I’d wager that I’m the only one who’s kept up the correspondence this long. And I’m fairly certain that was only because I was writing to a boy—a boy of about the same age as me. What better way to figure out how a guy’s mind works? Even if he is Amish.

Sure, I realized from the get-go that Zach assumed I was a boy when he selected my letter. A natural conclusion thanks to my name. After all, who names their daughter Micah? It probably hadn’t helped that since I was such a tomboy, my initial letter had been about baseball and bikes and flying with my dad in his single-engine Cessna. But it’s not like I intentionally tried to pass myself off as a boy. In fact, Miss Gunderson had even sent photos with our introductory letters, and I’m sure I wore something pink that day. We later discovered that the Amish teacher had removed all the pictures before letting her students pick a pen pal. I assume that’s because the Amish believe it’s wrong to be photographed. But that’s all water under the bridge now.

“Come on, Micah.” Lizzie breaks our stare down. “Don’t you remember how boring my Amish pen pal was? Her letters were a total snooze. Who could blame me for dropping her?”

“You didn’t really try. You only wrote a few times,” I remind her. “It’s not like you gave the poor girl much of a chance.”

“All Rachel Yoder ever wrote to me about was cooking and sewing and a cat named Muffin.” Lizzie rolls her eyes as she snatches my letter from me. “It was amusing at first, but it got old quick. I’m sure poor Rachel only got more boring.” She eagerly extracts the letter from the envelope. I don’t really care if she reads it. It’s not like Zach wrote anything personal this time. Besides, I’m relieved to finally get her full attention. Maybe she’ll recognize the urgency of my situation and offer some support.

“You never know, your pen pal might’ve changed over the years,” I point out. “Rachel Yoder might be totally fascinating by now.”

“She’s probably married with a baby on her knee.” Lizzie snickers. “Can you imagine being married at seventeen? Although, as I recall, she was a year younger than me. But she could still be married at sixteen. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Or she might just be enjoying the freedom of being a teenager. According to Zach, this is the best time of Amish life. And from what he writes, the teens in his settlement aren’t all that different from us. In fact, I’ve heard that some Amish kids get pretty wild during their *rumspringa* time. A lot wilder than you or me.”

“I know all about that.” Lizzie waves her hand as she curiously pores over my letter. She’s devouring it as if she expects to uncover some juicy morsel. “I’ve seen the Amish on TV.”

“Yeah, right.” I’m well aware of her addiction to several reality shows.

“*You invited him to visit you?*” Lizzie points victoriously

to a line in the letter. “So why are you surprised that he wants to come? He’s simply taking you up on your offer.”

“I invited him to come up here *years* ago,” I explain. “We’d only been writing a few months at the time, and Zach was really into airplanes. Since my dad was a pilot, well, I just kind of tossed that out to him.” I let out a long sigh. The truth was that I’d been worried his interest in me was waning. I’d probably been a little desperate and lonely and needy. Zach’s letters have always been a vital part of my life—especially right after my mom died, because it was Zach who helped me to find hope again. Why wouldn’t I want to keep the pen pal relationship going? And Zach’s keen interest in flying seemed like a good lure to keep him on the line.

“Uh-huh.” She gives me a somewhat dubious look as she dangles the letter in front of my nose. “Then how did he happen to know about spring break? You had to have told him about it, Micah.”

“Yeah, I probably mentioned that spring break was coming and that I didn’t have any big plans,” I admit. Why is she grilling me like this? As if it’s my fault. “But honestly, I never asked him to come here during spring break.”

“You’re sure about that? Maybe it was a Freudian slip.” Her eyes narrow with suspicion. “Maybe you really wanted him to come see you, Micah.”

“Honestly, Lizzie, when I invited him to come visit, a long time ago, we were both kids, and I knew his parents would never let him come. It’s not like he could travel on his own. Seriously, how would a twelve-year-old Amish boy figure out how to get a horse and buggy all the way from Holmes County to Cleveland all by himself?”

“Apparently he never forgot about your invitation.” She drops the letter into my lap as if it’s a hot potato. Maybe it is.

“So what do I do about it now?”

“Tell him *you’re a girl*.”

“But what if he hates me for tricking him these past six years? What if he cuts me off completely and I never get to meet him . . . and what if he never writes to me again?” The idea of not getting letters from Zach puts a solid lump in my throat.

“I guess you should’ve thought of that sooner.” She slowly shakes her head with a serious look in her golden eyes.

“I came here for your help,” I remind her, “not for another lecture.”

“*Another* lecture?” She tilts her head to one side. “So what’d your dad say about all this? Did he even know that your pen pal assumed you’re a boy?”

“Yeah, I told him all about it years ago. He’s always been kind of amused by it, but when I told him about Zach’s possible visit, he said I should just let him come out. Then he lectured me about not being honest and how I’m going to reap what I sowed.” I refold the letter, sliding it back into the plain white envelope. “I know he’s right. And you’re right too.” I let out another sigh. “I guess that’s what I’ll do.”

“You’ll tell him in a letter?”

“What else? It’s not like I can text him or call him on the phone.”

“Some Amish kids have cell phones. I saw it on a reality show.”

I roll my eyes. “Really? And you believe everything you see on these reality shows? None of it is staged, right?”

She laughs. “Good point.” She pulls up a calendar on her iPad. “You know, spring break is only a week away, Micah.

And I've heard that snail mail is incredibly slow and unreliable these days. You'd better write that letter and get it sent to him ASAP, girl."

"Believe me, I know." Suddenly I'm pondering a new idea. "But what if Zach didn't get my letter in time? Would that be so bad, really? I mean, what if the letter arrived late and Zach just went ahead and came here anyway, without hearing back from me? Then once he was here, I could simply confess the obvious—that I'm a girl—duh. But that way I'd actually get to meet him face-to-face."

"Micah Janine Knight!" Lizzie gives me her grim parental expression. "You would really do that to this poor guy? Get him out here under false pretenses and then blindside him like that? Hang the unsuspecting Amish boy out to dry?"

"Well . . . only if it was too late to get a letter to him . . . and if I couldn't help it."

"You just really want to see him, don't you?" She smiles slyly. "Whatever it takes to get your eyes on him."

"That's *not* it." I turn away to avoid her penetrating gaze. I know she can see right through me.

"Come on, Micah, tell the truth. You're curious. You just want to get a look at him, *don't you?*"

I shrug, running my thumb over the postage stamp. "Well, can you blame me for being a little interested? I mean, we've been writing faithfully for six years, and it's not like I could ask him to send me a snapshot. I am absolutely clueless as to his appearance."

"You've never asked him about any of that? Hair color? Eye color? Anything?"

I frown at her. "Seriously, does that sound like the kind of thing a guy would ask another guy about?"

She chuckles. “Maybe not. So . . . what do you *think* he looks like? I mean, based on his letters and how he writes to you? Can you imagine him at all?”

I feel my cheeks warm as I recall how many times I have imagined him. In my mind’s eye he looks just like Brad Pitt. Okay, a much younger Brad Pitt. “No,” I declare. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“Has he ever written anything about his appearance? Like if he wears glasses? Or how his hair is cut? Or how he’s built?”

“No, of course not. Why on earth would Zach write about that kind of stuff to his *guy* friend?”

She laughs. “Yeah, I guess not.”

“The truth is, I could see Zach walking down the street and not even know it was him.” The mere thought of this is disturbing. How can I know someone this well and still be unable to recognize him? “For all I know, Zach could be a ninety-pound weakling with crooked yellow teeth and zits and thick glasses and stringy, greasy hair.” I feel guilty as soon as I say this. “But it wouldn’t matter. I’d still like him just the same. I’d still consider him my good friend.”

“And if he was a hottie?”

“Well . . . I wouldn’t hold that against him either.” I giggle nervously.

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t.” She points an accusing finger at me. “But would you honestly want him to come here under false pretenses?”

“Absolutely not. I plan to write back to him, Lizzie. Probably as soon as I get home. If necessary I’ll send my letter in some kind of special mail to make sure it reaches him on time. Although our letters only take a few days to get back and forth . . . usually.”

“But you do want to meet him, don’t you?”

“Sure. Why shouldn’t I?”

She makes a knowing grin. “You’re really into him, aren’t you, Micah? I’ll bet you’ve been secretly crushing on this boy for years.”

“No,” I say quickly. “That’s not true. Zach’s just a really, really good friend. We’ve shared all kinds of stuff with each other. Like after my mom died and I was having a hard time and Dad was uber-busy with work . . . Well, Zach was the only one I felt like I could talk to back then. He helped get me through all of that. I never would’ve survived that summer without him. He was my lifeline.”

“Even more than me?” Lizzie looks slightly hurt.

I suddenly realize this is a subject we’ve never fully addressed. To be honest, I have forgiven Lizzie for it, but I have never quite forgotten. “Don’t you remember how distracted you were that summer, Lizzie? You were so smitten with Matthew Sinclair that you could hardly see straight, let alone console your best friend. No offense, but you weren’t much help when I needed you right then.”

The corners of her mouth turn down. “Yeah, you’re probably right. I’m sorry about that, Micah. And as I learned the hard way, Matthew was so not worth it—not in the least. He was a total loser . . . not to mention a user.”

“I know. That’s all in the past now.” I give her a reassuring smile. “But just the same, Zach was there for me when I needed him. I poured out my heart to him in these great long letters—page after page, I just let it all come out. And even though his letters weren’t nearly as long-winded as mine, the things he wrote back were amazingly comforting. Zach really helped me to solidify my faith in God that summer. He

helped me to believe in heaven and to accept that my mom was really there.” I press my lips tightly together as I recall how hard that summer was for me, how alone I felt at times. I remember how I’d run to check the mailbox every day at the same time, hoping there was a letter for me. “Zach really kept me from going under.”

“That’s cool.” Lizzie nods with sad eyes. “And I’m trying not to be jealous of him. Because really, I’m glad that Zach was such a good friend to you . . . especially when I wasn’t.”

“Yeah . . . Me too.” I feel precariously close to tears now. Not just because of the memories of those difficult months, but because it feels like something really special could be coming to an end—a swift and bitter end that I’m not ready for.

“You really were lucky to have Zach for your pen pal all this time,” Lizzie says quietly. “I guess I didn’t even realize it until now.”

“I know, and I’m thankful for it. But I’m just not ready to lose him as a friend, you know? It’s hard. Really hard.”

We both get quiet now, like neither of us knows what more to say. And, really, what is there? I’m not even sure why I thought running over to Lizzie’s house and dumping on her like this would make any difference or change anything. What can she possibly say or do to change this mess I’ve created? Furthermore, what can I do? I slowly stand and thank her for listening, then make an excuse to leave.

As I meander the several blocks back home to our condo, I realize how hopeless this is. Did I honestly believe I could preserve a relationship that’s mostly built upon lies? Never mind that the Amish aren’t even supposed to be in contact with the “English.” Seriously, what was I thinking? It’s clear that I’ve been stuck in a childish daydream. I should’ve known

it was just a matter of time before my little charade blew up in my face.

When that happens—which will be sooner rather than later—it seems inevitable that someone will get hurt. And I'm not just talking about Zach either, although I do hate the idea of hurting him, and I know that once he discovers I'm a girl, he will shut down completely. If there's one thing I understand about the Amish, it's that they have a big fat dividing line that separates the sexes. Men sit on one side of the room, women on the other. At social functions, they even eat separately. Okay, so I watch a little reality TV too. As a result, I should've known ages ago that a friendship like I've had with Zach could not last. It's not like I'm an idiot. According to my GPA and some of my teachers, I'm rather smart, at least about some things, but I've been a total fool about this.

As I unlock the door to the condo, it's crystal clear that both Lizzie and Dad are 100 percent right. I have to tell my pen pal I'm not a boy, and the sooner the better. Zach deserves to know the truth, and I'll just have to deal with the consequences.