

The Amish Groom

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*For the Akamines
Brian, Tracey, Hannah, and Emiko
with love and thanks
for your faith and your friendship*



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ONE

The surface of the pond was glassy smooth, a deep liquid oval beckoning through the trees. I headed down the path, my dog at my side. When we reached the clearing, Timber darted forward, chasing a duck into tall reeds. I came to a stop right at the edge of the water, work boots and pant cuffs damp from the morning dew, and paused to take it all in.

This secluded little farm pond was always so striking, so peaceful, but never more so than at this time of day, when the sun was just coming up—not to mention at this time of year, when the trees lining its banks offered riotous bursts of reds and yellows and oranges among the green. Whatever the season, I could never get enough of it. The fish that darted in and out of sight below. The dense and rocky overgrowth on all sides. The weeping willow at the far end, its branches dangling down to the water, tickling the surface.

I set down the tools and other items I was carrying and then turned my face upward just as the sun broke across the stillness. I watched as the horizon lost its sleepy purple cast, turning auburn. There wasn't a cloud in sight, and I knew a perfect day lay in store for my cousin Anna's wedding. As if on cue, Timber barked from somewhere off to my right,

reminding me that there was much to do between now and then. Time to get to work.

Not far away, the old wooden rowboat rested upside down on the grass where I'd left it the last time I'd used it, the oar tucked securely underneath. I flipped it over and brushed out a few spiders who'd been living inside. Then I put the oar and the stuff I'd brought into the small craft and slid to the water. When it was all loaded, I glanced around for Timber and was glad to see that although the duck had flown off, the yellow lab was now fully occupied with sniffing his way around the pond's perimeter.

I placed one foot in the boat's hull and gently pushed off with the other, the small vessel cutting through the water with ease. When it slowed about ten feet short of my goal, I lowered the oar into the water and paddled toward the buoy that floated near the center of the pond. As I did, I breathed in the new morning air, filling my lungs with its earthy, October fragrance.

According to my grandmother, this pond had been my mother's favorite place to go when she was young and wanted to be alone with her thoughts. She had come here often, and I had a feeling I knew why. When the morning sun slashed across the top of the trees on mid-autumn dawns like this one, I could see my reflection in the water as clear as in the mirror in my bedroom back at the farmhouse, as if there were another me beyond the surface, looking back. I was always drawn to that other place, to the what-ifs of it all. No doubt my mother, who was so full of wanderlust, had felt the same.

Easing the boat alongside the buoy, I brought it to a stop once the floating brown orb was within easy reach. I rested the dripping plank beside my feet, gave the straw hat on my head a pat to make sure it was secure, and then slid my hands into the cold water, feeling under the buoy for the rope. Grasping it, I began to pull slowly upward, working my hands along the taut line, wishing I'd thought to wear gloves for a better grip. The more I pulled up, the slimier it grew, coating my palms in a nasty brown goo that smelled of mud and dankness and rot.

I'd known last spring that something needed to be done when the ice

began to melt away and I'd spotted more than a few silver, bloated bodies floating sideways in the black water. Too many fish had not survived the winter, which confirmed what I'd suspected for a while, that there was a problem with the aerator.

Not that this pond mattered all that much in the grand scheme of things. No one ever even bothered with it except me anyway—and, in her youth, my mother. Hidden among the trees on a far back corner of my grandparents' farm, it was no longer necessary once wells were dug on the farm, but that didn't mean it was unimportant—at least not to me—or that it could be ignored. Busy with my work in the buggy shop, I'd managed to put off dealing with the issue for months. But now that fall was here, and another winter just around the corner, I knew it was time to get this thing repaired.

As I pulled on the rope, an old airstone emerged from the surface, with long strands of what looked like seaweed dangling down from its round head. I put it into my lap—wetness, slime, and all—pressed my elbow against the boat's rim to hold the tubing in place, and then grabbed the wrench to disconnect the rusting adapter. After considerable effort, I finally broke the valve free. The rest of the installation was easy by comparison, and soon I had the new diffuser attached and ready to go, while the old one lay in a puddle at my feet.

I released my elbow hold on the tubing, gripped the rope, and began lowering the new diffuser into the water a little bit at a time.

I wasn't sure how long it would take for the bubbles to start appearing at the surface, but I didn't mind sitting in the boat, waiting. My time was usually spent in quiet reflection, standing on the bank, but being here in the middle of the pond was giving me a unique vantage point, so I took in the scenery, gulping it down like liquid to a thirsty man.

For years I'd been coming to the pond once every few weeks or so, but lately I'd found my way down here almost daily. As blessed as I was to have this place where I could escape and contemplate life in private, I knew the increase in frequency didn't bode well. My mind had become such a jumbled mess, and it seemed all I wanted to do was be alone to think and pray and try to make sense of the conflict raging inside of me.

Much as my mother had done, long before I was born.

Not far from the path, a cluster of rocks and boulders formed a natural sort of sitting area, and I often imagined her as a young woman, perched there and doing the very same thing, begging God for clarity and direction as she tried to soothe her troubled soul. She had been just eighteen years old when she turned her back on the farm for good, leaving behind her parents and siblings and the Amish life she no longer wanted. She'd thrown in her lot for a life among the *Englisch*, eventually marrying my dad, moving to Europe, and giving birth to me.

Then she died, suddenly and unexpectedly, when I was just six years old.

After that, I had been her family's consolation prize, so to speak. The little boy with the football jerseys and blue jeans who had known a smattering of Pennsylvania Dutch but otherwise hadn't a clue what it meant to be Amish. At my newly widowed father's request, my grandparents had taken me in right after the funeral, an arrangement that was supposed to have been temporary. But here I was, all these years later, still in the same place, living on the same farm my mother had lived on, sleeping in the same room that had been hers, and spending time at the same pond that had drawn and captivated her. I had accepted my lot and the fact that my dad found a new life with a new wife—and even a new son—without me. I'd see them now and then, but for all intents and purposes *Mammi* and *Daadi* were more like parents than grandparents to me. For that matter, the aunt and uncles I'd grown up with—Sarah, Thom, Eli, and Peter—were more like sister and brothers. Even Jake, who was a mere six months older than I, was technically my uncle, even though we felt and acted like brothers.

That very first day I arrived, I had traded in the jerseys and jeans for broadfall trousers and plain white shirts and had been raised Amish from then on. My dad had remained peripherally involved in my life even after he remarried and became a father a second time, but I had now been living here, on this farm, for seventeen years. At twenty-three, I was on the verge of big decisions that would determine the rest of my life, my future, my path—whether *Englisch* or Amish.

And I'd never been more perplexed.

Before she left here for good, my mother had been confused as well. I knew that much from what I'd been told by her brother Thom, who had been sixteen at the time. As a child, I hadn't known much about my mother at all, or at least not the person she was when she lived in this world. She had never talked much about her years growing up Amish. I don't remember her telling me about the house, or the smell of the horses' tack, or the sounds the buggies made when their wheels rolled on pavement, or how quiet the dark was on winter nights.

Most of what I knew about my mother I had learned from my aunt and uncles and from *Daadi* and *Mammi*. They told me she loved peaches and jonquils and her horse, Nutmeg, and the first snowfall. That she liked surprises and twirling and laughter.

Even though she had never joined the church, they would always see her as Amish. I looked Amish too, but lately it seemed as though underneath the Plain clothes and the hat and the language, there was a different man. Rachel Hoeck, who was the closest friend I had besides Jake, said I was as Amish as any man born right here in Lancaster County. I grew up here. I went to school here. I'd worked in my grandfather's buggy shop since I could tighten a bolt. I was on the verge of church membership and baptism. At twenty-three I was more than old enough to take my vows as an Amish adult—vows of commitment to the Amish life and vows of marriage to an Amish bride. Those faraway years when I lived in the *Englisch* world were just that, Rachel would say—far away. But how could she know? I'd never brought her here at the crack of dawn. She'd never seen the man in the pond who stared back at me with questioning eyes. Then again, if she did see him, I knew what she would say to me.

That is just your reflection, Tyler. That's you. The Amish man I love.

And I would want to believe her.

But there would be this tugging inside me, as there was every time I came to the pond now, pulling at all that I knew to be true of me. As though a loose thread was in the grasp of something or someone who wanted to yank it free...

My thoughts were interrupted by the subtle sound of a hundred tiny bubbles breaking on the surface.

A beautiful sight. The diffuser was doing just what it should.

I rowed back to shore, returned the rowboat and oar to the tall grass, and whistled for my dog. Then I gathered my things and started up the path toward home, Timber trotting alongside. I knew I should have felt good. After all, the aerator was working again, it was a beautiful morning, and God's presence was everywhere. But up ahead, as the farmhouse came into view, I felt a surge of emotion I couldn't even name. Loss? Joy? Hope? Fear?

Maybe all of the above, simultaneously?

My mind again went to my mother and one of the few memories I had of her, the first time she ever told me about this pond. We'd been far from here—a world away, in fact—but the way she talked, that small body of water had come as alive as if I'd been standing on its banks myself.

I had been in my bed, crying because there was a thunderstorm outside and lightning was scissoring over the house as though it wanted to slice me in two. My mother was sitting on my bed, trying to convince me the storm couldn't hurt me. Then, to take my mind off what was happening outside the window, she began telling me all about the pond, her favorite place on the farm where she grew up. She went on and on, finally concluding her elaborate description with the words, "You can see a different world in the water. It's like there's always another place besides the one where you are."

I hadn't known what she meant by that, but I remember asking her if there was thunder and lightning at that other place too.

She chuckled softly. "Every place has something about it we would change if we were in charge."

Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes now as I walked, trying to picture my mother's pretty face from that night, her gentle hands as she smoothed the covers around me. But then a voice echoed across the silence and the image tumbled away, back to the unseen place where I kept all of my memories hidden—or at least my memories of her.

"Tyler!"

I opened my eyes to see Jake watching me from where he stood in the drive, arms crossed over his chest. He and I were supposed to have loaded some additional benches we'd made in the buggy shop into the wagon first thing so that right after breakfast we could deliver them over to the Bowmans' farm for Anna's wedding. But my task at the pond had taken longer than I'd expected, leaving him to do the loading all by himself. I felt guilty, as I knew my errand could have waited for a more appropriate day. To be honest, I had probably just used the diffuser replacement as an excuse to get down to the pond this morning and have a little time to myself.

I gave him an apologetic smile and a shrug, and though I could tell he was about to lay into me, when he saw that my shirt and pants were covered in dark, slimy mud, he hesitated and then simply grinned.

He and I both knew that whatever my *grossmamma* doled out once she saw what I'd done to my clean clothes would be payback enough.

Stepping inside, I tried to soften the blow by warning her first.

"Just so you know," I called out as Jake and I paused in the mudroom to remove our hats, jackets, and boots, "changing out the diffuser in the pond was a lot messier job than I'd expected."

"Oh, Tyler, no," she replied from the kitchen. "You didn't fall in, did you? Your *grossdaadi* told you not to trust that old rowboat."

"No, nothing like that."

I stepped around the corner to see her at the counter, spooning out scrambled eggs from the pan. The aroma of coffee and peach strudel wafted past my nose, and I realized I was starving. I'd fed Timber before going to the pond but hadn't eaten a thing yet myself.

She didn't even look up to see me, so Jake let out a low whistle as he pushed past to go to the table. "Wow, Tyler. Nice going on your clothes there! Did you leave any mud in the pond?" He whistled again, dramatically.

Of course, at that *Mamma's* head snapped up. She took in the sight of me, her eyes narrowing.

"Just for that, no strudel," she said. When Jake burst out in a victorious laugh, she gave him a sharp, "I'm talking to *you*, young man. No strudel for troublemakers."

Lucky for me, she hated tattling even more than she hated extra work on laundry day. I grinned, though I didn't dare make a sound in return lest she come down on me as well.

"I'll rinse everything out as soon as I take it off," I told her.

"See that you do," she replied, returning her attention to the food preparations in front of her.

I flashed Jake a "gotcha" look. He snagged a corner of the strudel when *Mammi's* head was turned and tossed it into his mouth with a smirk that said "gotcha back."

Ten minutes later, I had returned to the kitchen, cleaned up and ready for the day, relieved that the mud had rinsed right out. I spotted *Mammi* still standing at the counter and Jake sitting at the table. He was sipping coffee but otherwise waiting to dig in until everyone else had convened here too. I heard *Daadi* come in the back door as I was taking my seat, and once he'd hung up his hat and jacket, he joined us in the kitchen and crossed the floor toward his wife.

Daadi always greeted my grandmother the same way when the morning's first chores were done and it was time for breakfast and devotions: kissing her cheek and speaking in the softest words, meant just for her, saying, "*Gud mariye, meiner Aldi.*" Good morning, my wife.

Mammi smiled the way she always did. "*Gud mariye, Joel.*"

I loved how tender my grandparents were with each other in these first few moments of the day. Like most Amish, *Daadi* didn't give *Mammi* kisses in front of people, or fuss over her in a personal kind of way, especially not in public. But their morning custom made me feel good about the start of the day, and it always had. It was strange and wonderful to think my mother probably saw them do this same thing every morning of her life too.

Daadi brought a mug of coffee to the table and took his seat at the end. "Beautiful sunrise over the pond this morning?" he asked, letting me know in his gentle way he'd seen me heading to the place I always went when there was much on my mind.

"Sure was," I replied, adding nothing else, not even about the diffuser

repair. He knew as well as I did that that wasn't really why I'd gone out there.

I avoided his gaze, watching as *Mammi* brought a plate of sausages to the table. We bowed our heads for a silent prayer, and the topic of the pond was dropped. That was fine with me. I had always felt free to share even my most troubling thoughts with my grandfather. But I wasn't ready to have *that* conversation.

Not yet, anyway—and especially not with him.