

“I need to find a new *mamm* for these *kinner*...”

“I’ll be their new mother,” Faith declared, “if you ask me to, Manuel.” She lowered her eyes. “Rebecca would want it,” she whispered. “I think God wants it, too.”

Silence.

Certainly, he would think she had lost her mind. To become their new mother meant she would have to give up everything. Yet she loved the children enough to do just that.

And then he nodded.

For a moment, she felt her heart skip a beat in her chest. She heard Manuel clear his throat. “I’ll talk to the bishop. If they agree to give you the baptism,” he said, watching her carefully, “we would be married in November.”

Married.

Was she actually agreeing to marry this man, the widower of her best friend? *Take care of Manuel*, Rebecca had said. Why had Faith agreed?

She realized that she had just taken the first step of a journey over which she had no control, nor did she have any idea how to proceed.

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AMISH FAITH

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Amish Faith

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Prologue



Faith stood at the graveyard, the cold wind whipping through her black shawl. She stood with her hand resting protectively upon her stomach as she stared at the tombstone. It was bland. Just a simple stone with no special wording: a name, date of birth, and date of death. That was it. No designs or markings. No special endearments. The beige-colored grass that grew up alongside the stone only bespoke of the time that had already passed. Not enough to forget but just enough to not always remember.

Death, Faith thought, is as cold as the winter air.

Indeed, it was cold outside, with the wind whipping through her black cape and skirt. But she barely noticed it. Instead, she was wrapped up in the warmth of the memory of her friend: Rebecca Petersheim. The cold winter air that chilled Faith's bones did nothing to cool the heat of her pounding heart.

Not a day passed without her thinking about Rebecca. To forget her friend was simply impossible. In truth, Rebecca's presence surrounded Faith every second of the day. There were days when she imagined

Rebecca standing nearby, smiling in approval at Faith's life, a life that Rebecca had unknowingly created for her with one simple request.

Yes, it was impossible to forget Rebecca. Yet Faith knew that it was becoming increasingly easy to forget that everything she had was because of Rebecca and that promise made, oh so many years ago! A promise born from innocence and cemented in a time of grief. A promise that, against all odds, Faith had kept. Despite the odds, she realized that it had been more of a gift than a promise, after all.

The sky was overcast and grey. The trees were dark, their bare limbs reaching toward the sky. The perfect backdrop to add to the emotion that Faith was feeling. She glanced up and stared, for just one short moment, at the darkening clouds. It smelled like snow. The year's first snowfall. She wasn't looking forward to it, just like she hadn't been looking forward to visiting Rebecca's grave either. Perhaps her friend's death was still too fresh in her memory.

Turning her attention back to the grey stone, she sighed. It was surrounded by others that looked just like it. A field of identical stones that marked the passing of lives. Some of the stones were old and worn out. A few were fresh, too fresh, and spoke of the recent passing of fathers, mothers, and children.

Her eyes studied Rebecca's stone. The chiseled words seemed so cold and unfriendly. No tender words of endearment that might proclaim that Rebecca had been a beloved wife, a loving mother, a cherished daughter, and a dear friend.

Ten months had passed. Ten long months in which entire worlds had shifted. Without Rebecca, life had

changed for so many and in so many ways. Oh, Faith knew she should rejoice in the fact that Rebecca walked with the Lord. But the truth was that she missed her friend. She missed her smile and the energy of her youth, her love and adoration of family as a young woman, wife, and mother, and her strength and determination in her final years.

How had it come to this, she pondered.

Chapter One



They were six and seven when they first met.

As Faith's father needed a new milking machine for his dairy barn, he had taken her to a farm auction. Their neighbor, Jonas Yoder, had encouraged her father to join him at the Amish auction that was being held at a nearby farm. Public auctions were always a great place to buy inexpensive, if slightly used, farm equipment.

Faith had stood by her father's side, pulling her brown coat closed at the neck and adjusting the blue headscarf that her mother had forced her to wear. She was not used to being in such a large crowd of Amish men. All these men looked similar to Faith, with their battered straw hats, white shirts, and black pants held up by black suspenders. Most had long, greying beards and stern expressions on their faces. They didn't look friendly at all.

For a moment, Faith had wished that she hadn't agreed to go with her father. It would have been much more fun to stay home and play in the hayloft or even help her mother with the chores. Anything but being here with all of these men who spoke in a language she

didn't understand and seemed to look right through her as if she didn't exist.

"I know you!" someone exclaimed behind her.

Faith turned around and looked at the girl standing opposite her. She appeared to be about the same age as Faith, despite being a bit taller. She, too, wore a heavy coat and a headscarf, but there was something different about her.

"You live on the farm next to ours! The Landeses' farm!" the girl said, a big smile on her face. "But you don't go to my school, ain't so? How come?"

Faith had only started school that past fall. She went to the public school, a small yellow bus picking her up each morning at the end of the driveway. Each morning, her mother would walk with her to the mailbox, waiting with her as they sung a hymn from their church or practiced Faith's spelling. "Cat? Dog? Bat?" Faith would recite the correct spelling of each word, glorying in the approval of her mother when she got each one correct. "My smart girl," her mother would say and give her a big hug before the bus came.

"I don't know," Faith said to the girl who stood so close to her. She wasn't used to such forwardness from other children, especially strange ones that she didn't really know.

"It wonders me," the girl went on, tapping a dirty finger on the side of her cheek. "Mayhaps you aren't Amish?"

Faith shook her head.

"What are you, then?" the girl asked, the curiosity in her dark eyes more than apparent.

"Mennonite," Faith whispered, wondering if the little girl would still want to talk to her.

“Ja vell,” the girl said. “My name’s Rebecca. We should be friends, don’t you think? We live next to each other and, even if you ain’t Amish, we could still play together!”

Faith didn’t know how to respond. Rebecca talked funny. Her words sounded like a song with a funny accent. Instead of saying “other,” it came out “oo-dher.” Instead of saying “could,” she said “coou-d.” Faith liked the way Rebecca drew out her words. She wished that she could speak like that.

“I guess so,” Faith said, trying to imitate Rebecca’s accent.

Rebecca laughed and shook her head. “You don’t sound Amish at all.”

Faith blushed and lowered her eyes, embarrassed.

“What’s your name, then?” the girl asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Faith.”

For a second, Rebecca frowned. Faith wondered why. Her parents had named her that after years of trying to have a baby. They prayed for a baby, just one. And when her mother had finally learned that she was pregnant, they immediately knew that, if the baby was a girl, they would name her Faith, for they had put their faith in God to bring them this one simple request: a healthy, living baby. Faith had never thought twice about her name. Now, however, as Rebecca hesitated and studied Faith, she couldn’t help but wonder if something was wrong with her name?

But just as quick as the frown had appeared, it vanished. Rebecca shrugged and grabbed Faith’s hand. “Come on, then. Let’s go watch the auction!” Dragging

Faith through the sea of Amish men, Rebecca pulled her toward the railing and stood by her side.

For a while, they watched the different pieces of equipment come to the front of the area set aside for the podium and the auctioneer. His voice was barely understandable as he rambled about the item, calling for bids on each piece, and pointing into the crowd when people raised their hands. Faith thought the auctioneer was singing and shut her eyes, listening to the magical voice.

She felt someone nudge past her and opened her eyes, seeing a large Amish man push her backward, blocking her view. Faith glanced at Rebecca who frowned, not liking the fact that she could no longer see. But just as quickly, Rebecca raised her eyebrows and her mouth formed a perfect O, something humorous having caught her attention.

She grabbed at Faith's arm. "Look at that!" she whispered, pointing toward the man in front of her. "He has a piece of toilet paper on his backside!"

Faith looked and started giggling.

Rebecca giggled, too. "Reckon my *mamm* would want me to tell him, but I'm not going to! Serves him right for blocking the view from us!"

From that moment on, Faith knew that Rebecca was going to be her once-in-a-lifetime friend, that special someone with whom she would share everything... secrets, dreams, and mischievous plans. Staring at her new friend, Faith was amazed. How was it possible that this wonderful girl had lived next to her for all of her life and that only now they had just found each other?

Faith never quite understood why she went to a different school than Rebecca. After all, they lived right

next to each other. Still, almost every day before evening chores, they would meet in the pasture between their houses and explore the fields, hunting for bird nests in the spring, baby bunnies in the early summer, and pretty butterflies in the waning days of August. They would collect wild flowers and bring them home to their mothers.

Faith was now nine and Rebecca was ten. They spent as much time together as they could, never noticing the differences between them or simply not caring to be bothered by them.

One day, they sat on a picnic table outside of the Yoder's house, looking at the flowers they had collected. It was a Saturday afternoon. A buggy pulled into the driveway and two young men got out, nodding in the direction of the two girls. Faith stared and Rebecca waved as she called out, "Hullo, Jacob! Hullo, Manuel!"

"Your *bruder* James around, then?" the older of the two boys said.

"Ja, ja!" Rebecca responded and looked over her shoulder toward the house. "Mayhaps inside, taking a short nap."

The boys walked toward the house, the younger one pausing to peer over Rebecca's shoulder, his eyes sparkling and an inquisitive look on his face. "What you have there, Rebecca?"

She smiled, pointing at the flowers. "Pretty, ain't so? Faith and I...well, we're going to press them so we have them forever." Pausing, she glanced at Faith. "Faith, this is Manuel," she said absentmindedly.

Faith flushed and couldn't meet his eyes. They were so blue and bright, as if the prettiest summer sky was reflected there. And his smile lit up his face. He was

the most handsome boy she thought she'd ever seen in her life.

Oblivious to what Faith was thinking, Manuel held out his hand, being a proper young Amish man, and waited until she took it. He shook it and smiled, a brilliant white smile, his blue eyes staring into her brown ones. "Nice to meet you, Faith. Unusual name, that," he said.

"Thanks, Manny," she whispered.

Rebecca frowned. "Manny? Did you call him Manny?" She shook her head and corrected Faith. "It's *Manuel!*"

He teasingly cuffed Rebecca's head. "Aw, she can call me Manny. I think I right like that," he said. Then, winking at Faith to let her know that her blunder was fine by him, he hurried down the path toward the house. She couldn't keep herself from staring after him, surprised at his sparkling blue eyes that had twinkled when she had called him Manny instead of Manuel. And he had winked at her with such a smile on his face, a smile that made her heart flutter.

Once the door shut behind the two boys, Rebecca turned to reprimand Faith. "We don't use nicknames, Faith."

"I'm sorry," Faith responded, feeling stupid for the first time in Rebecca's presence. "I didn't know."

"Ja vell, now you do," Rebecca said, turning her attention back to the flowers. "Now, you pick one and I'll pick one. We'll go back and forth, taking turns. That way it's fair and we can each keep our favorite flowers forever." She looked up at Faith and smiled, the nickname incident already forgotten. "Like our friendship, ja?"

Faith smiled back, feeling better already. “Yes,” she agreed. “We’ll always be friends.”

Rebecca reached out and placed her hand atop of Faith’s. “I don’t have no same-age sister. But I think you are just as good for that, ain’t so?”

Without any further words, the two girls began selecting their flowers with Faith picking first because she was younger. When they had their collections sorted, they carried them into the kitchen, where Rebecca’s mother would help them press the flowers in the family Bible.

“Come on,” Rebecca cried out, waving to Faith as the children ran down the hill toward the pond. “It’s going to be fun!”

Oh ja, Faith thought. *Fun for you. You’re the one that knows how to swim!* She dreaded the thought of letting the other children know that her parents had never taught her how to swim. She was already thirteen years old, a farmer’s daughter, who knew little else than how to milk a cow and do well in school. Other than that, Faith was lost.

She was an only child, not for lack of her parents’ trying. They had other children but none of them lived past infancy. Two had died in childbirth, the cords wrapped horrendously around their necks, and one had died six months after birth. Only Faith had survived, and that had driven her parents to keep her safe at all costs. She was never allowed to do anything that might present a hazard. Swimming? Never. Ice-skating? Out of the question! But having fun with the Amish neighbors’ children? That seemed harmless enough.

She never had to ask her parents twice. Not when

it came to spending time with Rebecca Yoder. Sweet, petite Rebecca with her freckled face and big brown eyes that always seemed to be looking for the next adventure. Leave it to Rebecca to find the nest of abandoned newborn bunnies and undertake the mission of saving them. Count on Rebecca to find a way to make weeding the garden a fun game. Even rainy days were exciting when Rebecca was around. Exciting, but safe.

Yet Faith was now faced with a great decision as she stood on the hill overlooking the pond on Rebecca Yoder's uncle's farm. It bordered on Rebecca's place and was a popular swimming destination with the other children. Knowing that she couldn't swim, Faith had never ventured there. But Rebecca, her dearest and "bestest" friend ever, had begged her to come along today. And so she had obliged, changing into her swimsuit and grabbing a towel to dry off.

Now Faith was sorry that she had permitted herself to fall prey to peer pressure.

"I don't know," she started to say, trying to mask her reluctance. She didn't want to look scared in front of her friends. "I bet my dad needs my help on the farm with the cows..."

Rebecca rolled her eyes and hurried back to her friend, grabbing her hand and dragging her down the hill. "Don't be silly, goose! It's too early to milk the cows and too hot to not take a quick dip!"

After all of these years, these years growing up together as sisters more than friends, Faith wondered how it was that Rebecca didn't know that she couldn't swim. How had she avoided this in the past? An even better question was how had she not avoided it today?

Faith was quiet and reserved, not known for her tom-

boyish activities. She didn't like getting dirty but was never one to complain to Rebecca about it. Instead, she quietly went along with Rebecca in everything.

They were thirteen years old, although Rebecca was always quick to point out that she was eight months older than Faith. As far as Amish youth went, Rebecca was different. Quite different.

Rebecca was a complete take-charge kind of girl. And always, she was smiling and laughing. It was this one particular characteristic that really stuck out about her. Happy, smiling, laughing Rebecca, she was called.

And everyone loved her.

Especially Faith.

So, strictly because she didn't want to disappoint her friend, Faith let Rebecca lead her down the hill toward the pond and, without a single additional protest, followed her friend into the water.

She hadn't expected the mud to swallow up her legs. Nor did she expect to lose her balance as she tried to trudge behind Rebecca, who was already drenched from the waist down and splashing the other children, all boys of different ages. No other girls were in the pond. Just Rebecca and Faith. They were all laughing and having fun, enjoying the cool water that soothed their hot skin under the afternoon sun. All of them except Faith.

She stumbled in the water and, with a pounding heart, fell forward, face first into the murky water. Within seconds, her head was submerged and she slid further down the muddy embankment, completely losing her way. Terrified, she tried to call out but all that happened was water rushing into her mouth and down her throat. Her eyes were wide open and she could

barely see anything, for the other children had churned up the otherwise clear water.

This is it, she thought. I'm going to drown.

She began to feel lightheaded and the darkness began to grow. She felt herself slipping into a deep abyss and realized, with stunning clarity, that she actually felt at peace, comfortable and warm. Her body felt light and her fear began to subside. No longer did she fight the feeling that she was being embraced and held back from escaping. Instead, she succumbed to it with grace and dignity.

"Come on, Faith!"

The voices seemed to be far away. Too far away. And everything was still dark.

"Manuel! Do something!"

That sounded like Rebecca, except her voice was strange. Panicking. Fearful. Upset. Faith had never heard her sounding like that, not happy-go-lucky Rebecca. For a moment, Faith wondered what had Rebecca so frantic.

"You have to save her, Manuel! Save her!"

"Come on, come on," a male voice begged, desperation in his voice.

As if in a moment of electric force, the light came back, but it was too bright. The sounds were louder. In fact, all of her senses were heightened, especially the pressure on her lips and nose. Someone was pinching her nose and someone was pressing their mouth against hers, breathing life back into her still body. One, two, three. She felt a pressure on her chest before it returned to her lips.

Her eyes fluttered open and she immediately focused on the blue eyes, hovering above hers. Dark, deep-set

eyes with an intensity that burned through her. She felt his lips against hers, forcing her mouth open again. As she began to make sense of what was happening, she began to cough and sputter, water being released from her lungs. She felt someone pull her upwards and pound her on her back. Feeling weak and lifeless, she leaned against someone's shoulder, her cheek pressed against the rough, wet cloth of a man's shirt.

"Faith!"

Again, it was Rebecca.

Faith shut her eyes and tried to take a deep breath. Fresh air had never tasted so pure and clean. "What happened?" she choked out, her words barely audible.

"You almost drowned."

Faith tried to pull back and look at the man who said that. Vaguely, she recognized him. Manuel Petersheim. One of the older Amish boys that she sometimes saw at the different gatherings. She knew him to be seventeen and that was about it. When she realized that she was in his arms, she tried to push away but couldn't. His arms were wrapped around her, holding her up.

"It's alright," he soothed. "Take a deep breath."

She listened to him and tried to relax.

"Oh, Manuel!" Rebecca gushed, her voice crackling. Faith realized that her friend was crying. "You saved her!"

"What happened?" Faith repeated.

Manuel pulled back, still keeping a close hold on her. He stared at her, taking in her brown eyes and wet hair. Shaking his head, he tried to smile but his face was pale, the color drained from it. "Seems like someone thought she could float, ja?" He tilted his head, just a touch, and raised an eyebrow. "Mayhaps next time

you might take a swimming lesson or two before you venture into water.”

Before Faith could respond, Rebecca was on her knees and had her arms around her friend, crying as she hugged her. “You goose! Why didn’t you tell me you couldn’t swim?”

The images came back to her. The water. The mud. Sinking. That was when she began to shake. Indeed, as she realized that she had almost drowned, her own tears began to fall down her face. Her hands shook, her body shook. She just wanted to go home. To be in her mother’s kitchen, wrapped in her embrace. “I want to go home,” she managed to say between her sobs.

“I’ll take you home,” Manuel said. “My buggy’s over there. Come, Rebecca. You ride along and show me where she lives, ja?”

The three of them walked across the field, one of them on either side of Faith, helping to support her. The other children watched from the side of the pond, still speechless from having just watched the almost drowning of Faith Alderfer, the Englische friend of Rebecca Yoder. Quietly, all of them quickly gathered their things and walked back over the field, away from that pond and to the safety of their own parents’ farms.

When Rebecca turned sixteen, she started what was called her *rumschpringe*, the time when Amish youths are allowed to explore the world of the Englische. She explained this to Faith with great excitement as she prepared to attend her very first singing on a Sunday evening. Her older brother was going to take her, and Rebecca could hardly contain her excitement. After all, she told Faith, now she was considered an adult. The

idea of being able to socialize with her Amish friends and be worldlier made Rebecca's eyes sparkle.

"But you already know the world of the Englische," Faith said glumly as she sat on the edge of Rebecca's bed. "You know it through me."

Rebecca was pinning on her apron over her dress, expertly sliding the straight pins through the black fabric without looking. "I know that, goose! But this is *different!*"

"I can't see how," Faith said, not liking the fact that Rebecca was going somewhere that she couldn't go, too. "It's a singing. It's not even Englische!"

At that, Rebecca laughed, the sound like sweet music. Usually whenever Rebecca laughed, Faith would join in. It was contagious. Just not this time. "I'm sixteen now," she tried to explain. "I can court young men if I want to!"

Faith made a face. Court men? There was nothing further from her mind than getting involved with boys. Her parents wouldn't dream of letting her court anyone. They had forbidden such a thing, saying that courting invited trouble, although Faith suspected it was just one more way to keep her protected and safe. Still, she didn't mind. "Courting leads to marriage, Rebecca. And you know where that leads you..."

Waving her hand over her shoulder, Rebecca turned to look at the small hand-held mirror that she picked up from the top of her small, narrow dresser. "I know, I know," she mumbled, pinching her cheeks so that they were rosy pink. "Babies."

"And you're ready for that?" Faith asked. "Yuck."

Rebecca sighed and set the mirror back onto the dresser. "Now, Faith," she said, turning around with

one hand on her hip. “You know how I feel about that,” she said sharply.

It was true. Faith did know exactly how her friend felt about babies. Rebecca came from a large family. She had nine siblings, five older and four younger. She had over 150 cousins, many of whom she had never even met. Family gatherings at the Yoder household usually meant over 200 people attended. Much different from Faith’s extended family of only thirty people.

Truth was that Rebecca adored children. Truth was that Rebecca longed for the day when she would have her own farm and raise her own family. In contrast, Faith couldn’t even imagine not finishing high school and, hopefully, attending the local community college so that she could find a nice job and stand on her own two feet. It was one, if not the only way that the two young women differed.

Faith flopped back onto the bed and tossed her arm over her eyes. “Oh, go ahead and find your young man, get married, and have your twenty children.”

She felt something soft hit her in the face and sat up. Rebecca was frowning at her, but it was a teasing frown. It was a rare moment when Rebecca was truly angry or upset. Faith looked around and saw that her friend had tossed a balled-up handkerchief at her. “Twenty children, for sure and certain,” Rebecca scoffed playfully.

When it was time for Rebecca to leave, her brother James motioned for Faith to join them in his buggy. He offered to drop her off at her parents’ farm. Faith shook her head, needing the time to walk and clear her head. She stood in the driveway, watching as the buggy pulled away, feeling as if a part of their friendship was disappearing with it.