



PATRICIA JOHNS

STILL
WATERS

THE AMISH OF
SHEPHERD'S HILL 2

“Patricia Johns’s *Still Waters* is a tender journey that explores friendship, second chances, and finding unexpected love. It reminds us God’s grace and mercy are ever present, especially when we’re uncertain of His plan for us. This story will delight readers who love the Amish culture and an endearing romance.”

Amy Clipston, bestselling author of *The Heart’s Shelter*

“Patricia Johns beautifully captures the struggles of three sisters trying to fit their dreams into the expectations of Amish life. You’ll find yourself rooting for each of them as they navigate love, faith, work, and the push and pull of tradition.”

Susanne Woods Fisher on *Green Pastures*

“Amanda Schrock had my heart from the minute she paid a call on the most ineligible bachelor in town. The multiple storylines were fresh, well-written, and simply adorable. *Green Pastures* is yet another example of why Patricia Johns is a true fan favorite.”

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Leslie Gould on *Green Pastures*

“*Green Pastures* by novelist Patricia Johns is a skillfully crafted and original story that is as inherently fascinating as it is emotionally engaging for the reader.”

Midwest Book Review on *Green Pastures*

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Books by Patricia Johns

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Green Pastures

Still Waters



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1



Friesen Lake was still and deep, nestled with the quietness of a prayer in the middle of treed hill country. It shimmered on the far edge of Shepherd's Hill, a Pennsylvania Amish church district. Chilly water lapped the rocky shore, and the pebbled lake bottom sank in quick decline down into the water, disappearing into crystal depths. With its deepest point at ninety feet, where an underground spring fed the lake, even the summer heat never completely warmed the water. But that vast, sparkling expanse was tempting all the same, and Beth Peachy longed to swim.

In her many visits to see her grandmother in Shepherd's Hill, Beth had never been permitted to swim in this lake. Not when the weather was sweltering hot in the middle of August. Not when the *Englischers* in the cabins farther down the lakeshore were paddling around by the dock, their laughter surfing the breeze. Mammi had forbidden swimming in this lake. Beth's *daet* had supported the rule, though no one in her family explained the reasons behind it.

But that was what her family did—they kept secrets. Daet had never spoken about his childhood here, and there was no

explanation for that either. Beth had been plying her mother with questions since Daet's death, though her mother knew very little. But *why*? That question had plagued Beth since her father's passing last year. Why all the silence and secrecy surrounding their family history?

Farther along the lakeshore, there was another Amish home nestled in next to the old ice house. Decades ago, that ice house used to provide ice for local Amish iceboxes. They would harvest the ice in the winter and keep it in the insulated ice house all summer. But those days were past, and their community now used propane-powered refrigerators and freezers for their families' needs. The Lapp family owned those cabins beside the lake, where *Englischers* liked to stay, and they had recently renovated the old ice house into an attractive little cottage too. Beth could make out both the Lapps' two-story house and the newly painted cottage from here.

She shaded her eyes. Did Danny Lapp still live there with his parents? He had been her friend long ago, but she hadn't been to Shepherd's Hill in about three years—Mammi had come to visit her family in Strasburg instead—and a lot could change in that amount of time.

Goldie barked hoarsely from the yard behind her. She was a twelve-year-old golden Lab. Her face was white, and her torso was thick. She plodded around the property with the gait of a regal old woman.

“Beth?”

Beth turned back to wave at her grandmother, who bustled out the back door of her house. Mammi was as portly as Goldie and often said that at their ages, neither of them could be expected to have waistlines anymore. Mammi had a round face and eyes that squinted so they almost disappeared when she smiled. But she wasn't smiling now.

“Beth!” Mammi pattered over the grassy lawn, beckoning. “Come away from the water, Elizabeth. Come away. Come, come.”

Mammi flapped her hands at Beth as if she were one of the chickens. She grinned but cooperated all the same. She’d arrived this morning to help with housework and chores while they prepared Mammi’s house for sale later that summer. Now in her late seventies, Mammi was starting to struggle with more than just the physical work. She’d been getting more forgetful lately and having bouts of confusion. Beth’s mother wanted Mammi to move in with them, and when they started looking for a young person to help Mammi get the big house ready to sell, Beth had volunteered for the task. It would provide Beth with some space and time to make her own decisions too.

“Mammi, I’m twenty-one,” Beth said, crossing the rocky shore and heading back up to the grass. “I’m not a little girl anymore.”

Mammi had always had strict rules regarding the water at her own house, but she wouldn’t try to enforce those when she moved in with Beth’s family, would she?

“The lake doesn’t care how old you are,” Mammi responded. “Come sit on a chair on the lawn. You can see the water from there. It’s a very nice view.”

As Beth’s feet touched the grass, a smile returned to her grandmother’s weathered face, and the old woman turned around and bustled past a pair of white Adirondack chairs that sat in the shade of two cherry trees. Mammi had a large garden, too, and her rows of vegetables were already flourishing even though it was only the beginning of June.

“I’m a strong swimmer, you know,” Beth said. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

She’d brought her homemade bathing dress with her. It

had a high neckline, short sleeves, and shorts underneath the knee-length skirt, so she was modestly covered. Her bishop back home in Strasburg had permitted her to wear it as long as boys and girls weren't swimming together. Besides, no one from the Lapps' section of the beach would see what she was wearing once she was in the water.

"It's not safe," Mammi said.

"That's all you've ever said about it. But my *daet* taught me to swim."

Mammi silently met her gaze for a moment. "There are people who have drowned in that lake and were never found." Mammi pursed her lips. "That lake holds more secrets than you can imagine. While you are here, Beth, you need to listen to me, or I will send you straight home. If you really are so grown up, then you'll understand that life is fragile, and it's prideful to take unnecessary risks. You are not less mortal than anyone else."

Beth looked at her grandmother in surprise. That was the most her grandmother had said about the lake in Beth's hearing. Ever.

"You'd send me home?"

"If I have to." Mammi crossed her arms over her chest.

Beth cast the glistening lake one last look of longing, then put an accommodating smile on her face. She was here to help Mammi, not upset her.

"All right, Mammi. I won't swim."

"*Danke.*"

She followed her grandmother in through the side door of the big three-story house. Goldie plodded after them, her back legs looking stiff. The dog stopped a couple of yards from the door, and when Beth bent down to give her a pet, Goldie yipped and shied away.

“Careful with her back end,” Mammi said. “The poor girl is awfully sore these days.”

“I’m sorry, Goldie,” Beth whispered. She held out a hand to the dog, but Goldie wouldn’t come close again. Beth straightened. She’d have to regain Goldie’s affections. On her last visit three years ago, they’d had a lot of fun together. Now, the dog padded stiffly over to Mammi’s side.

This house was big enough to accommodate a large family, but in recent years, it had only housed Mammi and Beth’s *daet*, Mose, when he was a boy. Which bedroom had belonged to Beth’s father? She didn’t even know that. Had he slept on the second floor or the third? What had they done in this big rambling house, just the two of them? No one had ever shared any stories.

The side door led into a spacious kitchen. The windows were propped open today to let in the cool air coming from across the water. The wooden floors were polished to a glow with linseed oil, and the cupboards were freshly painted a bright white. The counters were a little cluttered, but Beth could help with that. Goldie stopped at her water bowl and took a slow drink.

A plate of glazed donuts waited on the counter, but Mammi went to a cupboard and pulled it open. Beth looked over her grandmother’s shoulder. There were mugs and plates with a single black walking shoe sitting on top of them.

“Mammi, why is that shoe in the cupboard?” Beth asked.

Her grandmother blinked at the shoe in confusion. “I don’t know.”

“Here, I’ll take care of it.” Beth pulled out the shoe and tucked it under her arm, then pulled out the dishes too. “I’ll wash these for you.”

“You should eat something first,” Mammi said, her cheeks

growing pink with embarrassment, and she gestured toward the plate of donuts.

“Of course, Mammi. I’d love one.” Beth put the dishes in the sink, then brought the shoe over to the rack by the door. She didn’t see its mate, but she put it into a free space all the same. Then she went back to the sink and washed her hands.

“These are very good donuts,” Mammi said. “Aent Mary made them. She wanted you to have something special when you arrived.”

Aent Mary was actually Mammi’s niece and Beth’s father’s first cousin, but in a large family like theirs, sometimes people who were more distantly related were lovingly given closer titles, and so they’d dubbed her *Aent*. The donuts did look delicious. Beth picked up a plump pastry and took a bite. She chewed slowly and nodded her appreciation.

“Good?” Mammi asked with a hopeful smile.

Beth nodded again. “Delicious.”

“Aent Mary will come by soon to say hello,” Mammi said. “She was so happy you were coming.”

“That will be nice,” Beth replied. Aent Mary was more open and talkative than most of Beth’s family on her father’s side. She was always fun to visit with, and she was full of news from all corners of the family, which was why Beth liked her so much.

“I’m so glad you came too,” Mammi said. “I’ve missed you, Elizabeth.”

“I’ve missed you too, Mammi. It was so nice when you came to see us, but I missed this house and Goldie and your good cooking.”

Mammi smiled in response.

“I was hoping you’d tell me stories about my *daet* while I’m here,” Beth added. “When Daet passed away, I realized

I don't know much about when he was little. I should have pestered him more to tell me stories."

Daet had died six months ago, and too late Beth had realized just how little she knew about her father's childhood and upbringing. It was also time for Beth to make a choice for the church and get baptized, but she'd been holding back. She had a few hopes and dreams of her own that couldn't be fulfilled in the Amish world. Maybe if Daet had lived, he could have passed along some wisdom to help her make her decision. No one understood her quite so well as Daet had.

"You miss your father," Mammi said softly.

"I do. And I wish I knew more about him."

"What do you want to know?"

"What was my *daet* like as a *kind*?" Beth asked. That was an easy enough question to answer, wasn't it?

"He was a sweet boy," Mammi said, tears misting her eyes.

"He was kind to everyone. To animals, to friends, to me . . . He was a very gentle child."

"What about when he was a baby?" Beth asked.

Mammi didn't answer. Was that her confusion or the old refusal to speak of the past? Beth wasn't sure.

"What was his first word?" she pressed.

The old woman pushed herself to her feet and went over to the fridge. "I'll get you some milk to go with your donuts."

Evasion. It seemed like everyone except Aent Mary was so used to keeping secrets that they forgot how to talk about ordinary things.

"Daet was like this too, you know," Beth said. "I don't understand it. Why does no one talk about the past?"

"There's nothing to tell about your father as a baby," Mammi said, returning with a pitcher of milk. "Every

mother thinks her baby is wonderful. The stories don't get interesting until the *kinner* are older."

That answer felt like more evasion to Beth, but she'd given this some serious thought over the years, and she had a theory. Mammi seemed to have raised her son alone. There wasn't a *dawdie* in the picture—at least none that had ever been mentioned. Had Mammi ever had a husband? Had he died? Had he abandoned her? Beth didn't know because no one spoke about that, and when Beth asked questions, she was hushed. Apparently, Mammi didn't have a husband that anyone had ever met, and Daet had never mentioned his father. But Mammi did have a son. If Mammi had had her son out of wedlock, that would have been a deep disappointment to her conservative Amish family. Had Mammi been a single mother? Was that the big secret?

"I want to hear about you," Mammi said. "Tell me how you've been doing, Elizabeth."

"I've been working at the flour mill, and I've been learning some new quilting blocks. I'm making a Star of Bethlehem quilt to sell at the next mud sale."

"Very nice," Mammi said. "Are you making it alone?"

"My *mamm* is helping me get everything pinned, and my sister-in-law is doing some edging for me. But the hard work—that's mine."

"It's important to know how to quilt." Mammi fixed her with a fond look. "One day, you'll be making quilts for your own home with your husband and *kinner*."

"One day." Although if she married an *Englischer*, her homemaking duties would be a whole lot lighter.

"Is there a young man who's caught your eye?" Mammi asked coyly. "Your secret would be safe with me."

"There was a boy I liked a lot," Beth said. "His name is

Luke. I thought he liked me, too, but he ended up courting my friend Mary-Anne and marrying her.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

They both fell into silence, and Beth took another bite of the donut. Luke marrying Mary-Anne had been heartbreaking. Daet had told her that Gott must have someone else in mind for her, and that disappointments opened doors to new opportunities. Daet’s insight had helped. She’d spent that summer swimming at their own local lake, getting stronger and faster, and praying.

“Did you ever get disappointed like that?” Beth asked.

“Me?” Mammi blinked a couple of times and then looked away. “Oh . . . that was a long time ago. I hardly remember.”

Beth would never forget the pain of seeing Luke driving Mary-Anne home from Singing. Or the distinct agony of watching them take their wedding vows. She’d been one of Mary-Anne’s *newehockers* too. But maybe Mammi’s dementia had stolen her memories from that time already.

Mammi pushed the plate of donuts closer still. “Have another one. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a young person to feed.”

Beth shook her head. “I’ve had enough. *Danke.*”

Everyone back home wanted her to get baptized, to make her decision for the church once and for all. During her lengthy *rumspringa*, Beth had made several *Englisch* friends from town, and she had an *Englisch* neighbor she was particularly good friends with too. Those *Englischers* were much more open about their family stories. They knew the good, the bad, and the embarrassing about their family histories. It was refreshing how open and honest *Englischers* seemed

to be about those things. It didn't matter to Beth if Mammi had been a single mother—she just wanted her family to trust her with the truth.

Beth had a big choice to make about her own future, and she felt stuck on the fence, sometimes leaning toward her heritage, other times leaning toward *Englischer* freedom with opportunities she'd never have access to if she stayed Amish. And even with this monumental choice before her, her family was still closely guarding the truth about the past.

“Mammi, can I ask you something?”

Her grandmother raised gray eyebrows. Again there was that hesitant air. “*Yah*.”

“What bedroom belonged to my *daet* when he was a boy?”

Every time they'd visited, the *kinner* would play outside or hang out together in the kitchen, and the adults would chat. If they did ask a question, Daet used to joke around. He'd say something like “*Me? I slept in the barn,*” or “*Your mammi gave me a mat to curl up on next to the dog.*” And Mammi would playfully swat his arm and shake her head, and the conversation would move on.

But now Mammi pointed directly above them. “That one.”

“The bedroom above the kitchen?”

“*Yah*, that was his.”

Finally, a fragment of information. It was a start. Beth was here for the summer to help Mammi, and that gave her three months to wheedle out more details. The time for secrets was past. Mammi was becoming more confused and muddled, and there might come a time rather soon when she wouldn't be able to tell those stories anymore. They'd be lost, and as heartbreaking as Mammi's decline

was, Beth didn't want to waste a moment of this summer with her grandmother.

Daet had had both a childhood and a father, and he was gone now. Maybe the stories were going to be hard for Mammi to tell, but Beth was determined to find out about both of them.

2



The bedroom above the kitchen, the one that used to belong to her father, had a window overlooking the lake. Beth leaned the heels of her hands against the wooden windowsill, looking out across the backyard, down the grassy hill that turned more and more sparse until it faded into rocky beach. The far side of Friesen Lake was wild—trees and shrubbery growing almost to the shore, and thick forested hills beyond. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted low across the water, giving it a golden sparkle. Some geese paddled across, leaving a visible trail through the calm water.

Beth's pulse slowed to the pace of the geese's easy glide. Still waters ran deep. That was something she'd been told since she was a little girl, paddling around in the stock tank her father had filled up to teach her and her brothers how to swim. Their mother had never fully agreed with those swimming lessons. It seemed unnecessary to her. The Amish didn't tend to learn how to swim because it brought up modesty issues with bathing suits. Sometimes boys would learn to swim at the pond, but it wasn't common to learn more than some basic strokes and kicks to stay afloat. There were plenty of

things the Amish simply didn't bother themselves with. Their focus was on Gott, family, and farming, mostly. Or whatever other skill a man needed to make a Plain living. But then some teens had fallen out of a fishing boat and would have drowned if there hadn't been another boat close by to rescue them. Daet had talked to the bishop himself about wanting to teach swimming lessons, explained how he'd make sure all the requirements were met. He insisted that it was a survival skill, and Bishop Mark had agreed, with conditions, of course. Daet was an earnest Amish man. He met all of them.

"You never know if you'll fall in," Daet told his children. *"If you do, you need to be able to swim. That's what I care about—you getting to shore and not drowning."*

That had been one bit of advice, and the second had been *"Notice how still the water is. If the surface is like glass, the water is deep. Don't be fooled. Lakes can seem almost bottomless."*

And Friesen Lake was smooth tonight, disturbed only by the geese's silent trek. Since he grew up next to this body of water, she understood her father's caution. But he'd taught them all well, and Beth could do much more than get herself to shore if she fell out of a boat—she could probably even get another person to shore with her. The Amish people Beth knew enjoyed boating, fishing, and being by the water. She might have started swimming in a stock tank, but Daet had found some lakes in their area and taken Beth to swim longer distances because she enjoyed it so much. For a long time, he made her stay where she could touch the bottom, but eventually he eased off when he was sure she was strong enough, and they'd swim side by side through clear, cold water.

He allowed her to remove the skirt that went with her bathing outfit, and she'd put it back on while still in the

water before they got out. But leaving the skirt behind made swimming much easier.

“Don’t over tire yourself,” he’d tell her. *“If you’re getting tired, head back for shore.”*

A woman had stopped Daet once and suggested that Beth was such a strong swimmer, she could compete in a swim club, but Daet had refused to listen to that.

“We don’t compete,” Daet said. *“We do well for the moral value of doing well. But we do not compete. Is she fast? Yah. Is she strong? Very. Is she faster and stronger than some other girls her age? Who cares? My daughter swims—she doesn’t race.”*

If something was worth doing, it was worth doing well. If a young woman swam long enough, she’d end up being very good indeed. And that was enough for Daet. It had been enough for Beth, too, but a tiny part of her had warmed at those words praising her abilities. Was she really that good? She hadn’t realized it before the woman mentioned it to Daet.

So Mammi might worry about the dangers of Friesen Lake, but Daet had worried first, and he’d made sure his children could swim.

Beth turned away from the window and looked around the spacious bedroom that used to belong to her father. The bed was made up with a thin, worn quilt. A rag rug was on the floor next to the bed, and a bedside table held a ticking clock and a vase of violets that spread a sweet scent throughout the room. The floor was swept, and the closet was neatly organized with extra bedding, a few bolts of cloth, and what looked like an old tackle box.

Mammi was normally very meticulous in her organizing, and Beth was reminded of the shoe in the cupboard. She’d found a few more instances of Mammi’s confusion

around the house. Knitting needles in the cutlery drawer, a half-finished sewing project underneath the couch—which arguably could have been tucked there for a reason—and an opened jar of jam sitting on her grandmother’s dresser. Mammi might be more confused than people realized, and it was a good thing she’d be going back to Strasburg with Beth. She shouldn’t continue on by herself in this big old house.

Downstairs, Beth heard the front door bang and cheerful voices filter up through the floorboards. Someone was visiting, and Beth headed out of the bedroom and down the wooden staircase that led to the kitchen. There were two staircases that led down to the first floor—one leading to the sitting room and one leading to the kitchen. As she emerged into the kitchen, she spotted Aent Mary and her cousin Jonas. Jonas was a grown man of thirty, so he wasn’t near her age, but she’d always liked him. He told funny jokes that he laughed at harder than anyone else, and he always brought her chocolate bars from town when she was visiting.

“Elizabeth!” Aent Mary bustled over and threw her arms around Beth, giving her a squeeze. “Oh, it’s good to see you! It’s been too long, sweet girl. Too long.”

Aent Mary released her, and Jonas gave her a smile.

“How was the bus ride?” he asked.

“It was long, but there was a lot of pretty scenery,” she said.

The bus ride between Strasburg and Shepherd’s Hill was two hours including the rest stops. She’d been thinking seriously for most of the ride, though. There was a baptismal class starting in the fall, and Mamm wanted her to join it. She had several friends who would be taking part too, and everyone seemed to expect Beth to be there. It was time to

make a decision, but this choice wasn't a simple one for Beth. Maybe it should be. It seemed to be for other Amish people, but it wasn't for her.

She wanted to take swimming lessons—real ones. She could become a lifeguard or a swimming teacher, but there was no way the bishop would allow it. As a lifeguard, she'd have to wear shorts and a T-shirt as her uniform, and that would be entirely inappropriate for an Amish woman. Plus, she'd have to swim with men and women in a pool at the same time, which was utterly forbidden.

There were more opportunities than swimming in the *Englisch* world, though. There was further education that led to interesting jobs. She'd been particularly good at math and science in school, and she'd finished all the math up through the eighth grade, so the teacher had gotten her a math textbook for ninth grade and then tenth, just to keep her occupied while the other scholars were studying. She liked the idea of working with numbers. She'd even looked into a job as a bank teller but had been told she needed her high school diploma. She was also interested in learning more about computers, but that would pose a problem in her conservative community.

Beth had scanned the courses at her local community college, and there were other options that had appealed to her—an X-ray technician, for example. That would be a job in which she could learn more science and then help others. There was more out there—so much more than she would ever see if she took that vow and settled into Amish life in earnest. Something inside of her was tugging toward the edges of her safe community. When she looked out the window, her eyes immediately turned toward the hills, toward the sunset, and toward that cold, deep lake.

She'd been seriously considering finishing high school and joining a swim club to start. Her *daet* hadn't wanted her to compete, but she'd watched videos of races online at the library, and they were thrilling. Was she too old to train? Maybe, but maybe not. Maybe she'd be an Amish prodigy who amazed the world when they let her compete. She'd gotten to be very fast and strong using her Amish bathing suit that was quite restrictive. How fast could she swim in an *Englisch* bathing suit? Beth had never swum in Olympic-sized pools or learned how to flip and push off the wall for another lap. But she had swum in lakes and pushed herself to her limits of endurance and speed. And there were open-water swim races.

The *Englisch* world held so many exciting opportunities, and once she was baptized, those doors would be closed for good if she didn't want to be shunned.

"How is your *mamm*? How are your brothers?" Jonas asked.

"Mamm is good. She's still really sad since Daet passed, but we all are. Violet and Adam just had a baby, and Andy just graduated school, so he's going to be home full-time now to work the farm. How have you been, Jonas?"

"I can't complain."

"Have you found another girl yet?" she asked with a teasing smile. "Because that's what everyone wants to know about you. Mamm will ask me, for sure and for certain."

"No, not yet." He chuckled. "You can tell your *mamm* that I'm waiting for the right woman, and when I find her, you'll all be invited to the wedding. But not a minute sooner."

Beth laughed. "That's a good answer."

"*Danke.*"

Goldie pushed herself up from her spot by Mammi's chair

and started toward her food bowl but then lay back down again.

“Oh, Goldie,” Jonas said. He grabbed the food and water bowls and brought them over to the dog. “How are you, old girl?”

He took some pieces of kibble in his hand and fed them to Goldie, who ate them up readily enough. While the other animals such as Mammi’s horse and milk cow would be sold, Goldie was going to make the move with Mammi to Strasburg.

“She’s got a sore back end, Mammi says,” Beth told him.

“*Yah*, she’s getting older,” Jonas said, then he raised his voice a little louder. “Aent Iris, has Goldie been getting worse?”

“*Yah*, she’s getting slower and more sore,” Mammi replied. “But we all get that way when we’re old, and I’m not putting her down. So don’t even suggest it.”

“I’m not suggesting that,” Jonas said. “I’m suggesting you bring in the vet.”

“The new girl?” Mammi squinted.

Beth’s interest piqued at those words. There was a female veterinarian? *Englischer* women could do anything, it seemed.

“She’s a very good veterinarian,” Jonas explained. “She’s worked on our animals, and she’s excellent.”

Mammi sighed. “Can she really do something for an old dog?”

“She might have some medication that can help Goldie have less pain,” he said. “That’s all I was thinking.”

“Who is this female vet?” Beth asked.

Mammi and Aent Mary exchanged a look. It was the same kind of look she’d been getting when she asked too many questions about family history lately.

“Tabitha Schrock,” Jonas replied as he stroked the top of Goldie’s head. He didn’t seem to have noticed the women’s hesitation. “She jumped the fence ten years ago, became a vet, and came back home. So she’s our local veterinarian now.”

“She’s a full vet?” Beth asked. “An Amish veterinarian?”

“*Yah*. She’s good too.” Jonas caught the look from his aunt at long last, and he blinked. “What, Aent Iris?”

“Tabitha had a very painful time of it beyond the fence,” Mammi said meaningfully. “She came home again for good reason.”

“What happened?” Beth asked.

Mary turned toward Beth. “She left the faith when she was about eighteen and married an *Englischer* boy she fell in love with. He wasn’t a good man. He was flagrantly unfaithful to her, and she left him. She didn’t have a lot of choice—he wasn’t going to choose her, and he wasn’t going to stop seeing the other woman. After she divorced him, he married the woman he was cheating on her with, and Tabitha came home to be Amish again.”

“She’s divorced?” Beth asked in surprise.

“*Yah*.”

“Oh . . .” She’d heard of people jumping the fence and marrying *Englischers* before, but she’d never heard of those marriages ending. If Tabitha Schrock had come back to the Amish faith, then she couldn’t marry again while her ex-husband lived. Divorce might mean something to *Englischers*, but it made little difference for the Amish. Marriage vows were stronger than legal dissolutions. That was the nature of a vow before Gott. That was why Beth’s baptismal choice was so deeply important too. Vows were forever.

“So should I ask her to come take a look at Goldie for you?” Jonas offered.

Mammi nodded slowly. “Yes, please, Jonas. I would appreciate that.”

Beth would meet this Tabitha Schrock, and she was already storing up questions to ask her when she had the chance. An Amish woman had left, gotten more education, lived *English* for a decade, and returned. What was it like out there? And if Tabitha could become a veterinarian, what other options were available for a girl who’d been raised Amish?

“They’re friends,” Mary told her quietly.

Beth hadn’t noticed her aunt’s approach, and she looked up in mild surprise. “What’s that?”

“Jonas and Tabitha know each other from their school years,” Mary said.

“And they’re friends still?” Beth asked.

Mary nodded. “She’s a nice young woman. She’s very likable, and she’s smart as a whip, they say. But like your *mammi* said, she came home for a reason. She saw what all that freedom offered her, and it was nothing but pain. We’re thanking Gott that she returned.”

Tabitha’s story was meant to be a warning, but Beth was still curious. What had happened out there, exactly? And what had brought her home again? Because most people who jumped the fence never returned.