

THE AMISH NANNY

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ONE

Four weeks later

Lexie was a beautiful bride. Her white gown had little cap sleeves, which was modest, I knew, for an *Englischer's* wedding dress, but it looked a little like a summer nightgown to me. While Ella and I sat side by side on the bed and watched, one of Lexie's friends fixed her hair, artfully piling blond curls atop her head and pinning them in place along with her veil. Once they were finished, Lexie stood and spun around. We all cheered, Ella's elbows bumping mine as we clapped.

The first time I met Lexie last spring, I thought she was beautiful. Later, she and I stood in front of a mirror, side by side, and I'd been surprised to realize that we looked a lot alike. Same blond hair. Same brown eyes. Same tilt to our noses. That didn't make much sense, for I knew I was merely average while she was stunning. Perhaps it was her glow, her vibrancy, that set her apart. Either way, today she was positively radiant, and even more beautiful than I had ever seen her before.

"Breathtaking," Sophie pronounced from her perch on a stool in a corner. As one of Lexie's closest friends, Sophie had declined the request to be a bridesmaid as well, insisting she was far too old. Instead, she had been serving as a sort of fill-in mother of the bride, something needed here,

given that neither of Lexie's parents were still alive to share this day. Her mom had been dead for many years, but her father had passed only six months ago, and I knew his absence was being sorely felt by Lexie—and by everyone else who had known him.

"You look like a princess," Ella gushed at Lexie as she completed her spin.

"Thanks, cuz," Lexie replied, giving Ella a wink and a loving pat on the knee before returning to the mirror for a final touch-up on her makeup.

I glanced at Ella in time to see her looking down at her own outfit and then over at mine. I could tell she was feeling quite dowdy by comparison, as though Lexie were Cinderella at the ball and we were the scullery maids. Ella and I were dressed Plain, of course, in white *kapps* and aprons over dark brown dresses. Being Mennonite, Ella could have worn a print but opted to match me instead, although with her auburn hair, ivory skin, and lively eyes she was far prettier. At least we both fit in with the wedding's color scheme and with the other two bridesmaids, who wore the same brown color, though in dresses far more stylish and made of a silky, shiny material. At weddings back home, the bride and her side sitters would all have dresses out of the same fabric, usually blue or purple. But this was an *Englisch* wedding, which meant attendants in coordinated colors and a white gown for the bride.

A soft rap interrupted us, followed by a voice asking, "Lexie? Are you ready? The guests are seated." The door opened and Mrs. Glick, who had to be older than *Mammi*, stuck her head inside. Looking at her, I realized that even she, with her simple calico dress, looked more stylish than Ella and I. At the sight of Lexie in her gown and veil, Mrs. Glick's face broke into a broad smile. "Oh, you look lovely, my dear. Just lovely."

"Thank you, Mrs. Glick," Lexie replied, standing up straight and smoothing out the skirt of her gown. "Everybody ready?"

We all stood, adjusting our skirts as well. Lexie thanked the two bridesmaids for their help with her hair and makeup and then flashed Sophie a grateful smile, no doubt for all the many ways she'd been helping out as well, not to mention her quiet, calming presence. Finally, Lexie turned to Ella and me and opened up her arms. We stepped into them for a hug, careful not to pull the back of her veil or crush the lines of her dress.

"Have I told you how much it means to me that you guys came all this way?" she asked.

We laughed. She'd told us multiple times since we'd arrived five days before. When we pulled apart, her eyes were full.

"Don't cry!" Ella said. "You'll ruin your makeup."

Lexie shook her head, blinking away her tears as Sophie turned toward the tray on the dresser and began handing out the flowers we would all carry—tiny bouquets of pink roses trimmed with white, pink, and brown ribbons. Lexie's bouquet was a bigger, fancier version of ours, with added greenery, baby's breath, and extra ribbons woven among the flowers. We didn't use flowers like this in our weddings back home, but I thought it made a nice touch here.

"They have started the music," Mrs. Glick told us from the doorway.

"You lead the way," Sophie instructed the older woman, who started down the hall to the stairs. Sophie followed, and after her went the two bridesmaids and then Ella.

I started toward the door next, but Lexie grabbed my hand and squeezed it, hard. I turned toward her and gave her a final hug, and then with tears stinging my eyes headed through the hall and down the stairs. As I went, I couldn't help wondering what my life would have been like if my family had kept Lexie and given me up for adoption to the Jaegers instead. I probably would have gone to college, and though I wouldn't have become a nurse-midwife, I could have become a teacher. By now I would probably have a classroom in an *Englisch* school. Perhaps, even, I'd be the one wearing the Cinderella dress, ready to unite with my own Prince Charming.

I shook my head as I paused at the back door and watched Ella start down the aisle between the folding chairs in the yard. It was wrong to covet. God had given Lexie the life He'd chosen for her and given me the life He wanted for me. I would be grateful for what I had been given and trust that He knew what was best for each of us.

When Ella was halfway toward the front, I started down the back steps just as we had practiced, careful to hold on to the rail. I didn't recognize the music coming out of the portable sound system in the back, but it was slow and soothing and pretty. Zed, with a goofy grin on his face and his blond bangs hanging low over his eyes, already stood at the front with the three other attendants and James. They all looked handsome in matching black tuxedos and dark-brown "cummerbunds," a term Ella had been using with authority, having picked it up from her bridal magazine. I was

so pleased James had included Zed in the wedding party. He was a great kid and Lexie's cousin, but James hardly knew him except from the short time he'd spent in Pennsylvania earlier this year, when he'd come out to join Lexie. Including Zed here now was a nice gesture, one that made me appreciate James's sweet heart all the more.

The guests, mostly older, smiled in encouragement as I made my way toward the front. Before I got there, I knew the groom had spotted his bride waiting in the back for her turn, because his eyes grew wide, his lips curving into a tender smile.

I took my place beside Ella. Then the guests all stood and turned to watch as Lexie started down the aisle, her veil flowing out behind her on the gentle breeze. Her gown hung flawlessly as she walked, her carriage regal and tall. She came alone, her gaze fixed on James, her eyes filled with love. Still, something about her expression seemed almost melancholy, and I knew she was missing her late father now more than ever.

Suddenly, a breeze caught the spokes of the windmill high above our heads and sent it twirling. Lexie looked up, and it seemed a gasp caught in her throat as she froze in place. Watching the windmill spin, a beautiful smile illuminated her features. When finally she began moving forward again, gaze once more on her groom, I realized her sadness seemed gone. In its place was the joyous expression of one fully at peace, almost as if the windmill had signaled a greeting from heaven itself, a blessing on this special day.

When Lexie reached us, I took her bouquet and she joined hands with James. Facing each other as the pastor began to speak, it was as if they disappeared into another world, lost to the rest of us. I sighed inside. Would I ever experience that kind of love? Not from Will Gundy, that was certain. Not now that he was courting Leah. At least I would have my teaching. That was where I'd find my calling.

After all, what other choice did I have?

The service was short and sweet, not like the weddings back home that went on for hours and hours. There were no stories from the Bible here about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. No songs from the *Ausbund* lasting twenty minutes each. Instead, the pastor simply read from 1 Corinthians 13 and spoke about love and submission, including submitting to each other and making sacrifices in marriage.

After that, he led the couple in exchanging vows, and then he declared James and Lexie husband and wife.

“Now you may kiss the bride,” he added, grinning.

I blushed at the sight of their enthusiastic kiss. At our weddings, there was nothing like that in the service itself—though it would not be unusual to see the couple stealing a kiss or two later as the day went on.

Another song began, this one louder and faster than the one we had walked in to. Claspng hands, James and Lexie moved back down the aisle, grinning widely at each other and at their assembled guests. After a beat I took the arm of the best man and we followed, with the other members of the bridal party also pairing up and coming along behind us. Except for Zed, James’s attendants were all married, so once we reached the back of the crowd, we reshuffled a bit so husbands and wives were together. Then we headed for the orchard to take some pictures.

I had discussed with Lexie the fact that I was uncomfortable having my photograph taken, but she had convinced me to participate in just one shot as a favor to her: a picture of the two of us. Now, posing in the shade of the graceful hazelnut trees, Lexie and I stood together arm in arm, laughing even as we were trying not to cry.

As I stood there with my sister, waiting for the photographer to take our picture, my heart began to soar with such a joy I could barely contain it. Lexie and I may have spent the first part of our lives far apart and unaware that the other even existed, but once we had found each other, the bond we had formed was instant and deep. God had blessed us in abundance, and I knew that neither my sister nor I would ever take each other or our relationship for granted.

After the photo had been taken, I hugged Lexie before excusing myself to go help in the kitchen. There I found Sophie and the other women from the church carrying out stacks of plates to the long table in the yard, so I jumped in as well. On one trip I glanced over toward the orchard to see that Zed had something in his hand—more than likely Ella’s cell phone—and he was using it to film the various attendants as they continued to pose in different groupings for the pictures. Zed was obsessed with moviemaking and had been driving Ella and me crazy with his nonstop filming since the trip had begun. I could only hope he wasn’t in the way out there among Lexie and James and their friends.

The other women and I continued to put out food and see to all the details of the reception. As we worked I couldn't help but compare how much simpler this was than the way we did things back home. For weddings, the norm there was three hundred guests or more, with two full meals being served, both lunch and dinner. By comparison, this one meal for Lexie's eighty wedding guests seemed an easy task indeed.

The next time I emerged from the kitchen, I noticed the members of the wedding party wandering back from the orchard, and it looked as if everyone except for the bride and groom had finished with their part of the photo-taking. Ella was walking with purpose toward the house, no doubt so that she could go inside and tend to the wedding cake. A gifted baker even at sixteen, Ella had been obsessed with this cake for days, decorating it in secret and not allowing any of us see it in its finished form.

Zed still had her phone, only now he was coming toward me with it, trying to get up close as he filmed. He knew I didn't want to be caught on camera, but he was so persistent that finally I turned my back on him and strode to the house as well, closing the door in his face.

It was time to bring out the roasted chickens, but when I got to the kitchen I stopped short at the sight of Ella's beautiful cake in the corner, which she had finally unveiled. It was three layers high, each one decorated with swirls and patterns in white frosting, accented with delicate, edible gold balls. This fancy cake would never do for a Plain wedding, but here it seemed just right. I knew Lexie and James would be thrilled.

Several of the other women had also noticed the gorgeous cake and paused to compliment Ella on her artistry. But she was so focused on adding the last few finishing touches that she barely acknowledged them. Grabbing the platter of roasted chickens, I decided to give her a little room to work. I would tell her later how pleased I knew the happy couple would be.

Stepping outside, I soon realized that Zed hadn't given up—and that now he was adding narration as he filmed.

"Here's my cousin Ada again," he said, "carrying the roasted chickens she made for the bride and groom. Are you the roast cook, Ada?"

"*Englisch* weddings don't have roast cooks," I replied, wishing he would be quiet and go away. Back home at our weddings, the couples in charge of roasting the chickens were known as the "roast cooks." We also had "potato cooks," who made all of the mashed potatoes.

“Wow!” Zed exclaimed suddenly, interrupting my thoughts.

I turned to see what he was looking at and spotted Ella just emerging with the finished cake, carefully balancing it on a board covered with paper. Immediately, Zed zoomed in on her and continued his narration.

“And now we have Ella, my sister and a cousin of the bride, carrying the cake she spent the last three days making. Tell us, Ella, did you set some sort of record, taking that long to make one cake?”

“Knock it off,” Ella said. Tightly gripping the board holding her creation, she went down a step, the tall cake tottering slightly as she did.

“Oh, my.” Zed held the phone closer to his face. “It looks as if a catastrophe’s looming.”

“Put that thing away and help me.” She took another step, but the cake wobbled again, leaning even further this time. “Zed! Please!”

“Oops, incoming text.” He turned the phone and flipped it open.

“Don’t you dare read it!” Ella took another step, and this time the board tilted enough for the cake to slide a little.

But Zed had his hand out in half a second, steadying it as he slipped the cell phone into his pocket. “Whoa, easy does it.”

Together they stabilized the board and then carried the cake across the lawn. Once they finally eased it onto the center of the dessert table, she gave it a few last adjustments and then asked for her phone. Zed gave it to her, announcing the text was from Ezra, as if any of us would be surprised. Ezra was Ella’s beau—not to mention Will Gundy’s little brother.

I set the chicken on the main table between the stuffing and creamed celery, glad that I’d thought to gather the recipes from *Mamm* before I left for Oregon. The other women brought out the last of the dishes and added them to the table, things like relish trays, hot potato salad, and little sausages. Stepping back to survey the entire spread, I realized that it was quite the mix of Amish and Mennonite “cuisine.” I smiled. That was yet another word Ella had picked up from her bridal magazine and used as often as possible.

Glancing around for Ella, I saw she was standing away from the crowd just a bit, furiously texting away on her phone. She needed to be done with that and focus on matters closer at hand, but before I could get over there to tell her, I was sent back inside for more serving spoons. By the time I returned and had finished distributing the utensils among the

various platters and bowls, a few minutes had passed. Yet Ella was still standing in the same place, focused on her phone.

I walked over to her, realizing as I got closer that instead of texting, now she was talking—or rather listening, the phone pressed tightly to her ear, her lips pursed shut.

“Ella, you need to get off the phone,” I whispered.

She looked at me, eyes wide, and shook her head no. Glancing toward the orchard, I saw that Lexie and James were still posing for the photographer. Though Lexie wasn’t the type to embarrass easily, I didn’t want her guests, especially the older ones, to think that Ella or Zed were typical American teens, obsessed with a cell phone at the expense of the people around them.

Ella whispered something into the receiver, turning slightly so that her back was to me. Stepping around in front of her, I softly repeated my request.

“I can’t,” she said, covering the phone with her hand. “This is important. It’s about Alice. Alice Beiler.”

My eyes widened. Alice was Will and Ezra Gundy’s grandmother, one of my own grandmother’s dearest friends and a woman I absolutely adored. Though Alice and *Mammi* were about the same age, Alice was in far better health than *Mammi* was. When Will’s wife died, Alice was one of the women who had taken over most of the daily care of his children so Will could keep working.

Fearing that Alice had now fallen ill or perhaps become hurt, I took Ella’s arm and led her around to the side of the house, where we could deal with this call more privately. Except for a few marriages between distant cousins, Ella and I weren’t related to Alice or her family in any way, but we certainly considered the Beilers and Gundys to be treasured friends, and Alice in particular. Had Will and I married, they all would have become my in-laws. Even though that was never going to happen for me, I was aware that they could still become Ella’s in-laws someday if she married Ezra.

“What’s wrong with Alice?” I pressed, and when Ella didn’t reply, I spoke more loudly, “Is she sick? Did she break a hip or something?”

Ella put her hand to the phone. “No, it’s nothing like that. You’re not going to believe it, Ada. Alice is going to Europe!”