

Prologue

The house had never been this quiet before.

Not even in the middle of the night.

For months, the silence had always been interrupted by something—the gentle hum of the oxygen machine, the creak of Mom shifting in bed, whispered conversations with hospice nurses, or the familiar rattle of medication bottles as I stood in the kitchen under a single dim light at two o'clock in the morning.

Now there was nothing.

Just stillness.

I stood at the kitchen sink staring through the window at the gray May afternoon, my hands wrapped around a mug of tea that had gone cold long ago. The casserole someone had dropped off the night before still sat untouched in the refrigerator. I kept telling myself I'd deal with it later, but every time I opened the door, I closed it again.

People meant well.

That was the hard part.

The flowers on the dining room table.

The sympathy cards lined across the counter.

The steady stream of texts asking if I needed anything.

What I needed wasn't something anyone could bring me.

I needed the world to stop feeling so different.

The funeral had been three days ago, though it already felt strangely far away, almost as if my body had walked through it while the rest of me was still catching up somewhere behind. Since then, the house had become unfamiliar—not because anything inside these walls had changed, but because everything had.

Without thinking, my eyes drifted toward the hallway. For months I'd listened for the smallest sound from Mom's room. A cough. A shift beneath the blankets. Her quiet voice calling my name. Even now I caught myself waiting before the truth settled over me again.

There would be no more medications to organize tonight.

No more checking the clock every few minutes.

No more listening for movement.

No more updates.

No more waiting.

The waiting had ended.

I never imagined that could hurt almost as much as the loss itself. I had divorced young and raised two children alone but I always had my mom. I had never known a world without her in it. I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath.

"It's just you and me God. Please help me get through this."

A dull ache settled in my chest when I heard the metal flap of the mailbox close outside.

Probably another sympathy card.

For a moment I considered leaving it there. I didn't have the energy to open another envelope filled with kind words that somehow made the house feel even emptier. But eventually I slipped on my sandals and stepped onto the porch, the warm, humid air wrapping around me the moment I opened the door. The scent of freshly cut grass drifted through the neighborhood, and somewhere down the street a lawn mower hummed steadily. Ordinary life was continuing all around me, even though mine still felt as if it had come to a stop.

Inside the mailbox sat a single thin newspaper folded neatly in half.

The Budget.

I stood there holding it longer than I meant to.

My one-year subscription was almost over. I'd started receiving the Amish newspaper months earlier during those long stretches at home with Mom. At first it had simply been curiosity born from my love of Amish life and simpler things. But somewhere between doctor's appointments, medication schedules, and hospice visits, reading *The Budget* had quietly become part of my routine. Every week I'd settle into my chair with a cup of tea and spend a few peaceful minutes reading about people I'd never met in towns I'd never seen. Community suppers. Birth announcements. Quilting gatherings. Church dinners. Ordinary families living ordinary lives. Somehow those simple little stories reminded me that life was still beautiful, even when mine felt unbearably heavy.

I carried the paper inside and settled into the chair beside the front window, pulling a throw blanket across my legs more out of habit than necessity. The house wasn't cold. It simply didn't feel like home anymore.

For several minutes I turned the pages slowly, letting my eyes wander from one story to the next. Children were being born. Neighbors were gathering to quilt. Families were sharing meals after church. Fields were being planted. The world kept moving forward one ordinary day at a time, and there was something strangely comforting about that. It reminded me that grief might feel like it had stopped my life, but it hadn't stopped everyone else's.

Then my eyes caught a small notice tucked near the bottom of one page.

Pinecraft, Sarasota, Florida.

Something inside me shifted.

It wasn't happiness.

It wasn't excitement.

It was simply... movement.

I read the paragraph twice.

Pinecraft.

I knew exactly where it was.

My uncle lived in Bradenton, only a few miles away. For years he'd invited me to visit, always insisting I'd fall in love with the little Amish community tucked beneath the Florida palm trees.

Every time he'd asked, I'd found a reason to stay home. There was work to finish. Bills to pay. Life to manage. And during these last few years, there had always been Mom.

The thought settled over me with an unexpected heaviness.

For months every decision I'd made had revolved around someone else's needs. Every doctor's appointment, every meal, every sleepless night listening for movement down the hallway had simply become part of loving her. I wouldn't trade a single one of those moments, but now there was no one waiting for me to come home, no meals to prepare, no quiet voice calling my name from the bedroom. The freedom I'd prayed for during so many long, exhausting nights had finally arrived, yet it came wrapped in the deepest grief I'd ever known. I had spent so much time wondering what life would look like afterward that I had never stopped to ask myself who I would be when "afterward" finally came.

The question lingered as I stared out the window, the newspaper resting forgotten in my lap.

Maybe...

A change of scenery wouldn't erase grief. I knew better than that. But maybe sitting in the same chair, looking at the same walls, and replaying the same memories every day wasn't helping me heal either.

My eyes drifted back to the newspaper.

I could drive.

Ten hours alone behind the wheel sounded exhausting.

Flying wasn't even a consideration. I'd never liked airports, security lines, or the thought of being trapped inside a metal tube thirty thousand feet in the air.

Then something stirred in the back of my mind.

Wasn't there a bus that traveled from Pennsylvania all the way to Florida?

Years ago someone had mentioned a charter bus company that carried Amish families between Pennsylvania and Sarasota. It followed the same route every trip.

I frowned, wishing I could book a ticket.

But what if I called?

It was a long shot.

Still...

Maybe—just maybe—they'd be willing to make one extra stop along the way.

For the first time since the funeral, I caught myself making plans instead of simply trying to survive the day.

Chapter 1

Suzanne

I watched the bus come into view, and my stomach immediately tightened into a knot. Maybe I shouldn't have eaten such a big dinner before a ten-hour bus ride.

Then again, it probably wasn't the food.

I'd spent the entire drive to the pickup spot trying to convince myself this was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Apparently, my stomach hadn't gotten the message. As the large white bus eased toward the curb, I tightened my grip on the handle of my suitcase until my fingers ached. For one reckless moment, I seriously considered tossing it back into the car, climbing behind the wheel, and pretending this entire trip had never been my idea.

Honestly, what was I thinking?

A fifty-five-year-old woman boarding an Amish bus alone and heading to Florida sounded like the beginning of someone else's adventure, not mine.

The bus hissed to a stop.

I drew in a slow, steady breath.

Well...

There was no backing out now.

The moment I stepped aboard, the conversations throughout the bus softened almost imperceptibly.

Nearly every Amish passenger glanced up, their curiosity as natural as it was immediate.

Heat crept into my cheeks as I suddenly became aware of everything—my purse hanging awkwardly from my shoulder, my shoes sounding far louder than they probably were, and my carry on feeling much larger than I remembered.

Don't trip, I told myself. Don't hit anyone. Just find your seat before you make even more of a spectacle of yourself.

The driver greeted me with an easy smile.

"Welcome aboard."

"Thank you."

I still couldn't quite believe the company had agreed to make a special stop just for me. When I'd called their office in Pennsylvania, I'd fully expected them to apologize and explain that they didn't make additional stops. Rather than turning me away, the woman on the phone had simply asked where I lived.

Just like that.

The kindness of it still surprised me.

I made my way carefully down the aisle, trying my best not to look as awkward as I felt. An older Amish woman smiled warmly and shifted her things, inviting me to take the empty window seat beside her.

"Good evening."

"Good evening," I replied, returning her smile.

Something about her expression immediately put me at ease. She reminded me of the older ladies at church who always seemed to know exactly when someone was nervous without ever making a fuss over it. Some smiles invited conversation.

Hers simply offered permission to breathe.

I appreciated that more than she probably realized.

Sliding into the seat beside her, I let out a quiet sigh of relief. The cushion had clearly seen better days, but after standing outside wrestling with butterflies, it felt surprisingly comfortable.

Outside, the last traces of daylight clung stubbornly to the western sky. Bands of orange slowly melted into lavender before fading into the deep blue of approaching night as the bus eased back onto the highway.

Florida.

My uncle would be waiting.

So would my cousin.

It had been far too long since I'd hugged either of them, and just thinking about seeing them again made my heart feel lighter than it had in months.

I rested my head against the cool glass and watched the North Carolina countryside slowly disappear into darkness. For the first time in what felt like forever, I wasn't driving toward responsibility. I wasn't heading to another doctor's appointment or helping mom in and out of bed while wondering what difficult news might come next.

I was simply...going somewhere.

That realization settled quietly over me.

For months every mile I'd traveled had carried the weight of obligation. Every destination had been another appointment, another errand, another responsibility waiting to be handled. Tonight, though, every mile pointed toward possibility instead, and I found myself understanding what it felt like to travel simply because I wanted to.

The feeling was unfamiliar.

Wonderful.

And, if I was being honest, just a little terrifying.

As always, my thoughts drifted to my mother.

I could almost hear the conversation.

She would have worried first—she always worried first—asking if I'd packed enough snacks, reminding me to keep my purse zipped and wanting to know who was sitting beside me. Then, once she'd satisfied herself that I wasn't in immediate danger, she would have laughed and spent the next week proudly telling everyone she knew that her daughter was riding an Amish bus all the way to Florida.

The picture came so easily that, for one impossible moment, I forgot she wasn't there to call.

My throat tightened.

Before I realized it, tears slipped silently down my cheeks.

I brushed them away with the back of my hand and turned my attention back to the darkened window.

No.

This wasn't going to be a sad trip.

I'd cried enough.

This trip was going to be different.

An adventure.

Maybe even the beginning of whatever God had planned for the next chapter of my life. I didn't know what that looked like yet, but for the first time since losing my mother, I realized I wanted to find out.

The steady hum of the engine and the rhythmic whisper of the tires against the pavement slowly unraveled the tension I'd carried aboard. My eyelids grew heavier with every passing mile until, somewhere between North Carolina and all the unknown possibilities waiting in Florida...

I fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes again, the bus had grown remarkably quiet.

For a moment I wasn't entirely sure where I was. Then I heard it.

Soft breathing.

A gentle chorus of snores.

Someone near the back let out an especially enthusiastic snort.

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing.

Most of the passengers had fallen asleep. The overhead lights had been dimmed, leaving only a soft glow throughout the cabin. Careful not to disturb anyone, I reached into my bag, pulled out a small snack, and nibbled quietly while taking in the peaceful scene around me.

The elderly Amish woman beside me looked perfectly content, her hands folded neatly in her lap as she slept.

My attention drifted to her dress.

I'd always been fascinated by the tiny straight pins that held parts of Amish dresses together. How in the world did they manage to wear those without sticking themselves fifty times a day? And how did they bend over without bleeding?

The thought nearly made me laugh out loud.

Still, I couldn't help admiring the craftsmanship. Every seam was neat and precise, every fold carefully pressed into place. Years ago I'd briefly tried sewing clothing myself, and that experience had taught me just how much skill went into creating a garment that fit well and lasted.

Someone had spent hours making that dress.

Glancing down, I noticed a loose thread dangling from the hem of my own skirt and smiled to myself.

Sewing had never been one of my spiritual gifts.

Across the aisle, a younger Amish woman wore one of the heart-shaped bonnets I'd always found so charming. I'd seen pictures of them for years, but somehow they were even prettier in person.

What I couldn't figure out was how they managed to keep them so white.

No matter how many Amish women I saw, their bonnets always looked spotless, as though not a single speck of dust had ever dared land on them. Mine would have survived exactly one day before I ruined it.

My attention wandered farther down the aisle. Even the older Amish men looked sturdy. Years of physical labor had shaped broad shoulders and weathered hands that spoke of early mornings and

honest work. It was a striking contrast to so many of the men I knew back home who spent their days behind desks, staring at computer screens beneath fluorescent lights.

There was nothing wrong with that, of course. The world needed accountants and insurance agents every bit as much as it needed farmers and carpenters.

Still...

I'd never found soft hands particularly attractive.

There was something quietly admirable about hands that had spent a lifetime building things, fixing things, and caring for the people who depended on them.

The steady drone of the tires became almost hypnotic as my thoughts drifted from one observation to the next. Before long I felt the bus begin to slow.

We were approaching another driver change.

Before leaving home, I'd learned that the husband-and-wife driving team traded places every few hours, allowing one to sleep while the other drove.

The bus eased into a small parking area, and several passengers climbed out to stretch their legs. I followed, grateful for the chance to stand and breathe in the cool October air.

Autumn had always been my favorite season.

The cool breeze carried the scent of fallen leaves and damp earth, and even though darkness had settled over everything, I could still make out the rich colors lingering in the trees beneath the parking lot lights. October had a personality all its own. It wrapped around me like an old friend, familiar and comforting in ways I could never quite explain.

Nearby someone unscrewed the lid of a thermos, and the rich aroma of fresh coffee drifted through the air. Small groups gathered in quiet conversation while others wandered a few steps to stretch stiff legs before making their way back toward the bus.

Five minutes later everyone began climbing aboard again.

As I stepped onto the first stair, I glanced back and noticed my elderly seatmate carefully making her way toward the entrance. She hesitated just long enough for me to realize the steps were giving her trouble.

Without thinking, I reached out my hand. "Here, let me help you."

Her face brightened with a grateful smile as she slipped her hand into mine, and together we climbed the remaining steps at an easy pace before returning to our seats. Once she was settled, she smoothed her skirt with both hands and looked up at me.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She studied me for a moment, the corners of her eyes crinkling with a kindness that immediately put me at ease. "First trip?"

I laughed, surprised she'd figured me out so quickly. "Is it that obvious?"

Her smile widened as she gave a small nod. "A little."

"Well," I said with a grin, settling back into my seat, "I'll try to hide it better."

She chuckled softly, then folded her hands in her lap. "Visiting family?"

"My uncle and my cousin."

She nodded as though that explained everything. "Family is a blessing."

I smiled and glanced toward the window before looking back at her. "It is."

Our conversation eventually faded. She folded her hands neatly in her lap, smiled one last time, and before long drifted back to sleep.

I turned toward the window.

Outside, darkness stretched endlessly beside the highway while the bus rocked gently as it carried us farther south. Around me, entire families slept peacefully. Children leaned against their parents' shoulders, husbands rested beside their wives, and the occasional whispered conversation drifted through the dim cabin before disappearing once again into the steady hum of the tires.

There was a sense of community woven into everything around them.

I admired their devotion to family, their faith, and the quiet way they seemed to care for one another without making a performance of it. I wasn't naïve enough to believe Amish families were perfect. Every family carried heartache. Every family had disagreements, disappointments, and private struggles no one else ever saw.

But there was something steady about them. Something rooted. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt rooted anywhere, and that realization hit me more deeply than I expected. It wasn't the dresses that drew me. It wasn't the bonnets. It wasn't even the slower pace of life. It was something much harder to describe—a way of living that placed people ahead of schedules, a sense of belonging and a quiet confidence that came from knowing exactly who you were and where you belonged. I wasn't sure I could have put words to what I was longing for if someone had asked. I only knew that something deep inside me wanted it. Florida was still hours away, but for the first time in a very long time, I felt as though I was moving toward something instead of simply existing inside my life.

A small smile found its way across my face as I whispered, "Father... delight me." The prayer surprised me almost as soon as the words left my lips. Not bless me. Not protect me. Not provide for me, though I knew He would. No, this prayer came from someplace much deeper. Somewhere beneath the grief, beneath the exhaustion, beneath all the years of simply trying to survive. I wanted to be delighted again. I wanted to wake up looking forward to tomorrow instead of just making it through today.

"Delight me," I whispered into the quiet bus. "Show me things I would never think to ask for. Bring people across my path that I need to meet. Let me see things that make me smile. Amaze me with Your goodness."

The corners of my eyes stung unexpectedly.

Life had been heavy for so long, filled with loss, responsibilities, and changes I never would have chosen for myself. Yet when I looked back over the years, I could also see that every time I'd left room for God to write part of my story, He had written something far more beautiful than anything I could have imagined on my own.

I closed my eyes, smiled, and surrendered the rest of the journey to Him.

* * *

Eli

Eli Miller stood quietly on the front porch of his daughter's home, watching the first rays of sunlight stretch across the Pennsylvania fields. Autumn had settled comfortably over the countryside, and the morning air carried the first real hint that winter wasn't far behind. A crisp breeze stirred the maple leaves along the fence line, and for the first time in nearly two weeks, the house behind him had fallen completely silent.

The quiet felt almost unfamiliar.

For days the farmhouse had been filled with the sounds of a newborn—soft cries in the middle of the night, whispered conversations, visitors arriving with casseroles tucked beneath towels, and well-meaning friends eager to offer advice to first-time parents. It had been wonderful, exhausting, and exactly as it should be. This morning, though, no one needed him. The baby was asleep. Rachel was resting for a few precious moments, and the steady stream of visitors had finally slowed.

A grin pulled at the edges of his lips. The baby had inherited her mother's lungs. There wasn't much doubt about that.

The screen door creaked open behind him.

"You leaving already?"

Rachel stepped onto the porch, gently rocking the sleeping baby in her arms. Eli turned, and the sight before him warmed his heart all over again. His newest granddaughter was only two weeks old, tiny enough to fit comfortably against her mother's shoulder and completely unaware of how thoroughly she had already claimed a place in her grossdaadi's heart. She stretched, yawned dramatically without ever opening her eyes, then settled back to sleep as though the effort had exhausted her.

He chuckled.

"Seems like I just got here."

Rachel smiled. "You've been here twelve days."

"Twelve days?"

Rachel adjusted the little blanket around the baby's shoulders before smiling over at him.

"You know Mom would've spoiled her rotten."

Eli laughed softly.

"That child wouldn't have stood a chance."

For a while they simply stood together, watching the sun climb a little higher above the fields.

Neither of them felt any need to fill the silence. Over the past two weeks, they had shared enough mornings like this to know some moments were better left undisturbed.

The space Martha had left behind was still there. Perhaps it always would be. But it no longer felt quite as empty as it once had. Life had continued to grow around that loss, gently and faithfully, until joy and sorrow had somehow learned to exist side by side.

Eventually Rachel broke the silence, glancing over at him with a hopeful smile.

"You'll come back for Christmas?"

He returned the smile with an easy nod.

"Lord willing."

"You always say that."

"Because it's true."

Rachel stepped closer and kissed his cheek before carefully placing the sleeping baby into his arms.

Eli looked down as tiny fingers instinctively wrapped around his thumb. He never ceased to marvel at how someone so incredibly small could already possess such surprising strength. A rush of memories stirred as he remembered Rachel doing the very same thing years before. Now she stood beside him as a wife...a mother. Time had a way of slipping quietly past while no one was paying attention, and emotion tightened unexpectedly in his throat.

He and Martha had been blessed with two beautiful children. Complications after Rachel's birth had quietly ended every dream they'd once held of filling those seven bedrooms. Eventually they had accepted that God's plans were different from their own, even when they didn't understand them. Looking back now, Eli could see blessings they hadn't been able to imagine all those years ago. He lifted his eyes toward the farmhouse. He and Martha had built it shortly after they married, convinced it would one day overflow with children, laughter, and muddy footprints racing through the hallways. Seven bedrooms had seemed perfectly reasonable for the family they imagined they would have.

Life had unfolded differently.

Now the house belonged to Rachel and her family, and he couldn't think of anyone he would rather see filling its rooms with new memories. His gaze returned to the sleeping baby nestled peacefully in his arms. God had been generous after all—not always in the ways Eli had expected, but generous nonetheless. He had given him two wonderful children, grandchildren who filled his later years with joy, a thriving bakery, faithful friends, and a church family that had carried him through the darkest season of his life. Looking back over the years, he could honestly say the Lord had been good to him far more often than he deserved.

The bus arrived shortly after breakfast. Rachel hugged him tightly while the baby, true to form, slept peacefully through the entire farewell.

"Tell Caleb I said hello."

"I will."

She looked at him with a smile that suggested she already knew how the conversation would end.

"And call me when you get home."

"I will."

Traveling between Pennsylvania and Florida was common enough that many of the passengers recognized one another. Familiar faces greeted him with nods and quiet smiles as he made his way down the aisle, stowed his bag in the overhead compartment, and settled into his seat.

The bakery would be just fine while he was away. Caleb had been running more and more of the day-to-day operations over the past few years, and if Eli was honest with himself, his son probably needed him far less than he liked to admit. The realization was both humbling and comforting, a reminder that the years he'd spent teaching Caleb the business had been well invested.

Several hours later, the gentle rhythm of the ride changed as the bus began slowing unexpectedly. Eli glanced toward the windshield.

That...

was unusual.

When the folding doors opened once again, a lone English woman stepped aboard.

She wasn't dressed like many of the tourists he was accustomed to seeing in Sarasota. There were no bright tropical colors, no flashy jewelry, no hurried confidence that often accompanied vacationers eager to reach the Florida sunshine. Instead, she wore a simple denim skirt that fell below her knees, a soft cream blouse, and carried a lightweight sweater over one arm. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was neatly brushed, and the little makeup she wore did nothing more than brighten a pair of tired blue eyes.

The moment she stepped onto the bus, curious glances followed her down the aisle. She hesitated for the briefest moment, clearly aware that every eye seemed to be on her, then quietly lifted her chin and continued forward.

Eli found himself admiring that small act of courage.

She was obviously uncomfortable, yet she neither hurried nor retreated. The sort of thing Martha would have noticed.

As the bus continued south, daylight slowly surrendered to evening. The conversations that had filled the cabin gradually gave way to silence until only the steady hum of the engine and the rhythmic whisper of tires on pavement remained. One by one, passengers settled into sleep, their heads resting against windows or the shoulders of those beside them.

Several rows ahead, the English woman remained awake.

She sat quietly by the window, her attention fixed on the darkness beyond the glass. From where he sat, Eli couldn't see her expression clearly, but after a long moment she lifted a hand and brushed a single tear from her cheek before returning her gaze to the passing night.

Most people would never have noticed.

Eli did.

He looked away almost immediately.

Whatever sorrow she carried belonged to her, and he had no desire to intrude upon someone else's private grief. Life had taught him that every person carried burdens invisible to everyone else. Some simply became better at hiding them.

Still...

The past two years had changed the way he saw people.

Grief left its mark. It settled quietly behind the eyes and lingered there long after the tears had stopped, revealing itself in fleeting moments when a person's guard slipped without them realizing it. He wondered what loss had found her.

Later that evening, the bus pulled into a parking area for a short break. The quiet cabin suddenly filled with movement as passengers stretched stiff legs and stepped into the cool autumn air.

Children darted across the parking lot until patient mothers called them back. Several of the men gathered in small circles, talking while they worked the stiffness from their backs. Someone opened a cooler filled with sandwiches wrapped neatly in wax paper, and laughter drifted through the crisp evening air as a little girl chased her bonnet across the pavement.

Eli lingered beside the bus for a moment, taking in the familiar scene.

No matter how many times he made the trip, there was something comforting about watching families who genuinely enjoyed one another's company. It reminded him that ordinary moments often became the ones people treasured most.

As he started back toward the bus, he noticed the elderly Amish woman from several rows ahead pausing at the bottom of the steps.

Before anyone else could reach her, the English woman stepped forward.

"Here, let me help you."

She offered her hand so naturally that it seemed almost instinctive. There was no hesitation, no attempt to draw attention to herself, and certainly no expectation of being thanked. She simply walked beside the older woman until they reached their seats, quietly making sure she was settled before taking her own place by the window.

It was a small kindness, the sort that revealed far more about a person's character than any conversation ever could. The two women spoke softly for several minutes before the older woman closed her eyes once again. As the bus continued south through the darkness, Eli leaned his head back against the seat.

It wasn't attraction. At least, he didn't think it was. It was curiosity. The woman carried the same quiet sadness he had spent the last two years learning to live with, and for reasons he couldn't quite explain, he found himself wondering who she was and what road had brought her onto this bus. The steady rhythm of the highway eventually drew his own eyes closed. Somewhere ahead lay Florida, home, and a bakery full of people waiting for him. Yet just before sleep claimed him, his thoughts drifted back to the woman sitting quietly by the window. He didn't know her name. By morning, he assumed he would never think of her again.

Tomorrow he would be back at the bakery, knead bread while the rest of the town still slept, and fall comfortably back into the familiar rhythm of ordinary life. He had no reason to believe this trip home would be any different from all the others.