

A photograph of a woman in a long purple dress and a child in a white shirt walking away on a dirt path. The woman is holding a small white bag. The text is overlaid on the image.

the
OUTCAST

a modern retelling of
THE SCARLET LETTER

JOLINA
PETERSHEIM

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The Outcast

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The Outcast is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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❧ *Rachel* ❧

My face burns with the heat of a hundred stares. No one is looking down at Amos King's handmade casket because they are all too busy looking at me. Even Tobias cannot hide his disgust when he reaches out a hand, and then realizes he has not extended it to his angelic wife, who was too weak to come, but to her fallen twin. Drawing the proffered hand back, Tobias buffs the knuckles against his jacket as if to clean them and slips his hand beneath the Bible. All the while his black eyes remain fixed on me until Eli emits a whimper that awakens the new bishop to consciousness. Clearing his throat, Tobias resumes reading

from the German Bible: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .”

I cannot help but listen to such a well-chosen verse, despite the person reading it. I feel I am walking through the valley of death even as this new life, my child, yawns against my ribs. Slipping a hand beneath Eli’s diapered bottom, I jiggle him so that his ribbon mouth slackens into a smile. I then glance across the earthen hole and up into Judah King’s staring, honey-colored eyes. His are softer than his elder brother Tobias’s: there is no judgment in them, only the slightest veiling of confusion not thick enough to hide the pain of his unrequited love, a love I have been denying since childhood.

Dropping my gaze, I recall how my braided pigtails would fly out behind me as I sprinted barefoot down the grassy hill toward ten-year-old Judah. I remember how he would scream, “*Springa! Springa!*” and instead of being caught by Leah or Eugene or whoever was doing the chasing, I would run right toward the safety of base and the safety of him. Afterward, the two of us would slink away from our unfinished chores and go sit in the milking barn with our sweat-soaked backs against the coolness of the storage tanks. Judah would pass milk to me from a jelly jar and I would take a sip, read a page of the Hardy Boys or the Boxcar Children, and then pass his contraband book and jelly jar back.

Because of those afternoons, Judah taught me how to speak, write, and read English far better and far earlier than

our Old Order Mennonite teachers ever could have. As our playmates were busy speaking Pennsylvania Dutch, Judah and I had our own secret language, and sheathed in its safety, he would often confide how desperately he wanted to leave this world for the larger one beyond it. A world he had explored only through the books he would purchase at Root's Market when his father wasn't looking and read until the pages were sticky with the sweat of a thousand secret turnings.

Summer was slipping into fall by the time my *mamm*, Helen, discovered our hiding spot. Judah and I had just returned from making mud pies along the banks of the Kings' cow pond when she stepped out of the fierce sun into the barn's shaded doorway and found us sitting, once again, beside the milking tanks with the fifth book in the Boxcar Children series draped over our laps. Each of us was so covered in grime that the jelly jar from which we drank our milk was marred with a lipstick kiss of mud. But we were pristine up to the elbows, because Judah feared we would damage his book's precious pages if we did not redd up before reading them.

That afternoon, all my *mamm* had to do was stand in the doorway of the barn with one hand on her hip and wag the nubby index finger of her other hand (nubby since it had gotten caught in the corn grinder when she was a child), and I leaped to my feet with my face aflame.

For hours and hours afterward, my stomach churned. I thought that when *Dawdy* got home from the New

Holland horse sales he would take me out to the barn and whip me. But he didn't.

To this day, I'm not even sure *Mamm* told him she'd caught Judah and me sitting very close together as we read from our *Englischer* books. I think she kept our meeting spot a secret because she did not want to root out the basis of our newly sprouted friendship, which she hoped would one day turn into fully grown love. Since my *mamm* was as private as a woman in such a small community could be, I never knew these were her thoughts until nine years later when I wrote to tell her I was with child.

She arrived, haggard and alone, two days after receiving my letter. When she disembarked from the van that had brought her on the twelve-hour journey from Pennsylvania to Tennessee, she walked with me into Leah and Tobias's white farmhouse, up the stairs into my bedroom, and asked in hurried Pennsylvania Dutch, "Is Judah the *vadder*?"

Shocked, I just looked at her a moment, then shook my head.

She took me by the shoulders and squeezed them until they ached. "If not him, who?"

"I cannot say."

"What do you mean, you cannot say? Rachel, I am your *mudder*. You can trust me, *jah*?"

"Some things go beyond trust," I whispered.

My *mamm*'s blue eyes narrowed as they bored into mine. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. Although I was nineteen, I felt like I was a child all over again, like she still held

the power to know when I had done something wrong and who I had done it with.

At last, she released me and dabbed her tears with the index nub of her left hand. “You’re going to have a long row to hoe,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“You’ll have to do it alone. Your *dawdy* won’t let you come back . . . not like this.”

“I know that, too.”

“Did you tell Leah?”

Again, I shook my head.

My *mamm* pressed her hand against the melon of my stomach as if checking its ripeness. “She’ll find out soon enough.” She sighed. “What are you? Three months, four?”

“Three months.” I couldn’t meet her eyes.

“Hide it for two more. ’Til Leah and the baby are stronger. In the meantime, you’ll have to find a place of your own. Tobias won’t let you stay here.”

“But where will I go? Who will take me in?” Even in my despondent state, I hated the panic that had crept into my voice.

My *mamm* must have hated it as well. Her nostrils flared as she snapped, “You should’ve thought of this before, Rachel! You have sinned in haste. Now you must repent at leisure!”

This exchange between my *mamm* and me took place eight months ago, but I still haven’t found a place to stay. Although the Mennonites do not practice the shunning

enforced by the Amish *Ordnung*, anyone who has joined the Old Order Mennonite church as I had and then falls outside its moral guidelines without repentance is still treated with the abhorrence of a leper. Therefore, once the swelling in my belly was obvious to all, the Copper Creek Community, who'd welcomed me with such open arms when I moved down to care for my bedridden sister, began to retreat until I knew my child and I would be facing our uncertain future alone. Tobias, more easily swayed by the community than he lets on, surely would have cast me and my bastard child out onto the street if it weren't for his wife. Night after night I would overhear my sister in their bedroom next to mine, begging Tobias, like Esther beseeching the king, to forgive my sins and allow me to remain sheltered beneath their roof—at least until after my baby was born.

“Tobias, please,” Leah would entreat in her soft, high-pitched voice, “if you don't want to do it for Rachel, then do it for *me!*”

Twisting in the quilts, I would burrow my head beneath the pillow and imagine my sister's face as she begged her husband: it would be as white as the cotton sheet on which I lay, her cheeks and temples hollowed at first by chronic morning sickness, then later—after Jonathan's excruciating birth—by the emergency C-section that forced her back into the prison bed from which she'd just been released.

Although I knew everything external about my twin, for in that way she and I were one and the same, lying

there as Tobias and Leah argued, I could not understand the internal differences between us. She was selfless to her core—a trait I once took merciless advantage of. She would always take the drumstick of the chicken and give me the breast; she would always sleep on the outside of the bed despite feeling more secure against the wall; she would always let me wear her new dresses until a majority of the straight pins tacking them together had gone missing and they had frayed at the seams.

Then, the ultimate test: at eighteen Leah married Tobias King. Not out of love, as I would have required of a potential marriage, but out of duty. His wife had passed away five months after the birth of their daughter Sarah, and Tobias needed a *mudder* to care for the newborn along with her three siblings. Years ago, my family's home had neighbored the Kings'. I suppose when Tobias realized he needed a wife to replace the one he'd lost, he recalled my docile, sweet-spoken twin and wrote, asking if she would be willing to marry a man twelve years her senior and move away to a place that might as well have been a foreign land.

I often wonder if Leah said yes to widower Tobias King because her selfless nature would not allow her to say no. Whenever she imagined saying no and instead waiting for a union with someone she might actually love, she would probably envision those four motherless children down in Tennessee with the Kings' dark complexion and angular build, and her tender heart would swell with compassion and the determination to marry a complete stranger.

I think, at least in the back of her mind, Leah also knew that an opportunity to escape our yellow house on Hilltop Road might not present itself again. I had never wanted for admirers, so I did not fear this fate, but then I had never trembled at the sight of a man other than my father, either. As far back as I can recall, Leah surely did, and I remember how I had to peel her hands from my forearms as the wedding day's festivities drew to a close, and *Mamm* and I finished preparing her for her and Tobias's final unifying ceremony.

"*Ach*, Rachel," she stammered, dark-blue eyes flooded with tears. "I—I can't."

"You goose," I replied, "*sure* you can! No one's died from their wedding night so far, and if all these children are a sign, I'd say most even like it!"

It was a joy to watch my sister's wan cheeks burn with embarrassment, and that night I suppose they burned with something entirely new. Two months later she wrote to say that she was with child—Tobias King's child—but there were some complications, and would I mind terribly much to move down until the baby's birth?

Now Tobias finishes reading from the Psalms, closes the heavy Bible, and bows his head. The community follows suit. For five whole minutes not a word is spoken, but each of us is supposed to remain in a state of silent prayer. I want to pray, but I find even the combined vocabulary of the English and Pennsylvania Dutch languages insufficient for the turbulent emotions I feel. Instead, I just close my

eyes and listen to the wind brushing its fingertips through the autumnal tresses of the trees, to the trilling melody of snow geese migrating south, to the horses stomping in the churchyard, eager to be freed from their cumbersome buggies and returned to the comfort of the stall.

Although Tobias gives us no sign, the community becomes aware that the prayer time is over, and everyone lifts his or her head. The men then harness ropes around Amos's casket, slide out the boards that were bracing it over the hole, and begin to lower him into his grave.

I cannot account for the tears that form in my eyes as that pine box begins its jerky descent into darkness. I did not know Amos well enough to mourn him, but I did know that he was a good man, a righteous man, who had extended his hand of mercy to me without asking questions. Now that his son has taken over as bishop of Copper Creek, I fear that hand will be retracted, and perhaps the tears are more for myself and my child than they are for the man who has just left this life behind.

✧ AMOS ✧

I never thought I would enjoy the day of my own funeral, yet that's exactly what I find myself doing. Outside my and my wife's *haus*, which has been scoured from top to bottom by my sisters, I watch my grandsons discard their

sorrow like a worn-out garment and begin to rollick with the enthusiasm of pups. Before you can count to *zehn*, the knees of their best pants are stained brown with dirt, and their straw hats with the black bands have gone sailing off into the yard, causing the fine hair not constrained in the bowl cuts to poke into their eyes.

If the mothers, aunts, and sisters of these boys could see them all now, they would surely wag their fingers along with their tongues. But they can't. They are too busy slicing *schunke* and mashing *grummebere*, beating egg whites into stiff meringue peaks and pouring pickled chowchow into crystal relish bowls. My wife brushes a tendril beneath her black bonnet and stoops to slide an apple strudel into the *kochoffe*. If given another chance, I would pull that black bonnet and prayer *kapp* back and burnish every silvered tendril of hers with a kiss. I imagine how Verna would scold while swatting me out of the kitchen, but all the while her dark eyes would shine as she reveled in the fact that she was loved by a man no longer afraid to show it.

I imagine, too, how I would go up to my three daughters—Irene, Mary, and Ruth—who are right now filling the chocolate whoopee pies with peanut butter cream, and I would hug them. Oh, how I would *hug* them! All these years as husband and father, I allowed my stiff German upbringing to inhibit the demonstrativeness of my love, for I thought the congregation might perceive physical touch to be improper. Now that my mortal eyes have been replaced with something far more heavenly,

I can see how my girls yearned for my touch until they became women who expected it no longer.

The banter of my wife, sisters, and daughters as they prepare the evening *esse* reassures my heart that theirs will mend, despite eyes still being swelled from tears and chests heaving with the flood of those they have not shed. The only one who worries me is Rachel Stoltzfus. Though she is of no immediate relation, I wish I could do something to ease the pain etched across her features because I feel responsible for it.

You see, when the heat of a Tennessee summer no longer allowed Rachel to conceal her illegitimate pregnancy beneath a shawl, she was placed amid those few who remain in the church while living outside its doctrinal parameters. The community, as they'd been taught by the generations before them, withdrew from Rachel so she could see the error of her carnal ways, ask for forgiveness, and rejoin the flock. I had always counted myself blessed that I was not bishop over a congregation that enforced the shunning. But watching everything unfold from this higher plane, I have to wonder if the shunning might be easier on the person it is placed upon. Without it, Rachel does not know her place, and the community does not know where to place her. They cannot be cruel—for what is Christlike in that?—but neither can they have her around the young women and men who haven't joined the church and could still be lured into leaving Plain life for the glamour of the *Englischer* world.

❧ Rachel ❧

Eli and I take a seat at the far end of the five tables. Although I have no appetite, I know that I must eat or my body will not produce enough milk to supply my ravenous son. I give him a knuckle of my left hand to suck, and his scrunched face relaxes until he realizes that nothing is coming out. Stiffening his body in its cocoon of blankets, his face darkens and his mouth splits open in a silent, frustrated wail. Then he gets his breath, and oh, what a breath it is! The entire house seems to reverberate with the intensity of his screams, and I am again amazed at how much noise can come from one so young.

Placing him against my shoulder, I sing the lullaby my *mamm* sang to Leah and me: “*Schlaf, kindlein, schlaf! Der vater hüt’ die schaf; die mutter schüttelt ’s bäumelein, da fällt herab ein träumelein. Schlaf, kindlein, schlaf!*” I stroke his downy hair and pat his bottom, but this does nothing to help. I am working my legs over the bench so I can go into the next room and not disturb anyone’s meal, when a hand brushes my shoulder.

Turning, I look up into the smiling face of Judah King.

“Let me take him,” he says. “You eat.” I glance down the long row of tables flanked by my sister’s family and friends, who are all watching us with a knowing gleam in their eyes.

“No,” I whisper. “They’ll talk.”

Judah shrugs. “What does that matter? They’ll talk anyway.”

With great reluctance, I pass Eli up to him. My eyes well with the image of my child tucked against a man's work-hardened chest. I know that feeling of masculine security is not one Eli will often experience.

Judah sits on the bench across from me. I won't give everyone the satisfaction of glancing down the table again, but inside my heart skitters against my ribs.

"What're you doing?" I whisper, staring at my plate. "Your name will be mud if you sit with me."

Judah tears off a piece of my *brot* and pops it into his mouth. Swallowing, he says, "What do I care about names?"

"You will once you lose it."

"Do *you* care?"

I nod but keep my eyes where they are. The pineapple gravy pooled on the *schunke* and *gemaeschde grumbeere* has started to congeal. "Yes, I care," I say. "But not for me. For *him*." I look up long enough to nod at Eli.

"Then why don't the two of you leave?"

"And go where?" I snap.

"I don't know, back to Lancaster?"

"I can't bring more shame upon my parents by raising a fatherless child under their roof. Besides, my *dawdy* won't let me come back."

Judah winces at this. Then he says, "Why don't we just leave?"

"What do you mean?"

"You and I, we could leave the church."

Hope causes my eyes to rise up to meet Judah's, and I see there is not a hint of jesting in them.

"But why? Why would you suggest that?"

He looks down at Eli, whose fingers are curled around his face like a starflower. "Because nobody should live in a place where they're not welcomed."

"Oh, Eli'll be welcomed. The community won't punish him for my sins."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I'm saying that *you* shouldn't live in a place where you're not welcomed."

"We must stop talking like this," I say. "I'm not just going to run away with you. I—I can't."

Judah King extends a hand toward me, and then looks down the length of the table to where his brother sits, watching us with disapproval in his eyes. Retracting his hand just as Tobias had done at the funeral, Judah's jaw begins to throb. "I'm not talking about running away; I'm talking about getting married."

"So you can make an honest woman of me?"

"No, Rachel. So I can make you my wife."

I point to the bright bundle nestled against Judah's chest. "And are you ready to be Eli's father, even though you don't know who the real father is?"

"Wouldn't you tell me if we were married?"

"Never. That's a secret I'll take to my grave."

"Never?" Judah leans back on the bench and searches my eyes. "You'll never tell?"

"No."

He nods. “Well, I can respect that decision, but I want you to know that it doesn’t change mine. I’m leaving Copper Creek in a month. I hope you’ll have your answer by then.”

“I can’t promise I will.”

“I know. I never asked you to promise anything.”

He comes around to my side of the table and passes back my son. In just a few minutes, my arms have grown unaccustomed to Eli’s warm weight. As I watch Judah King stride out of his family home with his shoulders squared, I let myself imagine how it would be to share the burden of raising this child together.

Even with a man I can never let myself love.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I was born on a hot August day in the heart of Amish country. My family moved to Tennessee when I was only three years old, but my childhood was filled with stories of Pennsylvania Dutch ancestors hiding TVs from bishops and concealing permed hair beneath *kapps*. However, this unique heritage did not interest me. Instead, I pouted as my mother divided my waist-length hair into plaits and then forced me to change from purple overalls into a jean skirt and sneakers in preparation for a visit to our Plain friends—knowing, even at the tender age of six, that this combination was a fashion faux pas. Playing hide-and-seek or kick the can with my Old Order Mennonite peers, however, I soon became grateful for that skirt, which helped me transition from Southern *Englischer* to intimate friend.

Years passed. I knew my Mennonite playmates had traded braided pigtails for *kapped* buns, yet on a visit to the community, I rebelled against my mother's instructions and arrived with unbound hair. During supper, which was

eaten beneath a popping kerosene bulb, the hostess came and stood behind my portion of the bench. She slid out my blue satin ribbon and plaited my hair as I stared into my bowl of *grummeere supp* accented with homemade *brot*.

The winter of my seventeenth year, I returned to the community to visit a once-raucous playmate whose ill health had transformed her into a soft-spoken friend. The whites of her deep-brown eyes had yellowed from liver complications. Her family and my own gathered around her bed, which was heaped with spinning-star quilts, and sang hymns whose Pennsylvania Dutch words I did not know, but whose meaning struck my heart with such clarity, tears slid down my cheeks.

One week later, I stood beside her grave, wearing a thick black headband to hide my newly pierced ears with the fake diamond studs that stabbed the tender skin of my neck, giving me a migraine further magnified by jaw-clenching grief. I remember how the somber community huddled around her family as if their physical presence could shield them, not only from the slashing wind and sleet, but from the reality that the body of their *dochder* and *schweschder* was about to be placed into the cold, hard ground.

I left for college that summer, almost eighteen years to the day after I had been born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the first person in my immediate family to attempt a higher education. As I unpacked my flared Lucky jeans and beaded sweaters into wobbling dorm drawers, I thought I was leaving my Mennonite heritage

along with a certain broad-shouldered, hazel-eyed man whose father had attended my father's Mennonite high school.

Three years, one death, and two lifetimes' worth of tribulations later, I realized that I had not lost the precious attributes surrounding my Plain heritage so much as I had needed to go away in order to find myself.

In the cool autumn of 2008, I married my broad-shouldered, hazel-eyed Dutchman, thus making my last name as difficult to spell as my first. I kept wearing my Lucky jeans and layering my wrists with jewelry, but I was also drawn to a simple life, reminiscent of the one I had once tried to flee. My husband and I purchased a forty-acre valley nestled at the base of softly rolling Tennessee mountains.

Upon moving into the *haus* my husband built with determination and his own two hands, I began to write a fictionalized version of a story that had once been told to me—a story regarding the power of desire and the reverberating cost if that desire is left unchecked, a story that, shockingly enough, took place in an idyllic Old Order Mennonite community.

In Nashville, I was introduced to a genial, white-haired man who was as excited to hear my Dutchy last name as I had been to hear his. He had attended the same Mennonite high school as my father (and my husband's father) and, as a literary agent, he was interested to read the portion of the story that I had completed.

He read the first twenty-five thousand words while flying home from a book festival in Brazil and wanted to read more. I continued to write as my expectant belly continued to grow. Two months after the birth of our daughter, Tyndale House accepted the manuscript; they were as excited to promote my modern retelling of *The Scarlet Letter* as I had been to write it.

And so, wearing Lucky jeans (the same pair, actually), chandelier earrings, and *unkapped* hair, I continue writing stories about the Pennsylvania Dutch heritage that once brought me acute embarrassment but has now become a creative outlet with no closing doors.

Thank you for joining me on this journey.