

THE MITING

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The Miting: An Old Order Amish Novel

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*For Rachel, Maryann, and Matty.
Your journeys are my inspiration.*

CHAPTER ONE

Leah Raber sank wearily onto the porch swing, causing the chains to jangle. She leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and imagined herself free—her skirt and apron flung carelessly over the branches of a prickly mulberry, her legs running to the pond, her hair blowing behind her as she leapt into cool, deep waters. She could almost feel the splash as she plunged into the secret world of water and swam among the fronds of the dark pond bottom, the silky liquid sliding against her arms and legs as her feet kicked out, over and over.

A cow mooed, and Leah came up for breath, opening her eyes to the reality of the hot, unrelenting sun.

Leah's gaze traveled around the yard to the barn, where she spotted Benny chasing a few of *Maem's* setting hens away from the road. His laughter carried across the field, his cheeks rosy and his bowl-shaped haircut flopping up and down while he chased the squawking birds. Life used to seem so simple.

From outward appearances, Leah could certainly see why *Englishers* would think her family's life was idyllic. But they didn't have to wear the long skirts and *kapps* and heavy shoes in the summer. They didn't have to follow endless rules . . . forever.

Pressing her feet against the gray boards of the porch, she stopped swinging and thought about going inside to help *Maem* put lunch on the table. With a sigh, she wiped the sweat from her face and stood up.

"Might as well get to it."

The kitchen felt even hotter than outside. *Maem* had started the weekly bread baking before five that morning in an effort to finish the task before the heat of the day, but the wood-burning stove had held its warmth. A fan or a quick-cooling propane stove, anything to relieve the heat, would be so nice in the kitchen.

“Another silly thing the *Ordnung* won’t allow . . .”

Maem turned with a puzzled frown. Wisps of damp hair clung to her flushed cheeks, and perspiration beaded over her lips. “Did you say something, Leah?”

“Just . . . oh, nothing.”

Maem bustled by to get some of her homemade, sweetened peanut butter spread and sweet pickles from the pantry. Her brow furrowed again, but a smile played at her lips. “I never know what you’re going to surprise me with.”

Leah reached into the bread box for the only loaf of wheat bread left from last Saturday’s baking. Slicing and arranging the bread on a white pottery plate, she hummed a song she’d heard the last time she’d been with her friend Martha.

Martha—against her parents’ and the church’s wishes—was dabbling in the English world. While some Amish sects turned a blind eye to a teen’s running-around years, their bishop preferred that children not flirt with sinful English ways. Just last week, Martha and her boyfriend, Abe Troyer, had stopped by Leah as she walked along the road. They were in Abe’s beat-up truck on their way to Ashfield to shop. Country music had blared from the radio, and the joyous freedom emanating from her friends made Leah long for something that seemed just out of her reach. A few of the words she’d heard still stuck in her head.

“*Oh, I wanna go to heaven someday—I wanna walk on streets of pure gold—I wanna go to heaven someday, but I sure don’t wanna go now.*”

“Leah!”

Maem’s sharp tone brought her back to the present, and Leah’s cheeks flushed as she realized she’d sung aloud. Not something her parents would want her to sing, that’s for sure.

“Sorry.”

Maem lowered her gaze and shook her head slightly, her face drawn.

Lately, Leah couldn't keep count of the number of times a day she made her mother frown. It didn't take much. The set of her jaw showed her disappointment.

Leah slammed the cheese knife down on the counter in frustration. *Can't even sing in my own home—can't sing anything but Sunday singing songs. Boring.* She whirled around to escape back onto the porch, but *Maem* caught her arm and motioned her to the table.

"There's something *Daet* and I want to talk with you about. We're concerned for you. I know it's your teen years and at least one of your friends has fiddled with English ways—"

"*Maem—*"

"No. Listen to me, please, for just a minute. So far, you haven't acted like you wanted to join Martha, but we're worried she's influencing you."

Leah ducked her chin, avoiding her mother's gaze. She'd known this talk was coming. *Best to get it over with.*

"*Maem*, don't you remember your teen years? Don't you remember longing for freedom? Just a little bit of time with no one telling you exactly what to do, what to wear?" Leah lifted her gaze to her mother, willing her to show a glimmer of compassion. *Maem's* stony face looked back, fueling Leah's determination.

"Didn't you ever wish that you could blend in—that people wouldn't stare at you, point at you, laugh at you? Why do we have to live this way? I want to understand, *Maem*, I really do, but I just don't see what we gain by living this way. So . . . so . . . backward. I could even accept being hot all summer long if I just understood why. So many things are wrong and sinful—too many to keep track of. But some of those same things are okay in other Amish communities. Like being allowed to have a phone shed in the driveway. Why can other Amish have that but not us? *Why?*"

Realizing she had raised her voice, she clamped her jaw shut. She hadn't meant to be disrespectful. *Maem* held her gaze, but her cheeks had gone white in spite of the heat of the kitchen. When she finally spoke, her voice was full of reproach and sorrow.

"You surprise me, Leah. You really do. You've never talked like this before. Your *daet* won't be happy to hear you saying these kinds of things.

And no, I did *not* question the things you seem to be so unhappy with.” *Maem* swiped a dish towel across the table in frustration. “What’s to question? You have a good home, good family, and a hard-working *daet* and *maem*. Your brothers and sister are good to you, too. The church—”

“*Maem*, I just want you to understand me. Even if you’ve never thought like this, can’t you think about what I’m saying? Just let me have a little breathing room, okay?”

“Breathing room for what?” *Maem* exclaimed. “Putting the light in your window as some girls do to attract *buves* driving by? Sneaking away in some boy’s sinful car and riding around drinking, smoking all night? Listening to godless music and wasting your life trying to find out what the English world has to offer you? Let me tell you this: the English have nothing to offer you. Believe me. Nothing.”

“How do you know that, *Maem*? How do you know! You’ve spent your whole life in this place and done everything the bishop and the church told you to do.” Leah jumped up from the table and threw her hands out imploringly. “I’m not like you and *Daet*. I need some freedom, and I want to do things other than staying here in this house, on this farm. I don’t want to spend all my time—”

The back screen door banged. *Daet* stood in the kitchen. Sawdust and small curls of wood covered his face and his blue cotton work shirt. He undoubtedly had heard her last words, but he silently went to the sink and washed his hands, then came to the table and sat down next to *Maem*. Fear of his reaction kept Leah from storming out.

The screen door banged again as her brothers and sister rushed in for lunch. *Maem* and *Daet* exchanged a look, then bowed their heads for silent prayer. When he finished praying, *Daet* pointed to Leah’s vacated chair. She cautiously eased into her seat and took a slice of bread.

“I think someone should catch that mean *hohma*, as soon as lunch is over.” Benny’s blue eyes sparkled. “I can do it. I’m old enough now.”

Maem wiped a glob of mustard off his cheek. “Being a second grader does make you old enough to do many things to help out, but I think you’d best leave that old rooster alone. He’ll claw you if you try to catch him.”

“But don’t you think he’d make pretty good *bott boi*?”

Ada snickered. “He’s ancient. And he’s mean, so I vote for *bott boi*, too.”

“Pretty much up to *Maem* when a chicken’s life is over around here.” *Daet* nudged Leah’s older brother, Daniel. “But she gets attached to ’em, too. Isn’t that why we don’t have chicken *bott boi* for *suppah* much, *Maem*?”

“That rooster has much more life left in him. We won’t be using him for pot pies any time soon. Now hurry and eat your lunch. *Daet* wants to *schwetz* with your sister.”

The siblings’ eyes swiveled to Leah. Deliberately ignoring their stares, she scrutinized her uneaten bread, her lips pressed tightly together.

The family finished the meal in silence, her brothers and sister seemingly aware of the awkward strain between their parents and Leah. Benny finished his milk with a long, loud gulp, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then scurried out of the kitchen behind Ada and Daniel.

Finally *Daet* pushed his plate back and leaned forward, resting his fists beneath his chin. He sighed, and his beard bobbed as he swallowed.

“Leah, I’m sorry to say I have no respect left for your friend Martha—”
“*Daet!* That’s not fair—”

He held up his hand. “No. I’ve thought and prayed about this for a while, and your *maem* and I have talked this over. You’re being influenced by her and what she’s doing.”

His gaze held Leah’s firmly, and though he said nothing else about her friendship with Martha, his message was clear: Martha would not be a welcome visitor to their home as long as she was *rumspringen* with the English. She was definitely outside the will of the church and going against the *Ordnung* letter in open rebellion.

“I also want you to consider joining the church sooner—as Daniel did. He didn’t have to join when he was only seventeen, but he decided it was best. I think once you’ve made that decision, all these worries and problems you’re having will stop pestering you.”

He stood up, signaling an end to the conversation, and went to the back door. As he pushed open the squeaky screen, he looked back at Leah, a tilted grin clearing his face of lingering anger. “By the way, Jacob Yoder is coming today to help me unload and stack lumber. He should be here in about an hour.”

An unexpected wave of remorse rolled over Leah, and she moved

quickly to her father, giving him an impulsive hug. He clumsily patted her arm before he hurried back to work in his furniture shop.

Leah then offered a look of contrition to *Maem*, who merely pointed to the dishes left on the table, waiting to be washed. Suppressing a sigh, which would only resurrect angry feelings, Leah set about redding up the kitchen. A moment later she felt *Maem*'s hand on her shoulder.

"Leah, you have always been such a headstrong child. Please don't let your stubborn and sinful nature get the best of you." *Maem* softened her words with a smile before reaching down for her basket and garden shears. With one meal over, it was time to start planning for the next one.

"I promise to think about joining the church. Okay?"

Her mother paused and tucked a strand of damp hair back under her kerchief covering. "Don't just think about it. Pray earnestly that your heart turns to *Gott* and that you will do it joyfully. Yes?"

Leah gave a short nod, turning to the table to gather the lunch dishes for washing. She watched through the kitchen window as her *maem* walked slowly across the yard.

Childhood memories of working beside *Maem* flashed through her mind—planting seeds in the spring and later pulling weeds to keep the rows neat; snapping green beans on hot, late-August afternoons; picking apples in the fall. *Maem*'s apron pockets had held secret sweets to reward her back then. Her mother wasn't much for hugs or kisses—it wasn't something her people did. But no matter what happened, *Maem* was always there to soothe away childhood hurts with her work-worn hands.

What kind of *maem* would Leah herself be one day? How would she deal with a daughter who dreamed of freedom and yearned for more than what farm life and rural living could offer? Would she understand a daughter's yearning to shake off the traditions of Amish life?

A long line of ghostly forefathers seemed to hover over Leah's shoulders, whispering their must-nots in her ears the livelong day. She shuddered. She was not rebellious by nature, and it hurt to know she was causing her *maem* pain.

"I really am trying *not* to be difficult," she whispered as she washed. "I just don't know what to think anymore."



Later that afternoon, Leah was in the wood shop helping *Daet* with the billing when she heard a wagon come up the drive. Nervous anticipation fluttered inside her. At the last Sunday singing, Jacob Yoder had shown more than enough interest in Leah, but he hadn't yet asked if he could take her home. Leah did not object to his attentions one bit.

The door swung open, and Jacob stepped in. She tried to control her keen awareness of him by pointing him to the back of the shop where *Daet* worked, but his impish dimple made it clear her nonchalant attitude hadn't fooled him.

"Good afternoon, Jacob," *Daet* called as he strolled out to the front of the workshop.

The men shook hands in greeting.

"Where do you want me to stack this cherry lumber?"

Daet pulled at his beard. "Let me see. I had it over there next to the back wall, but I think, with the order of dining-room furniture I have yet to finish, I'd like it closer this time." He scuffed out a spot to the right of the door. "This should work. It'll be close to me but not in the way of the oak that'll be coming next week."

Daet and Jacob worked side by side for several minutes in silence, while Leah forced herself to focus on the receipts. She could hear Jacob's footfalls as he moved back and forth between the delivery wagon and the shop. Already she recognized his step: quick and sure. He had been bringing supplies to *Daet* for several months, earning extra money for his family. It was a given that, being the oldest son and a good farmer in his own right, Jacob would take over from his father someday. But for now, he was also adding to the family's income by delivering lumber for Jonas Coblentz, the local lumber mill owner.

She glanced up in time to catch his glance as he passed the desk. The roguish dimple flashed as a friendly grin spread over his face. Leah held his gaze for a moment, taking in the broad shoulders, lean frame, and suntanned face. She could feel heat rising in her cheeks as Jacob's eyes twinkled in amusement.

Daet cleared his throat. “Uh, Jacob—”

“Yes?” Jacob broke his gaze to turn respectful eyes to Leah’s *daet*.

“What are you and the other teens hearing about Martha Mast and her boyfriend, Abe Troyer?”

Leah’s eyes darted up, and *Daet* glanced her way, as if to be sure she had overheard his question.

Jacob shuffled his feet in the sawdust and kept his head down. Finally, he looked at *Daet* and then over at Leah. “We know she’s *rumspringen* with *Englishers*, and she’s not likely to join the church, John.”

“Not going to join the church! You think not?” asked *Daet*, alarmed.

Leah looked at the pile of bills in her hand. *Daet* had thought Martha was going wild, but she knew it had never occurred to him before today that she might leave the Amish for good.

Jacob resumed piling wood. “She says she’s not going to join, and Abe’s looking into getting a factory job in Richland because he wants to do something other than farm.”

“I don’t farm either, but in no way would I consider leaving my faith and all I know to be right just to do something different for work.”

Jacob shook his head. “Work isn’t the issue for him, John. He doesn’t like all the rules and ideas of the Amish anymore. He claims he wants his freedom.”

Leah watched *Daet* ponder Jacob’s words. The community would not consider Abe’s actions a simple rebellious *rumspringen*, as some of the less strict, higher church Amish might. He would be seen as a young man with sin in his heart and the Devil’s hand on his shoulder.

Daet turned his gaze to Leah. “If Abe has Martha thinking like this, then maybe Martha is putting these same thoughts in your head, Leah.” He wagged his finger at her. “You should watch this friendship with her very carefully, Daughter. If she says anything against the church or the *Ordnung*, maybe we should get the bishop involved. Better to cause embarrassment or shame than to risk her soul.”

Leah lifted her chin in silent defiance. “I’ll remember that, *Daet*.”

He nodded, apparently satisfied with her response. “I’ll be right back. I have to get a tape measure.”

As he passed by her, he murmured under his breath, “A little time

alone with Jacob won't hurt, eh, Leah? You should be thinking of your future." *Daet* left the shop, whistling.

The heat from the sunlight coming in the window behind her had nothing to do with the warmth in her face. Jacob kept stacking lumber, but Leah was sure he'd heard some of *Daet's* whispered advice.

"*Being married almost always ensures that the jungen join the church,*" he'd said many times. He'd even mentioned once, after Benny and Ada were in bed, a *daet* who had gone so far as to allow bed courtship. The father had claimed it "helped" his wayward daughter make up her mind, but Leah's parents didn't think a hurried marriage with an early baby were worth the shame or risk, no matter how rebellious a daughter might become.

Jacob walked over to Leah and leaned casually against the counter. His shirt cuffs were rolled up to his elbows. His face glistened with sweat in the heat of the shop, but he looked calm and collected.

"Your *daet* is really concerned about Martha."

Leah frowned. "He and *Maem* think she's influencing me with her wild ways, and . . . maybe . . . some of that *might* be true."

She leaned in closer to Jacob, glanced at the door, and lowered her voice. "Do you ever have questions, Jacob, about all this, you know?" Her gesture took in the whole place.

Jacob shifted his weight, and when his gaze met hers, he was serious but gentle in his reproach. "Leah, you shouldn't be so worried. Everything is *gut*; your parents have the best in mind for you. My parents do for me, too."

"I don't know why, but I'm restless, Jacob. Feeling trapped, in a way."

His brown eyes looked into hers. He nodded. "It's your age, I think. I went through that for a few weeks, but you'll see. Soon you'll be back to being your cheerful self."

"So you plan to join the church this fall?" Leah asked, as she wiped her clammy palms on her apron. *Can he sense the indecision in my heart?*

"Yes. Probably will. Can't think of any reason not to, you know?"

Jacob twirled his straw hat. His work-hardened hands appeared older than the rest of him. He looked back at her merrily, and she couldn't help but smile. One thing about Jacob Yoder: he could charm a person into

anything. His wide, unaffected grin and sparkling eyes were everything friendly and warm. Laugh lines, accented by the tan he carried from being outside, added to his appeal.

Leah arranged the bills in a neat pile and stretched a rubber band around the ones that still needed to be paid. "I guess I should get back to the house and see what *Maem* wants me to do yet today."

He nodded. "Always lots of chores on a Saturday—right? You going into town later?"

"I think so. We have to do some shopping for the singing tomorrow night."

"It's out here?"

"Yes. We offered to host in place of Miriam and Paul. They have church tomorrow, but with their new baby, we thought the young people shouldn't bother them tomorrow night. *Maem* and *Daet* said it would be okay to have it here. You coming, Jacob?"

"You know it." He winked, then turned back to stacking lumber.

As Leah passed *Daet* on her way to the house, he raised his eyebrows, not missing the grin she wore and knowing who was responsible for putting it there.



The Sunday night singing went as planned. The *jungen* sang their favorite hymns and songs, ate the cookies Leah made, and chatted in the between times. When the evening ended, Leah wished the singing had been hosted elsewhere so she'd have had an excuse to be driven home in Jacob's buggy. She waved to friends as they drove away, some in couples, and some by themselves. Jacob drove off alone. Maybe he'd not be alone after the next singing.