

One

From her perch on the milking stool, Sylvia patted the cow's side and cooed to her, enjoying the warm softness of the cow's hide. "You're feeling better now, *ya?*" Puffs of white vapor left her mouth when she spoke, and her fingers ached from the cold.

The cow mooed gently as if answering her.

Sylvia removed the claw milker from the cow's udder and sprayed Udder Care to prevent chaffing and to ward off mastitis. She set the stool and bucket out of the way, moved to the far end of the stalls, and pulled the lever that opened the tie rails, releasing the last round of cows from their milking stalls.

Daed lifted two buckets of milk and headed for the milk house. "What are you humming this morning?"

"Oh. Uh..." She hadn't realized she was humming, so she had to pause for a moment and think. "Moon River."

"Sure does sound nice. This place don't seem the same when you're off. No one else I know hums while working a herd." He disappeared into the milk house to dump the fresh liquid into the milk tank.

Unlike a lot of *Daeds*, Sylvia's hadn't minded when she bought an iPod during the early years of her *rumschpringe*. The *Englischer* who picked up their milk three times a week had always recharged it for her. But then, five years ago, it fell under a cow during a milking and was trampled to death. Since she still hadn't joined the faith, she could've bought another iPod, but Lilly was seven by then and hanging around the barn more. It would have hurt Lilly to realize that her older sister didn't always keep the Old Ways, so she never replaced it. But she missed some of her favorite songs, like "Moon River." The lyrics about the dream maker always made her think of Elam.

Her pulse quickened as she envisioned Elam next to her in the barn. His good looks seemed more suited to modeling in *Englischer* ads than managing a dairy herd, and she found his physical presence frustratingly compelling. He frequently mentioned marriage lately, and she could imagine their future together, always being close to him, waking alongside him in the mornings. But she had reservations too. Didn't she want more from true love than heart-pounding attraction? Maybe she just needed to spend more time talking with him about their "rainbow's end," and all her reservations would melt into nothingness.

She patted a few cows on the rump, gently moving them along. The herd desperately wanted in the barn at milking time, each cow hurrying to a stall in the milking parlor, but they weren't eager to leave the building afterward. Their contented lowing and the ease with which they lumbered outdoors toward the bunk feeder and water trough made her smile. The large creatures were the same today as they'd always been—peaceful and productive.

In a side stall a new calf nursed from its mother. Ginger slid her head across the wooden gate, and Sylvia rubbed her long forehead. Sylvia had been up half the night making sure Ginger didn't have any trouble bringing the calf into the world. Fortunately, Sylvia hadn't needed to pull the calf or call a vet. Both were victories she was proud of.

Two years ago after she'd cried over the death of both a cow and her calf, her *Daed* did the unthinkable. He gave her the right to tend to the breeding of the herd as she saw fit. Her ways took more effort than his, but she'd not lost a cow or a calf yet. Milk production was

up, and the overall health of the herd had improved. She had her grandpa's teachings to thank for that.

Her Daed returned from the milk house. "I bet you're thinking about *Daadi* Fisher."

"Ya, I think of him every time a healthy calf is born." As a child she'd been her grandfather's shadow while he tended to the cows, and she'd been young when he began training her in the value of careful breeding and vigilance during every labor and birth. In spite of her being a girl in a patriarchal society, he believed in her. When he'd passed away a couple of years ago, she thought her heart might break.

Daed headed toward the remaining buckets of milk.

Sylvia pushed the wheeled cart that carried all her milking supplies toward the mud sink. "I need the two heaviest of those buckets, Daed."

"Two?" His eyes met hers, reflecting interest. "You making more yogurt already?"

"I am."

"Are we eating that much, or are you selling that much?" He poured the white, frothy liquid into a sterilized milk can for her and securely tamped down the lid.

"The answer to both is yes."

It was rare to see a smile on Daed's face before breakfast, but he grinned broadly. "*Sell iss gut, ya?*"

"Ya, it's a good thing." She pushed the supply cart into the milk house section of the barn and then returned to the parlor. "Daed, do you mind if I go to the house early? A bad dream woke Ruth up last night. I promised her that this morning I'd prove it was just a dream."

He tossed a pitchfork into a wheelbarrow and went into the first stall. "Sure, go on."

Sylvia abandoned her usual routine and climbed the haymow. After finding the mama cat's new hiding place for her kittens, she gently placed Ruth's favorite tabby into the inside pocket of her coat and then went back down the ladder.

"Hey, Daed."

He turned, and she pulled out the kitten, once again hinting at her ultimate goal: for Ruth to be allowed to keep this one inside the house when the little fur ball was a week or so older.

A lopsided grin caused one side of his face to wrinkle, and she wondered what had him so jovial this morning. "Just don't get me in trouble over it. And make sure Ruthie knows it can't stay inside. Barn cats tend to become mean once they get a little age on them."

Sylvia put the milk cans into a wooden handcart. "They wouldn't if—"

"Go already." He shooed her toward the barn door. "I don't want to hear any more of your newfangled ideas about how I could run this farm differently. They always cost me money and energy."

His tone was playful, but she'd be wise to accept that he meant his words...for now. He'd come a long way in accepting her ideas concerning the farm. She often wondered if he'd give her any say if he had a son. She'd never know, because he had nine daughters, of which she was the eldest and the only one with a heart for farming.

His other daughters were more typical and girlish in every possible way, preferring housework over farm work. The three teenagers—Beckie, Lizzie, and Naomi—hated

farming, always had. Lilly, who'd just turned twelve, would never complain about anything, but the smells and hard work made her queasy. The four youngest—Ruth, Barbie Ann, Salome, and Martha—were a hazard in the barn, causing Daed to shoo them away if they set foot inside the milking parlor.

Pushing the milk cart, Sylvia hurried from the barn to the house. Last week's snow glistened under the early morning sunlight. She toted the heavy milk cans inside one by one, being careful not to lean the containers against her body and squish the kitten.

The warmth of the entryway made her cold fingers scream in pain. Delicious aromas of sausage, biscuits, and coffee made her mouth water and her tummy rumble, keen reminders of how long and cold her night had been.

Her *Mamm* was adding wood to the stove, and Lizzie stood at the sink, washing dishes. There was never a shortage of dirty glasses and plates in a house with eleven people.

Sylvia removed her wader boots. "Morning."

Lizzie yawned. "That it is, and it arrives way too early in this house."

"Why, there you are." Mamm closed the door to the stove, smiling and motioning for her. "*Kumm*. Warm yourself. How's that mama cow?"

"Ginger and her newborn are doing great."

"I'm glad, but a girl shouldn't have to work like you do."

"I love it. You know that."

Mamm put her arm around Sylvia's shoulders and squeezed. "Still, we need a solution, and your Daed's found one that is right around the corner."

Sylvia would never get used to Daed making plans about the farm without telling her. "What does that mean?"

Naomi came through the back door, carrying an armload of firewood. She held the door open while Beckie entered with a lighter bundle of wood.

Beckie's blond hair peeked out from under one of Daed's black felt hats, and her blue eyes shone with spunk. "Good grief it's cold out there. Isn't it time for warmer weather?"

Mamm pulled several mugs out of the cabinet. "Your Daed said they're calling for a long winter and a late spring this year."

Clearly her mother had no intention of answering Sylvia's question. She'd find out whenever her Daed was ready for her to know.

Naomi dumped her load of wood into the bin and quickly straightened it. After she finished, Beckie tossed hers in and began warming her hands over the stove. Naomi straightened the mess, piece by piece. Getting the morning firewood used to be Beckie's job, but she wasn't good at doing chores by herself. Not making beds, washing dishes, or getting firewood. She would come back with only a couple of pieces of wood, and later, when Mamm wanted to add fuel to the stove, the bin would be empty. Sylvia and her sisters used to fuss about doing their jobs and then having to help Beckie with hers, but arguing only made everyone's days miserable. In the end, someone still had to help Beckie in order for all the chores to get done.

On washdays when it was time for Beckie to gather the dirty clothes, she seemed half-blind, always forgetting a few hampers, including the diaper pails. Since Naomi, a brown-haired beauty, was as meticulous as they came, she and Beckie were assigned to work

together. Beckie was sweet and plenty smart. She just needed to mature, and Sylvia trusted she'd do that one day. But at eighteen, she had a ways to go.

Beckie dusted her gloved hands over the woodbin. "These temps wouldn't be so bad if someone in this room"—Beckie stared at Sylvia, amusement dancing in her eyes—"wouldn't abandon her side of our bed to tend to cows. I woke up lonely and with my toes freezing."

"You could've bedded down beside Ginger. Then you wouldn't have been lonesome or cold."

Beckie peeled out of her gloves. "Ew, gross. I will never be *that* frosty or alone, thank you very much. It's unfair that we ended the day just right, and the next thing I know, I'm in a cold bed all by myself."

Sylvia couldn't help but smile. Beckie and she had slept in the same bed since Beckie was old enough to leave her crib. And as far back as Sylvia could remember, they'd ended most days in the same way, sharing things only sisters did and then whispering, "*Im Gott sei Lieb*"—in God's love—over each other, putting their joys and sorrows in His hands before they fell asleep.

The kitten mewed, and Mamm stopped pouring coffee into a mug. Beckie gazed into Sylvia's eyes, doing her best to suppress a laugh. Lizzie glanced her way and seemed to purposefully drop a plate onto the countertop in an effort to distract their mother. Thankfully it wasn't breakable.

"Meow." Beckie mimicked the kitten and did a good job of it. "Meow."

Mamm sighed. "Beckie, stop that. I thought I heard a real cat."

"Me too." Lizzie mocked scolding Beckie as she picked up the plate.

Mamm didn't like or trust cats. Rational or not, she worried that they'd scratch one of her daughters' faces and leave scars.

"I can't find my homework." Ruth's whiny voice was a clear indication of how poorly she'd slept last night.

"Coming." Mamm wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "She's so miserable this morning that I don't know if she can go to school."

"I'll see to her." Sylvia hurried toward the doorway of the kitchen. "And she'll be in the mood to go within the hour. I'm sure of it."

"I hope so," Mamm said. "She loves school like you love farming."

"Ah, but she'll grow out of liking school," Sylvia teased before getting to the steps.

"Wait," Mamm said.

Sylvia stopped and turned.

Mamm propped her hands on her small hips. "You need to eat."

"Oh, she's fine," Beckie said. "I'll fix her some coffee and take it to her."

"You girls." Mamm sighed. "Something's going on. I know that much."

"We're just pitching in to help each other like you taught us," Lizzie said.

"Ya, uh-huh." Mamm slung the dishcloth onto her shoulder, a move she repeated dozens of times every day. "You all stick together like peanut butter and jam." She motioned for Sylvia to go. "Well, do whatever you're going to do. But I want food in you within the hour. You were out most of the night, and you need to get some sleep."

Mamm's correcting tone grated on Sylvia a bit. It never seemed to dawn on her Mamm that by Sylvia's age, she was married and had been running her own home for more than four years. She had one child and another on the way by twenty-two. But as long as Sylvia was unmarried, it seemed she'd be treated like a child.

When Sylvia stepped into Ruthie's bedroom, her little sister was sitting on her bed, crying. The sight of it tugged on Sylvia's heart. She covered her lips with her index finger and closed the bedroom door. "Shh. Don't squeal. But look what I have for you." Sylvia eased the kitten from her pocket.

Ruthie's eyes lit up, in much the same way Sylvia imagined her own did whenever Elam came to the house. "Whiskers." Ruth held out her hands. "She is alive."

"I told you it was just a bad dream." Sylvia placed her hand on Ruth's forehead, checking for a fever. She didn't seem to be coming down with a bug.

"How'd you get Whiskers past Mamm?"

"The little fur ball likes to snuggle in warm places."

Sylvia laid Whiskers in Ruth's lap. She'd no more than gotten Ruth and Whiskers settled and content when Martha started crying, demanding someone get her out of her crib, which woke Salome and Barbie Ann.

The day became a blur of tending to little ones, doing laundry, preparing meals, taking the school-age children to school and picking them up, and helping Beckie make herself another new dress. Sylvia didn't know why Beckie felt she needed one by that evening when she wasn't going anywhere, but they got it done before supper. Sylvia also managed to squeeze in a nap before returning to the barn for the second milking.

The good part was that the busyness made the day hurry by. Sylvia looked at the clock for the umpteenth time. Elam should be here any minute.

Daed had gone to the bank a few hours ago, and he had instructed Lizzie and Lilly to help with the evening milking. When her sisters filled in for Daed, the process always took longer. Darkness fell long before they left the barn for the night, and the stars twinkled brightly.

As they crossed from the barn to her home, she spotted Elam's rig in the carriage house. Her heart went wild. Why hadn't he stepped into the barn to say hello?

She and her sisters went inside the house and peeled out of their coats, scarves, and boots. Kerosene lamps were lit throughout, giving off a warm glow.

Elam's voice filled her soul as it softly rumbled through the house. She followed the sound of it until she found him with her Daed, sitting in the office, looking over papers. With his head bent over a calendar, she was able to study his handsome features unobserved.

Have they been talking business? To her knowledge they'd never done so before. She knew about milking cows and breeding and delivering calves, but she understood almost nothing about the other parts of farming—the finances, the land, growing crops, and what it took to keep the silos filled.

Elam jotted something down. "I think if the weather cooperates and we plant the alfalfa earlier this spring than you have in past years, we could rotate the crop and gain sufficient growing time to have enough silage to increase the herd numbers."

We? Something about his use of the word bothered her. But she knew better than to speak up. If her Daed wanted her input, he would have asked her to join the meeting. Still, it seemed they at least could have invited her to listen to the conversation.

Elam set his notes aside and lifted a stack of papers. "I think this'll work. It might take a few—" He spotted Sylvia standing in the doorway.

Daed glanced up and then returned to studying the documents in front of him. "You were saying?"

Elam rose to his feet. "I have no idea." He closed the gap between them, and a desire to be his thudded inside her chest. "Hi."

"Hello." She longed to kiss him. It'd been so long since their first kiss. She'd never forget it and that quiet evening as the horse and carriage ambled along under the harvest moon. "What are you two up to?"

"Nothing much." His eyes bore into hers with such intensity it was all she could do not to blush. She felt beautiful—wanted—and not at all like an odd duck.

"Elam," Beckie called. "Kumm. Surely it's time you returned to our game."

Elam's smile warmed Sylvia's insides as he winked before peering around her. "Later, pipsqueak."

"You'd better watch out calling her that," Sylvia whispered before Beckie came into the room. At eighteen, Beckie did not like being treated the same as the rest of the brood.

Elam held his hand a few feet off the floor. "It's not my fault she's about this big." He glanced at Beckie while smiling at Sylvia.

Beckie's cheeks flushed pink, and Sylvia wished he wouldn't pick on her. She tended to be dramatic about her petite size and anything else she was teased about.

Elam enfolded Sylvia's hand in his, and her knees felt weak.

Daed moved around them. "Kumm, Beckie. It's their time to be alone."

He pulled the door closed, which was against the house rules he'd made. When a beau visited, he had to earn the right to see his intended in a room by themselves, but even then the door was to remain ajar.

"Alone at last." Elam peered down at her before kissing her forehead.

Oh, how she longed to tilt back her head and let him kiss her lips. The desire overwhelmed her, and she felt like a fallen autumn leaf caught in a windstorm. Her Mamm said that there was nothing wrong with feeling so attracted to Elam, that it was as natural as getting hungry and needing sleep—as long as her feelings didn't turn to actions. But Sylvia wished it'd ease up so she could think with a clear head.

Elam slid his arms around her. "Your Daed has hopes for us, and we've agreed to start working the fields together this spring. But my dreams have nothing to do with farm work. They're haunted by a certain raven-haired beauty." He lowered his lips until they brushed her ear. "I love you. Marry me, Sylvia."

His whisper and his words drew her, but they also jarred her like rock shattering against pavement. Part of her had hoped for this moment since he'd stolen that first kiss last fall. That part nudged her to embrace him and say yes. But she remained still, knowing her whole heart wasn't committed.

She wondered where she fit inside his and her Daed's plans.

She had reservations when it came to the traditional idea of marriage, and she'd told Elam so. An Amish man's life barely changed when he married. His wife looked after him as his mother had—making clothes, cooking three times a day, and doing laundry. He kept doing the same job he always had, whatever it was. But a woman had to be ready to take on the responsibility of running a home and giving birth to baby after baby, sometimes into her forties, as her mother had.

As much as she thrilled at being with Elam, Sylvia wasn't sure she was ready to begin that journey. Something else nagged at her too, and she wished she knew what.

Easing away from him, she tried to gather her thoughts. The papers on the table sat in the light of the kerosene lantern on Daed's desk. She flipped through them, realizing the two of them were revamping the day-to-day running of the farm. "I didn't know you were this interested in our farm."

"I am now. My Daed would have to make room for another son to join him in his timber framing business. But your Daed really needs me."

The farm needed manpower, and Elam had plenty of it. That didn't bother her at all. What bothered her was her ignorance concerning his plans. He hadn't even thought to discuss them with her.

"It seems like you'd talk to me about all this before talking to Daed."

"I speak to him about business matters and to you of marriage. Would you prefer I turn the two around?" He chuckled at his joke.

Sylvia joined his laughter. "Definitely not, and I'm sure Daed appreciates that."

"Ya, me too."

She lifted an official-looking paper that had both men's signatures on it.

"Hey." Elam spoke softly while cupping his hand under her chin. "I just proposed. You did hear me, right?"

She placed her hand over the center of her chest. "I carry you in my heart, Elam, and in my head...all the time. You know that. But at the risk of angering you, I have to ask again. Doesn't it seem out of place that you're making plans for the future, our future, without even talking to me?"

"I was aiming to surprise you, which you don't seem to appreciate. Your grandfather left you his house, and it makes sense for us to live and work here. Doesn't it?"

"Ya. Sure it does."

"Look, Sylvia, I know you have funny ideas about how things should be sometimes. And you have some wild thoughts about what a marriage needs to look like. But I didn't expect this response—or, rather, lack thereof—and I *can* tell you I'm not thrilled about it."

"I'm sorry." She set the paper on the table and eased her hand into his, once again pulled in by his mysterious allure. "I...I was just caught off guard. I'm too surprised to have an answer right away."

"What's there to think about? You want to be with me... I know you do."

"Nothing, really, and I do want to be with you. But I can't say yes this moment. I need a little time to absorb it all."

He stood there, so tall and unbelievably handsome, and she should be melting in his arms. She wanted that, so what was wrong with her?

“You said it yourself, Elam. I’m weird sometimes. The fact is, I don’t react to much of anything the way most people do. There’s no reasoning it out. Just give me a couple of weeks. I’ll be able to explain what’s going on inside me then, okay?”

“Ya, okay. There’s time, since we don’t need to make any plans until spring. But I want to get married this fall, Sylvia.”

“This fall?”

He pulled away from her, his features growing hard. “You don’t have to say it like it’s a disgusting idea.”

Sylvia was surprised by his sudden irritation. “I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry it sounded so rude.”

“I’m going now. But you should sort through whatever’s holding you back—and as soon as possible.”

Her heart fell as he walked out, heading straight for the back door. Despite her conflicting feelings, she hadn’t wanted him to leave, especially not while he was upset with her.

“Elam?” Daed rose from his spot across from Beckie, upsetting the checkerboard as he did. “Leaving so soon?” He glanced at Sylvia, silently asking her half a dozen questions.

“I need to go. We’ll talk later.” Elam paused at the hatrack and grabbed his coat.

Beckie went to him. “But we haven’t had supper yet or played a game.”

“Another time, Beckie.” He put on his black felt hat while his eyes stayed glued to Sylvia. “We’ll talk again when I’m not so angry.”

Sylvia nodded, wishing he hadn’t announced to her whole family that she’d upset him.

Beckie moved to her side. “What’s going on?”

Sylvia didn’t answer. Some things were too private to share, even with Beckie. But no matter how much Sylvia wanted to keep her silence about this, she doubted she could. She never had been much for keeping truths to herself.

Without another glance her way, Elam walked out the door. Surely after he cooled off a bit, he’d see that her request was reasonable. A little time to think, and she’d be ready to give him the answer he wanted.

The two horses struggled to pull the loaded wagon. Sylvia slapped the reins against the team’s back, urging them out of the feed store parking lot and onto the main road. Heavy gray clouds hung low, and a cold wind from the west had begun to blow.

She’d taken her homemade yogurts by Eash’s Market, bought groceries, and picked up what seemed sufficient cow feed to get them through the rest of this unusually long winter. That was everything...she hoped.

Sylvia tapped the reins again, urging the horses to hurry. Her thoughts remained on Elam. It’d been three weeks since he’d come to the house. How much longer would he wait before talking to her?

When she’d seen him at the church meeting, he’d seemed unable to take his eyes off her. That had to be a good sign.

She loved him. That she knew for sure. But were they ready to marry? And how could he make plans with her Daed to change the operations of the farm and never once consider asking her opinion?

She didn't expect her Daed to understand her. He lived in a man's world and made do with daughters to help him. But Elam was supposed to know and love the real her, oddities and all.

Now that she understood what had bothered her so much, she was ready to talk to him about it. If he could see her side of it, and if she could see his side, they could work this out.

The house came into sight, and a bitter wind chilled her as she pulled into the driveway.

Elam. Her heart raced as if it'd been tapped by the reins. He and her father were hurrying into the barn. Surely this meant Elam was over being angry at her. It could mean that he'd decided to start working with her Daed in spite of her, but why would he wait until a Friday night?

Gusts of wind nipped her face as she brought the rig to a stop near the back door. She hopped down and ran two bags of groceries inside. "Hello?"

Her Mamm hurried toward her.

"Elam's here," Sylvia said. "Will you get the others to finish unloading the wagon?" She spun on her heels, ready to shout Elam's name and run for the barn the moment she was outside, but her Mamm caught her arm.

"Beckie wants to see you."

"Can't she wait?"

"No. It's best if you go on and talk to your sister. She's in the wash house."

Sylvia stared at her mother, waiting for an explanation, but Mamm simply nodded toward the washroom. Sylvia unbuttoned her coat and went through the narrow hallway that connected the wash house to the main house. Maybe now she'd find out what her sister and their parents had been whispering about for more than a week. Other than a few hints of being excited about something, Beckie had been unreadable, which had never happened before. Her sister had remained silent whenever Sylvia had asked her about it. Whatever it was, her Mamm seemed quite displeased.

"Beckie?"

The moment Sylvia saw her sister, she noticed several things. She wasn't happy, she didn't have on her prayer *Kapp*, and she wasn't making eye contact. Beckie stoked the fire in the small potbelly stove, closed the door to the stove, and set the face of a pressing iron on it.

Since learning what Sylvia had told Elam the night he left, Beckie had been distant and quiet, not offering any words of comfort. And she'd been going out every evening.

Sylvia pulled off her gloves. "You're ironing on a Friday afternoon? What'd you do wrong while I was out?"

Beckie turned to her. "Nothing. I washed my prayer *Kapp*, and I want it to look just right for tonight."

"Ah, you must be going out again."

Beckie nodded, but Sylvia could read no emotion in her face.

"Mamm said you wanted to see me."

“Ya.” Beckie fidgeted with a few loose strands of hair, tucking them carefully back into place.

“And...”

Beckie had obviously done something she shouldn't have—borrowed a dress and stained it or ruined another of Sylvia's prayer Kapps or borrowed money from Sylvia's stash.

“Whatever is on your mind, dear sister, can we speed this conversation along? I forgive you. There. It's done. Elam is here, and I want to go see him.”

Beckie licked her lips. “He's not here to see you.”

“He said that?”

She nodded.

“I guess he's still mad at me after all. Is he here to help Daed?”

“No. Well, maybe a little. But Elam's not upset that you turned him down. Not anymore.”

Tightness moved into Sylvia's chest. “I didn't turn him down. You know that. I only said I needed a little time. You reminded him of that, right?”

Beckie shrugged. “I'm sorry, but it's for the best, Sylvia.”

Panic began to race through her. What had happened? “Beckie, it's not for the best to let Elam think I don't want to marry him. It's just that twenty-two feels young.”

“Nonsense. Most brides marry much younger than that...Amish ones anyway. I don't think you really love him.”

“That's ridiculous. What would you know about it?” Sylvia's world tilted. Why was she having this conversation with Beckie? None of it made sense.

Beckie placed a clean towel on the ironing board and gently laid her prayer Kapp on it. “He's...he's here for me.”

“Oh, honey.” Trying to think of the most gentle way to correct her sister, Sylvia stepped closer. “You must have something mixed up. I—”

Beckie's face turned red, and she shook a finger at Sylvia. “Of course you'd think that! No way could he be interested in a pipsqueak like me, right? Well, he's asked me to marry him, and I wasn't stupid enough to tell him to wait!”

“Elam did what? No!” Her sister's betrayal burned through her, charring everything she held dear.

Beckie's face softened. “I shouldn't have blurted it out. I'm sorry.”

“You...you've been seeing Elam?”

“Ya.”

Hurt and confusion churned within her, and Sylvia couldn't catch her breath. “I have to talk to him. This is all wrong. He loves me. Wants me.”

“Sylvia, no.” Beckie moved in front of her, an unfamiliar steeliness in her eyes. “Don't make this harder than it has to be.”

Sylvia stepped around her sister, ran out of the wash house, and headed for the barn. Rolling clouds moved quickly across the sky, shrouding the land in winter's gray.

Surely Elam wouldn't... Beckie had to be wrong. The idea of her sister being disloyal hurt too much to bear. And Elam's betrayal? Impossible.

Sylvia hurried into the barn and stopped short. Neither man noticed her.

“Elam.”

When his eyes met hers, she was no longer confident that Beckie was mistaken.

“It’s not true, is it?” Tears threatened, and she swallowed hard. “Tell me you didn’t ask Beckie to marry you.”

Her Daed studied her for a moment before he lowered his head and went to the milk house, giving them privacy. Her Daed’s reaction made her head spin, and she longed to wake from this nightmare.

Elam walked over to her but fixed his eyes on the floor. “I told you I’m ready to marry this next wedding season.”

Part of her felt numb, and part of her burned as if someone had dumped scalding water on her. “You sound as if you don’t care who you marry. I thought you loved me.”

“I wasn’t the one who sounded sick at the idea of getting married this fall.” He lifted his eyes, and she could see his contempt. “And the truth is, I don’t think you’re ever going to be ready.”

“That’s not true.” How had the feelings between them soured so quickly?

“Do you love me?”

“If I said yes, what difference would that make now? You’ve betrayed me with my sister.”

“Let’s assume the answer is yes. That means you turned me down in spite of how you feel. Why? That’s all I want you to answer—for yourself, Sylvia. Why?”

Dozens of thoughts ran through her, and she didn’t know which to voice first. “She’s my sister, Elam. How could you do this?”

“If I wait, will you marry me?”

Was he setting her up so he could make more points in his argument, or was he proposing again? Her head pounded. “Are you...asking?”

“I—”

“Stop it,” Beckie hissed, interrupting his response. She moved between them, facing Sylvia.

Elam seemed perfectly content to hide behind her sister. Who was this man? Obviously a disloyal liar and a cheat. As if piecing together a quilt, she began to see a new pattern forming.

On the weekends, after she and Elam finished milking the herd, he’d go into the living room while she showered and put on fresh clothes. How many of those nights had she come downstairs and found him and Beckie cackling over some line in a book or a game of some sort? Often he’d sit between the two of them as they took turns reading aloud. She never once had challenged Beckie about it.

What a fool she’d been. And she feared that her sister was being one also.

Beckie moved closer. “Sylvia, please, open your eyes. I love him so much more than you ever did. Since you turned him down, I see no reason for you to stand in our way.”

Sylvia fought to remain standing when all she wanted to do was sink to her knees and sob. “How could you do this to me? You’re my sister, and you know how I feel about Elam!”

“I know how *he* feels. He loves *me*, Sylvia. And it’s clear that I love him more than you do.”

Sylvia looked past her sister, wondering how Elam had managed to steal both of their hearts. Had he kissed Beckie too? Was Sylvia blinded by attraction? “How can you be so sure? I’m no longer sure he has any clue who he loves.” She hoped Beckie would hear that truth.

Elam slid his hand into Beckie’s, and Sylvia thought she might die from the pain of it. “I asked her, and she said yes. It’s done.”

The undeniable fact that they’d been seeing each other behind her back scattered the words inside her until she could find none to try to reason with her sister.

The door to the milk house creaked as it opened, and her Daed came toward her.

Sylvia motioned at the twosome. “How can you agree to this?”

Her Daed gestured for Elam and Beckie to leave. “We’ll finish up.” He waited until they were gone.

Tears ran down Sylvia’s face. “How could you be a part of this?”

“I’m not a part of it any more than you are. I’ve talked to Beckie until I have no more words.”

“Do you not have enough loyalty to me to refuse her?”

“Sylvia.” Daed pulled out his handkerchief and passed it to her. “I couldn’t have stopped what happened.” He motioned for her to walk with him as he went to a horse’s stall on the far side of the barn and grabbed a bridle. “I can dictate certain things over her, but no parent can predict or prevent something like this. No matter who Elam ended up with, the damage was done before either of us knew what was happening. You have it in you to forgive and let go. Beckie doesn’t.” He bridled the horse. “You can help your Mamm forgive too. She’s fit to be tied, as your sisters will be when they find out.”

Sylvia stared at her father, unable to believe his casual attitude toward Elam and Beckie’s traitorous behavior. “I can’t stay here and watch them marry.”

“It’ll be tough. I know it will.” He put a saddle on the horse and began tightening the girth. “But before Daadi Fisher died, he did something that’s never been done before. He left a fourth of the family farm to a granddaughter—you. He bypassed every son and grandson to do it. You were grieving too deeply to know what all was happening, but for a while I thought there was going to be a feud over it. And I wasn’t sure the church leaders would allow it, but in the end they did. Don’t tell me you’d give up your inheritance over a man. I won’t believe it. Besides, if you don’t keep giving the dairy farm all you’ve got, you’ll own a fourth of nothing but bills.”

“You’re not hearing me.” She nearly shrieked at him. “I can’t stay here.”

“You’ve always said that the old place Daadi Fisher left you is too far from the herd for your taste. Let Elam and Beckie live there. It’ll give you some distance, as if they’re neighbors. You and I will run the herd and milk production. He and I will produce and harvest crops, keep the silos filled, and deal with the waste management. It’s a huge place, and if we handle things right, you won’t have to see him often. It’s far from ideal, but it’s the best I can offer.”

She’d never considered living in the two-bedroom house Daadi Fisher had left her, but the idea of Elam and Beckie moving there made her sick.

“Daed, I don’t care where they live. I have to get out. Why can’t you understand that?”

Hints of anger shadowed her Daed’s face before he drew a deep breath. “This is home, and no unmarried daughter of mine is moving away. It’s not respectable, and I won’t have it. You can find the strength, Sylvia. I know you can.”

“Is Elam doing this because of those papers you two signed?”

“No. But if I’d known then how this would turn out, I wouldn’t have taken him on as a partner. I’m sorry, Sylvia. Really sorry.” He held the leads out to her, giving her permission to go riding until she felt better. “I’ll see to it that you can get away for long weekends as much as possible. You can stay with cousins and aunts from other states for weeks at a time during our slow season. But this is home. I can’t imagine living here without you, and running away isn’t acceptable.”

She stared at him, too broken to feel any hope for her future. It was beyond her how either Beckie or Elam could do this, but for both to betray her was more than she could bear.

Daed sighed. “Trust me. It’ll all turn out for the best. I know it will.”

She took the reins from him, desperate to steal away for a few hours and get as far from the happy couple as she could.

As she rode the horse out of the barn, she didn’t bother drying her tears. Her vision blurred so much she could barely tell where she was going, and she knew it’d remain that way for a long time.

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