

## Chapter 1

Rhoda shoved her to-do list into the hidden pocket of her apron and slipped out of the summer kitchen. A brief glance assured her no one was around to see her. She needed a few minutes, however fleeting, without anyone tugging at her. Her shoulders and arms ached as she walked into the orchard.

She breathed in, and the heady scents of fall and ripe apples helped soothe her frayed nerves. After nearly two months of nurturing the tornado-ravaged orchard, she found the view both uplifting and disheartening. Despite their long, hard days of cleaning up felled trees and mending broken ones, the once-vibrant orchard looked like a battlefield strewn with injured, defeated soldiers. Would all of her and Samuel's tending restore the wounded trees? Or simply prolong their dying?

How strange that she found comfort in walking among these wounded trees. Much of the orchard lay dormant, waiting for late winter, when new trees would be planted.

But she wouldn't be here for that.

A ladder rested against a tree where she and Samuel had grafted tree limbs from storm-damaged trees into healthy ones, hoping their grafts would take. It wasn't the right time of year for such work, but they were giving this orchard their all before leaving it behind tomorrow.

A wavering, misty image stepped out from behind an apple tree.

*Emma.*

The vision appeared real enough, but it wasn't actually her little sister. Emma had been with God since the day she was murdered, since the day Rhoda all but sent her teary-eyed sister to that convenience store by herself at exactly the wrong time. Emma often formed in a visible way, as if Rhoda's guilt over her death was burned so deeply into Rhoda's soul that she would see her sister the rest of her days.

And maybe she would, but Rhoda dared to hope the move to Maine would end the haunting reminders.

Emma held out her arms, and Rhoda wished her little sister were truly here to embrace, but all Rhoda could do was watch. And pray.

Not long after she met Samuel King of Kings' Orchard last summer, he asked if she'd partner her canning business with his family's apple farming business. When she finally agreed, she did so hoping for several things to come from the agreement. One desire was for the aberrations to remain at home in Morgansville, some thirty miles away—and where all memories of Emma had been made.

But whether Rhoda was here at Kings' Orchard or at home with her family, she had yet to be freed of Emma's constant reminders that Rhoda had failed her.

Would Maine be an escape?

Emma stretched a hand toward her. "Don't let me go. Don't be afraid to hold on."

Rhoda's heart rate increased. Did it do any good to speak her sorrow out loud? "I have to move on. Can't you see that?"

Emma's eyes filled with tears, and Rhoda made herself turn away without responding. She walked to the top of a knoll. This orchard would be majestic again in a few years. Still, was Samuel doing the right thing by leaving its future in Eli's hands?

They would move to Maine tomorrow, to Orchard Bend specifically. Until Samuel went to close on the house a month ago, they had thought the land was in Unity, Maine. But at the closing, Samuel discovered that the farm bordered Unity.

Once they arrived there tomorrow, they would begin the challenge of restoring an abandoned apple orchard twice the size of this one. The aim was rock solid: reestablish the abandoned orchard in Maine so Kings' Orchard and her Rhode Side Stand canning business could bring in the needed profits while this orchard was restored and returned to production.

But the reality of this venture was terrifying...and exhausting.

Hoofs rumbled against the earth, and she turned to see Samuel riding the chestnut Morgan toward her. He had the reins in one hand and a five-gallon bucket in the other. The bucket housed what they called their first-aid kit for the trees.

"Hey." His lack of a smile as he dismounted didn't surprise her. For every ounce of energy she gave working, he seemed determined to give double. "I thought I'd find you here where we worked last." He gazed into her eyes for a brief moment. "I know you're tired, and you aren't going to like what I have to say, but could you do me a favor and *try* to take it well?" Without waiting for her to answer, he walked the horse to a nearby tree and tethered it.

He had her pegged on both counts: bone tired and edgy. They'd had more spats in the last few weeks than two alpha dogs sharing a food bowl. Who knew that accomplishing everything on her to-do list would be so draining?

Actually, now that she thought about it, the answer to that was Samuel and Jacob. Both had tried to get her to take numerous things off her list, like the experiments of growing herbs and developing mulch under horticultural lights. And both had tried for weeks to stop her from harvesting and canning the apples left by the tornado.

But she couldn't let apples rot. And she couldn't move to Maine without understanding how commercial greenhouse lights affected herbs and rotting leaves.

He dusted off his hands and returned to where she stood. "Well?"

A Bible verse echoed inside her—*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.* "I'll do my best."

His jaw clenched. "You have to appear before your church leaders tonight."

The orchard around her turned hazy as she stared into Samuel's eyes, trying to make sense of what he'd said.

With the message delivered, he turned and walked away.

She took off after him and grabbed his arm. "What do you mean?"

He barely glanced at her before shifting his attention to the horizon. "You know what it means."

Her heart skipped a beat and felt as if it might stop altogether. "But why?"

He pulled a letter from his pocket. "This arrived in today's mail."

"Addressed to you?"

Without the slightest response he headed for the ladder and handsaw a few trees away.

She unfolded the plain white paper to find a short message in perfect handwriting.

Subject: Rueben Glick and his possible involvement in the destruction of Rhoda Byler's crops.

Her hands trembled. How did they know what had happened to her fruit garden? She clutched the letter and shook it at him as he headed back her way. "Did you take that incident to my bishop and deacon?"

Her family wouldn't. They knew it would stir up trouble for her. Landon wouldn't. He was too loyal a friend. The only other person she'd told who was responsible for destroying her fruit garden was Samuel.

Samuel's jaw set. "It needed to be done."

"But...but you gave me your word." Compelled to read the rest, she returned her attention to the letter.

Dear Samuel, after much consideration we have prayerfully agreed that the matter you brought to our attention must be addressed. The charges are of such a serious nature that we cannot allow Rhoda Byler to go to Maine as a member in good standing unless this matter is settled first.

Since this matter needs to be settled before Rhoda leaves for Maine, and since your concern is that Rueben Glick is not only guilty of this incident but may be causing problems with others as well, we feel we have no choice but to allow this meeting to be open to anyone in the district who chooses to come.

Her blood ran hot as realization continued to dawn. Anger began to mingle with fear, but she couldn't stop staring at the letter. Why had the ministers waited until the day before the move to call a meeting? But more important...why would Samuel do this to her?

Wasn't it bad enough that Rueben Glick and his small band of nitwits had destroyed her fruit garden last August? She had been devastated when she'd arrived home with Samuel, Jacob, and Leah to discover what had been done. The garden meant the world to Rhoda. Her *Daed* had given her the first blueberry bush when she was just seven. Every year since then he gave her more plants and land to plant them on. The garden grew and became her sanctuary, especially after her sister was murdered.

Rhoda had worked year after year to make the garden beautiful and yield a healthy crop. All the naysayers who didn't like her and her *odd* ways had wanted her out of that garden. Some were jealous, but others were truly concerned that she was overstepping her place as a single Amish woman with too much independence and too much success. The number of stores that carried her canned products only increased. If she were married, those against her would probably feel different. Then again, if she were married, she wouldn't have the time to devote to her business, and it wouldn't be so successful.

For more reasons than she could explain, it meant everything to her to conceal from her community and neighbors that Rueben had uprooted her beloved vines and bushes. So she had called her friend Landon and asked him to bring over his Bobcat. By morning the land looked as if she had deliberately cleared her garden.

She needed people to believe she chose to give up the land. She'd made all that clear to Samuel, had told him how important it was that no one else find out what Rueben had done. Samuel had objected, but she'd been adamant. She refused to let the neighbors see her plants uprooted like a white flag of surrender. Nor would she give the vandals the satisfaction of seeing her treated as a victim. She had thought Samuel understood.

Why couldn't he accept that she needed it handled this way? Why couldn't he trust that she was doing what was right for her?

The familiar sound of an unsteady ladder against a tree drew her attention. Holding on to the handsaw, Samuel was climbing the rungs. She shoved the letter into her apron pocket and headed toward him. As she clasped the sides of the ladder, her hands shook against the wooden frame. Part of her wanted to knock him off his perch. Rather than give in to her desire, she gripped the ladder until her knuckles turned white. "You had no right, and you know it."

He said nothing.

“So *now* you hold your tongue? You couldn’t have done that a couple of months ago? Why am I just now learning that you took my private business to the church leaders?”

Again, silence.

He continued severing another healthy branch from the half-upended tree. The few remaining Baldwin apples shook, and some plunked to the ground. A fresh sense of powerlessness washed over her. No doubt some of her emotional upheaval was due to her exhaustion. They’d had no reprieve, no harbor of rest since the tornado came through, destroying crops, homes, and lives.

She looked to the horizon, hoping to see Jacob top the hill. At least *he* understood her.

How could two brothers little more than a year apart in age and raised in the same Amish home be so very different? Jacob would never consider ignoring her wishes while he manhandled her life. Ever. Samuel had times when he seemed to think it was his right, no, his obligation to fix things as *he* saw best.

“Samuel King, the least you could do is answer me.”

He gazed down at her. “I’ve already said my piece. It needed to be done.” His tone was even, as if he were talking to a child, and with that said, he returned to his work, pushing and pulling the sharp blade against the healthy branch.

“*Needed* to be...” She took several deep breaths, shaking like the branch he was sawing off. “Do you have any idea what a meeting like this could do? Some, maybe most, within my district do not see my horticultural skills as simply having a green thumb or my talking to myself as a weird habit. Since my sister was killed, my bishop has been waiting for any justifiable reason to question me directly. And you *gave* it to him.”

Samuel stopped and stared across the field as if considering her words. Was he capable of seeing her point? It wouldn’t undo what he’d done, but if he couldn’t at least see that he had been wrong, how could she continue to be his business partner? She held her tongue, hoping the silence would give him a chance to see how wrong he’d been.

Afternoon light streamed through the thick white clouds, casting a glow on the vibrant leaves of the different kinds of apple trees. The leaves were turning red, yellow, and orange, a welcome sign that some of the trees, or parts of them, were alive enough to change with the season. She tried to focus on the colorful leaves rather than on the sickening brown ones of the trees that had already died.

Samuel sighed and began sawing again. “Be ready to step back on command.”

Rhoda raised her eyebrows and shook her head, a silent venting that Samuel couldn’t see. For heaven’s sake, she knew the drill. And he knew she knew it. Yet he warned her every time. When Rhoda worked beside Jacob, she enjoyed their easy banter and humor. It used to be that way with Samuel too. But not of late, not since a group of them—nine Amish and Landon—went to Maine to inspect a foreclosed farm and dormant apple orchard. After walking the land, they had agreed to buy it. But since then, with few exceptions, Samuel had been especially hard on her. Why?

Jacob once described her and Samuel as oil and water. Though she and Samuel argued a little too easily, she had never felt powerless or truly disappointed with him.

Until now.

How could he have gone behind her back and taken charges against Rueben to her church leaders?

The night she discovered her beloved garden virtually destroyed, she had decided to beat Rueben at his own game by uprooting what he'd left of her garden and grading the land. Then she gave the acre to her brothers so at least one of them could build a home. With both married brothers and their offspring living under the same roof with Rhoda and her parents, she'd looked like a hero to her community. Her family knew the truth, but rather than Rueben getting to gloat over what he'd done, he had to watch as the church members patted her on the back for her generous gift. To her, that had a sense of justice about it, and since Rueben's attack had only harmed her and her business, and her plan hadn't included any physical harm to him, she felt she had the right to dole out the punishment as she saw fit.

But now Rueben would find satisfaction in what he had accomplished, and she would have to answer to the church leaders for not coming to them promptly, when the misdeed had been done, and for taking credit for giving up the land instead of admitting someone had ruined her crops.

“*Now!*” Samuel's growl echoed off the hills.

Rhoda swooshed to the far side of the ladder, clasping both hands on one side. The branch crackled as it finally let go of the tree and fell to the ground and then bounced like a springboard.

Samuel made his way down the ladder, and his brown eyes met hers. He paused, then turned away, set his saw against the tree trunk, and pulled a knife from his pocket.

She folded her arms. “We're supposed to leave before daylight tomorrow, and now we have this mess to contend with?”

He cut several ten- to twelve-inch twigs off the branch, creating scions for grafting. His Adam's apple moved as if he'd swallowed hard at her question, but other than that, he didn't acknowledge she had even spoken.

When he walked away, carrying the grafting stock with him, Rhoda grabbed the bucket and followed.

He paused. “You can't let Rueben get away with what he did.”

“Don't be ridiculous, Samuel. He's *already* gotten away with it. Nothing anyone can say or do could change that. I had one chance of being free from the humiliation of his vandalism. Can't you see that?”

“What I see is a man who needs to be held accountable to the church leaders.”

She dropped the bucket and let her frustration out on a scream. “Ahhh!” She was shaking. “That wasn't *your* decision! Until you can see that, we have nothing else to talk about.”

“*Gut.*” He set the first-aid bucket upright and slung into it the items that had fallen out, along with the scions. “Silence would be welcome.”

She needed to talk about this until the air was cleared between them, but maybe being mute for now was their best chance of protecting their budding partnership. Several who were going to the new settlement had invested money in purchasing the farm: Jacob, Samuel, Rhoda, and her brother Steven. Despite not going with them, her Daed had invested in the venture too. But only Samuel's name was on the mortgage. Rhoda didn't have a credit score, so the bank wouldn't allow her name to be on the loan. Steven hoped to buy a home of his own in Maine within a year, and having his name on the farm mortgage could keep him from qualifying for a loan on his own place when the time came. And Jacob didn't want to be listed on the financial papers, although she didn't know why. Maybe he also hoped to buy a home in the near future.

All those details aside, the farm had been purchased, and the Kings and the Bylers were depending on her and Samuel's expertise to make a go of the new apple orchard. She and Samuel had a lot to safeguard, and the work of restoring the orchard hadn't yet begun. Not really.

"Fine, you want me to shut up. You have it." She turned and started to walk off. "Oh." She faced him. "And you can go to that meeting tonight with the church leaders by *yourself*."

"Be reasonable." He jerked the black felt hat off his head and threw it across the field. "Without you, the ministers will cancel the meeting. But they'll hold me accountable if you don't go. It could cause enough scandal to make *my* church leaders question whether any of us can go tomorrow."

"Shoulda thought about that before you stuck your nose into *my* business."

"Okay, look, we're both beyond weary at this point. We've been pushing too hard and trying to accomplish too much before leaving tomorrow, and I know this meeting couldn't happen at a worse time, but you don't have a choice about attending."

"*Ya?* Well, then, you should've thought about that too. Decisions that affect other people's lives aren't so easy to disregard when those decisions start messing with your life, are they?" She raised her eyebrows, daring him to argue.

"It's inconvenient, and it won't be easy, but Rueben needs to be confronted. The train tickets are for seven in the morning, and—"

"Would you please stop repeating what I already know and admit you were wrong? Just say the words 'I shouldn't have contacted the church leaders. Forgive me.'"

"Why do you have to see me as wrong in this?"

"A much better question is why would you dare to believe you knew what was right about the destruction of *my* fruit garden!"

A horse and rider thundered over the hill and came to a quick stop. Jacob glanced from Samuel to Rhoda. "A few minutes ago I was unsure where to find you two—until I heard yelling." He stared at his brother for a moment, then he winked at Rhoda and slid off his horse.

She couldn't manage a smile.

Jacob picked up Samuel's hat and held it out to him. "Thirty acres of orchard to search for you two, and the sound of arguing guided me here. Can't say I'm pleased."

Rhoda had never heard an edge to Jacob's tone before, but as he held his brother's gaze, it was clear Jacob was correcting Samuel. Jacob slapped the reins against the palm of his hand. "Daed says you're needed in the office immediately. He says something is up that could hinder us from even boarding the train tomorrow." Jacob shrugged. "He didn't elaborate. He insisted I stop updating the bookkeeping and rushed me out the door to find you. What could possibly be going on that might cause that big a problem?"

Samuel angrily knocked the dust off the brim of his hat. "Nothing that a *reasonable* woman couldn't fix."

If this man understood anything, he would stop antagonizing her before she resigned from Kings' Orchard. She glared at him. "There would be nothing for this woman to fix if you'd respected my decisions concerning *my* life."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up her hand, silencing him. "I will not go to Maine and work beside someone who will be the head authority over the business but has no respect concerning my decisions as well as my boundaries."

Samuel's face filled with disbelief. "Are you threatening me?"

“Okay, guys.” Jacob pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and waved it between them. He let it dangle and gawked at the red fabric. “Just what I *don’t* want to do—wave a red flag between two bulls.” He made a face. “I thought it was white. Just pretend it is.” He waved it again. “Cause I’m calling a truce.”

It wasn’t like Jacob to get between her and Samuel when they disagreed, but he seemed to realize that what was happening went way beyond two people having a difference of opinion.

“Here.” Jacob shoved the horse’s reins at Samuel, despite the Morgan being twenty or so feet away. “Go. Whatever has you two riled, you both need some time to cool off.”

Rhoda shook her head. “I’m not changing my mind. This isn’t about being angry. I stand on principle.”

“What do you think I’m standing on, Rhoda?”

Jacob thrust the reins toward Samuel again. “Quicksand, the best I can tell. Go.”

Rhoda took a deep breath. “All I want is a sincere acknowledgment that you were wrong to go behind my back.”

“I’m not apologizing, and it’d be nice if you’d be a little grateful that I went out of my way to see that justice was done.”

“Grateful?” He had opened up her life to an authority that, at best, treated her with suspicion. She wasn’t going to tell Samuel that. It was embarrassing. Besides, if he had never seen a church authority treat someone unfairly, he would assume her concerns were only in her mind.

She hated feeling trapped and vulnerable, but what made it unbearable was that Samuel had no remorse for putting her in this spot. The earlier temptation to knock him off the ladder paled in comparison to what she felt now: a searing desire to end her working relationship with Samuel King.

Samuel looked at Jacob, motioning toward Rhoda. “You talk to her. I have work to do.” He started to walk off.

“Samuel,”—Rhoda fisted her hands at her sides—“you’re sure you want to be this stubborn?”

“Not an ounce of doubt.”

“Fine.”

“Samuel!” Jacob stepped in front of his brother and angled away from Rhoda. “This is going too far. Reel it back in.”

He shook his head. “I did what I thought was right, and I’m not apologizing for it.”

Rhoda drew a deep breath and held out her hand.

Samuel frowned. “What are you doing?”

“We’re parting now. You and Rueben have each gotten your way, and I’m done with both of you.”

Confusion and disbelief drew taut lines across his face. “You can’t possibly put what I did in the same category as what he did.”

“I don’t have to. Life isn’t that black and white. He ran roughshod over God’s will in order to damage my life. You did the same, but the will you ignored was mine. The fact that you can’t see what you did was wrong tells me we can’t continue.” She stepped forward, extending her hand again.

Samuel glanced at Jacob, raw emotions washing over his features. And then he shook her hand.

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