

Chapter 1

It's time...

Emma's voice rose from the past, encircling Rhoda and bringing a wave of guilt. Unyielding, unforgiving guilt.

Rhoda plucked several large strawberries from the vine and dropped them into the bushelbasket. "Time for what?" she whispered.

The moment the words left her mouth, she glanced up, checking her surroundings. She quickly looked beyond the picket fence that enclosed her fruit and herb garden but saw no one. Her shoulders relaxed. When townsfolk or neighbors noticed Rhoda talking to herself, fresh rumors stirred. Even family members frowned upon it and asked her to stop.

It's time...

Emma's gentle voice echoed around her for a second time.

"Time for what?" Rhoda repeated, more a prayer to God than a question to her departed sister.

God was the One who spoke in whispers to the soul, not the dead. But whenever Rhoda heard a murmuring in her mind, it was Emma's voice. It had been that way since the day Emma died.

The sound of two people talking near the road caught Rhoda's attention. Surely *they* were real. She rose out of her crouch, pressing her bare feet into the rich soil, and went in the direction of the voices, passing the long rows of strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries and her trellises of raspberries and Concord grapes. Headly scents rode on the spring air, not just from the ripening fruits, but from her bountiful herb garden that yielded rosemary, sage, scarlet bergamot, and dozens of other plants she'd spent years cultivating. Dusting her palms together, she skirted the raised boxes that held the herbs and peered through a honeysuckle bush.

She was relieved to see actual people speaking to each other. Then she recognized them, and her fingertips tingled as her pulse raced. Her mother's eldest sister walked beside Rueben Glick, a man who wanted to make her life miserable.

"Surely her *Daed* will listen to me this time." Aunt Naomi clutched her fists tightly. "He indulges her. That's the real problem."

Rhoda had no doubt they were talking about her. Since Emma's death two years ago, the church leaders had avoided responding to all the trouble that Rhoda caused, however unintentional. They offered grace and mercy as her family tried to deal with their grief from the tragedy. But Rueben and Naomi made it their responsibility to keep Rhoda's family aware of how the Amish and non-Amish in Morgansville felt about her.

"I can bring a witness this time, more if need be." Rueben's tone was confident, with a familiar edge of bitterness.

More than anyone else in Morgansville, Rueben detested her. But unlike the others, he was only too happy to speak his mind directly to her and her family. And Rhoda knew why. He wanted to make her pay for turning his girlfriend against him. Rhoda had plenty of things to feel guilty for, but Rueben losing his girlfriend was not one of them.

Her aunt paused at the corner of the fence, studying Rhoda's house. "There should be no need for a witness, especially from those who are not Amish. The quieter we keep this matter, the better."

Rueben had found witnesses who weren't Amish? How? She tried her best to keep anyone from knowing her business. She never even shared with her family her comings and goings based on intuition. Dread pressed in on her, and she bit back her growing contempt for Rueben Glick.

"*Kumm.*" Her aunt crossed the driveway with Rueben right beside her. Naomi tapped on the screen door and waited. The fact that she didn't let herself in was a sign of the troubled feelings between her Daed and his sister-in-law.

Not counting Rhoda, six adults and five children were living in the house right now—her parents, two of her brothers, and their wives and children. Regardless which adult answered the door, Naomi and Rueben would take up matters concerning Rhoda with only her father.

Mamm came to the door and invited her sister and Rueben into the house.

Rhoda moved out from behind the honeysuckle bush, curiosity and anxiety mixing inside her. What accusation did Rueben have against her this time? Regardless of the new charge, this visit would put more tension inside an already overloaded household and would only isolate her more. No matter how many people lived with her or how deeply loyal they were, she stood on an island by herself, forbidden to acknowledge the largest part of who she was.

She meandered toward the gate, running her fingertips across the various herbs as she went. A few bloomed now, in May, but come July these plants would be bursting with vivid color. More important, they would provide people with natural relief from certain illnesses. She paused in front of the red clover, but despite its name, this particular clover was splashed with lovely purple blooms.

Many of these plants—the clover, dandelion, and thistle, to name a few—were considered nuisances. Like Rhoda herself. But each herb offered health benefits under the right circumstances. Maybe she was like them in that way too. Her people used to believe her, used to trust her with their health. If they would only give her a chance, perhaps she could help them again.

"Rhodes?"

She blinked, coming out of her thoughts and realizing that someone had been calling her name. She turned toward the road that ran along one side of her berry patch.

Landon was sitting in his old pickup on the main road, banging on the door. Officially, he worked for her, but he was also one of her few friends. "There she is, back from Oz again."

Although she hadn't seen the movie, he'd explained enough that she understood Oz was somehow connected to witches. And he was talking about it out loud, right here in the thick of busy Morgansville. She put her index finger to her lips.

Landon grinned. "Okay, I'm hushing—not that it'll do any good."

A short line of cars stacked up behind him, and someone honked. He drove forward twenty feet and pulled into her driveway. Once out of his truck, he walked toward her. "In my two years of working for you, I don't think I've ever seen you doing nothing while standing inside this garden." Before opening the gate, he grabbed one of the empty baskets stacked outside the picket fence. "What has you so distracted?"

She turned away and walked down the long path at the end of the rows. "Just wondering if I ordered enough canning supplies to last through the month." She kept her back to him so he couldn't read her face and know she was fibbing. She returned to her strawberry bush, crouched down, and began dumping more of the velvety fruit into her basket.

He went to the other side of the row and started picking. "You were studying the red clover. Rotating it out seems like it was a good idea. Looks like we'll get a bumper crop this year. That should give you lots for making that ointment."

“Ya,” she mumbled, wishing she knew what was going on inside her house. Did Rueben have proof that she’d disobeyed the church authorities and her parents?

When the back door slammed, she jolted. But it was just one of her sisters-in-law taking another load of freshly cleaned diapers to the clothesline.

“First you’re in la la land, and then you jump at nothing. What gives, Rhodes?”

Landon knew her better than most. Emma had once known her best, but what good had that done Emma? If Rhoda had been half the sister Emma deserved, she would still be alive.

Rhoda moved the basket down the row. “How are things at the mail store today?” Maybe if she got him answering questions rather than asking them, she could avoid his probing. The tactic worked most days.

“Still slow. If the economy doesn’t pick up soon, working for you may be the only job I have.”

“I wish I could afford to pay you for more hours.”

“Me too, although both of us in that tiny cellar working long hours week after week might cause one of us to disagree with the other, ya?” His grin lifted her spirits a little.

One of the things she enjoyed about Landon was his ability to speak his mind with total honesty. She loved truthfulness between people. Stark. Radiant. And powerful.

Unfortunately, it seemed to be in short supply—from her most of all.

“What’s going on with you today?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, Rhoda.”

His use of her real name caught her attention, and she turned to face him. He pointed at his eyes, demanding she look at him. “It’s not your fault.”

She stared at him. Would she ever be able to believe that? Since Emma’s death, she hadn’t found one moment when she could accept it as true. There was nothing she could do to free herself. And if he knew everything she did, he wouldn’t say that to her.

Images flashed through her mind—fire trucks, policemen with guns strapped to their hips, groups of women whispering on the sidewalk. Even now, her crushing sense of guilt and panic rose within her again.

All her sister had wanted was for Rhoda to help her bake a cake for their Daed’s birthday. And Rhoda had promised she would. Throughout the morning Emma kept asking Rhoda to stop weeding her garden and to go buy the items they needed. Even though she was seventeen years old, Emma hated going places by herself. Strangers frightened her. And Rhoda kept putting her off, assuring her they’d have a great time making the dessert when she was finished tending the garden.

Finally, fed up with waiting, in an unusual act of self-reliance, Emma stormed off to the store without Rhoda, her eyes filled with tears.

A strawberry flew through the air and hit Rhoda on the shoulder, followed in quick succession by a second and a third one. “Stay with me, Rhodes,” Landon called to her.

She blinked. “Sorry.”

“You tried to save her, almost broke your leg—”

“Rueben’s here.” Rhoda had no desire to listen to Landon’s version of that day. She wasn’t a hero. More like a murderer. And what she’d done had divided this town, making both Amish and *Englisch* distrust and fear her. “He’s inside with my aunt Naomi.”

Landon chuckled. “On a witch hunt again, I take it.”

“That’s not even a little bit funny, Landon.”

“Come on, Rhodes. You know I tease because it’s all so ridiculous. Gimme a smile. You can’t change what they think. What’s Reuben’s problem now?”

“Remember when several Amish communities were at that regional function a couple of months ago?”

“Yeah. Your Mamm insisted you go, and you came back with your feathers ruffled at Rueben. But that’s about all I know.”

“He spent two days harassing me and making fun of me. On the second day he got bolder, saying things to me he shouldn’t, in front of a large group of singles, including his girlfriend. He was being a bully, and I lashed out.”

“What’d you say to him?”

She picked up her basket, ready to head toward the gate. “I looked into his eyes and knew a secret he wasn’t telling anyone. His guilt was easy to see—if anyone had a mind to look. I called him on seeing another girl while he was out of state helping some Amish farmers. He denied it at first, but I knew when he was telling the truth and when he was lying, by the guilt on his face. He thought that I’d spoken to the girl directly, that maybe she’d come to this area, and he owned up to his cheating. As I walked off, I let him know that I had no proof whatsoever, that he’d simply told on himself.”

“Rhodes, you didn’t.”

At times she picked up on silly, nonsensical stuff without even realizing it—an aroma from someone’s past or a distorted image in place of the person in front of her. But that didn’t stop her from relying on a reasonable intuition when it came to her.

“He asked for it, taunting me, saying if I *knew* anything, Emma would still be alive. Daring me to tell his fortune. He was vicious, and I gave him what he deserved.” She set the basket on the ground. “But ever since, I think he’s been scheming ways to force me out of this garden. Biding his time and planning carefully. That’s more wrong than anything I did to him. I make my living off these fruits.”

Landon brushed a gnat away from his face. “You think he can do something to take away your business?”

She padded across the warm dirt to her raised beds of herbs, drawn to them like bees to pollen. This was her favorite part of the garden. The medicinal plants in particular. Each one had properties that could help people whose bodies hurt as much physically as her heart did emotionally. Whenever people were strengthened through the power of her herbs, she felt strengthened too.

Landon joined her.

“I followed my instincts again. And it sounds as if Rueben has proof.”

Landon rolled his eyes. “Geez, Rhodes, why would you do that? You know you either have to do what your people expect or get out.”

“And go where, Landon? To the Englisch? They fear me just as much as my people do.”

“Then move somewhere else. Start new.”

“And leave more holes in my parents’ hearts? They’ve lost enough. I can’t do something that selfish.”

As she walked the row of herb beds, warm memories of her childhood, of laughter, and of fun-filled days rose within her. “I was seven when my Daed bought each of his daughters a blueberry bush and an herb plant. Did I ever tell you that?”

A slight grin lifted one side of his mouth. Nothing like being a paid employee who had to listen when the boss wanted to vent or reminisce. “You’ve only mentioned it a couple of times.”

“He helped each of us plant his gifts. But as the days moved into weeks, my three teenage sisters were more interested in their friends or boys than gardening, and they neglected their gifts. Emma wasn’t even four at the time, and she only cared about dolls and playing house. But I adored tending to those plants. And every birthday and Christmas since then, Daed has bought me at least one new bush, herb, or gardening tool.” And every year that she proved faithful in what he’d given, he allowed her a little more land to expand her garden until she now had every spare inch of ground they owned.

“I understand why you don’t want to leave your folks. But either keep a low profile and don’t make waves in the community, or be willing to leave. It’s that simple.”

She inhaled the sweet aroma of her apple mint plants. What a multipurpose herb. It repelled nuisance insects while attracting the beneficial ones. Was flavorful in dozens of drinks. Aided indigestion and stomachaches. Eased the pain and swelling of insect bites. Relieved morning sickness in pregnant women. It was even alleged to calm the nerves and clear the head. She’d like to be in her cellar sipping a cup of mint tea right now.

“So what did you do this time, Rhodes?”

She thought back to the events that had probably led to this latest uprising. “Not long after I got back in town, I was on one of my long walks, and as I passed a home, I had a strong sensation to go up to the door. I stood on the sidewalk, trying to talk myself out of following that feeling. But I sensed the woman inside the house needed someone. So I rang the doorbell. We got to know each other a bit. She talked about feeling anxious and depressed, but I knew she’d been entertaining the idea of suicide. She’s a young mom with three children and a husband who travels a lot. I took her some herbs. She’s already doing better, and sometimes I wonder if it’s the herbs or my regular visits that have helped her.”

He rubbed his forehead. “As long as you don’t tell people you helped her based on a premonition, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I’ve asked you before not to call it a premonition. I just have a little intuition, that’s all. And at times it’s clear enough for me to follow without botching up someone’s life.”

Landon peered at her over the rosemary. “Was she the only one recently?”

Rhoda pulled some leaves from the plant’s thin stalk. “No.”

He sighed.

She brought the leaves to her nose and drew a deep breath. “About six weeks ago I was at the grocery store in town, and the minute I saw this Englisch guy on the far end of an aisle, I knew in here”—she tapped her chest—“that he dealt with unbearable migraines.”

“So you struck up a conversation and gave him some herbs too, didn’t you?”

“What am I supposed to do? It’s not something I choose to feel, but when I do, I act on it.”

“You’ve been to see this man several times?”

“Ya, feverfew gives him some relief, and I purchased a bit of butterbur root. That seems to be helping too.”

Landon’s forehead crinkled. “And you think Rueben knows about all this?”

“I can’t imagine how. I’m discreet.”

“You’re playing with fire, Rhodes. After exposing him as a cheater, damaging his reputation, and causing his girlfriend to break up with him, I’d say he’d plow your whole garden under if he could.”

“Daed wouldn’t let that happen to my garden.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should have thought about the possible consequences before you ruined Rueben’s relationship with his girlfriend.”

“Someone needed to tell her he was cheating on her.” The faded blue geranium petals caught her attention. As an herb, geraniums were supposed to relieve anxiety, although no one could prove that by her. She did believe valerian to be potent, and maybe she should harvest some to fix a brew for herself. Now that Landon knew what all she’d been up to the past two months, he could probably use a cup to settle his nerves too.

She heard men talking, and she turned to see her Daed, Rueben, and Naomi coming out of her home. If her Daed had been able to settle the matter, Rueben and Naomi would have left her house by themselves and gone home. Instead, the three of them were walking toward her, and now she would be pulled into the discussion too.

“It’s time you head home, Landon.” Her family appreciated Landon and his loyalty to her, but incidents among the Amish were not discussed in front of those who weren’t Amish. Landon studied her for a moment before he pulled the keys out of his jeans pocket.

Her Daed, Naomi, and Rueben crossed the driveway toward her garden. Unwilling for Rueben Glick to set foot inside her sanctuary, she went toward the little white gate, Landon mere steps in front of her.

He held the gate for her. “Keep your head, Rhodes,” he whispered. “You have to try to undo some of the damage.”