

One

Rhoda tiptoed across the dark kitchen. Only the blue flame under the pan on the stove and a lone candle illuminated the room. Electric lights first thing in the morning bothered her. Besides, when she got up before Bob and Camilla, she found comfort in the familiarity of a wavering flame.

She measured out freshly ground cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon and mixed it into her apple purée and sugar mixture. The aroma of simmering apple butter filled the air. Since she couldn't start her days at the farm alongside her sister-in-law Phoebe in the kitchen, this was the second best thing—alone and trying new recipes.

Choose... A female voice sliced through the quietness.

Rhoda's heart clenched. Had she wakened Camilla? Or was Rhoda hearing her sister again? It had sounded like a real person, and something moved, maybe someone in a dress, near the doorway. She turned off the flame under the pan before easing toward the living room. She saw no one.

Choose! The shriek jolted her like an unexpected clap of thunder, and Rhoda stumbled against a table.

Something fell over, and cold water, a lot of it, splashed on her dress and bare feet. The word *choose* continued to echo in her ears.

Her heart pounded as she skimmed her hands over the tabletop, searching for what she'd knocked over. Perhaps she felt stems of some kind and what seemed like cool textured glass rolling back and forth. A vase, a large one that apparently had been filled with water. She set it upright. As her eyes adjusted to the soft glow of moonlight, she padded across the wooden floor and reached for the light switch. But she paused mere inches from it. How had it come to this—she, a devout Amish woman, taking refuge in an *Englisch* home?

She lowered her hand, leaving herself in the dark.

The easy answer was that Jacob had banished her from living on the farm.

Well, more or less.

He hadn't *made* her go. But he'd invited her to leave and then had refused to talk to her. Fresh ache flooded her. Not a minute had gone by that she didn't miss him. He felt the same way. She knew he did.

Still, here she was. An outcast.

Choose...

The taunting voice was clearer now. It sounded like Emma, her late sister. Although it had been as real as if someone were in the room with her, Rhoda realized it was her own conscience blaring at her.

She had chosen, but Jacob was too wounded to listen to her. Shoving back her frustration and regret, she set her will to get through the coming day. She returned to the kitchen to get a towel. The digital clock on the microwave glared at her: 5:19.

She'd been up for hours, and thankfully it'd be daylight within the hour. Despite feeling out of place in an *Englisch* home, she was here, in the dark, trying a new recipe for the canning business and hoping she didn't disturb her hosts.

It wasn't a disagreeable place, but she would never feel fully at ease inside this house. Sadness tried to rob determination from her. She was no longer a part of the farm's mealtime discussions about the workday. Or part of the camaraderie, chats, or even disagreements that were vital to running the business.

What was she going to do if Jacob's anger and hurt didn't dissolve?

A tapping noise caught her attention. "Rhoda, are you okay?" Camilla's whisper seemed to come from the front of the house. She was probably outside Rhoda's bedroom door.

Poor Camilla. Rhoda had to be the most unpleasant houseguest ever, but the Cranfords were too good to ask her to leave. For that she was grateful.

She went in that direction, shielding her eyes from the bright light in the hallway. "I'm in here. So sorry to disturb you." Rhoda turned around to see long-stemmed white roses scattered and water dripping off the edge of the round mahogany table. Bob had brought home a couple of bouquets a few days ago. "I'm so sorry." Rhoda hurried back to the spot and spread the kitchen towel over as much of the puddle as she could.

Camilla joined her and picked up the flowers and put them back in the vase. "Neither the mess nor the noise matters." Her tone was difficult to define at times, usually somewhere between guarded and caring.

Rhoda knelt, and her lone braid fell over her shoulder as she began mopping up the water. "I was trying so hard not to wake you and Bob."

"We're fine. It's you we're worried about." Camilla put her hands on her hips, making her short gray ponytail sort of wave. "But it smells wonderful in here. You're working on recipes again, aren't you?"

"Ya." Did Camilla mind?

"So just how long have you been up?"

"A while."

"You need sleep more than new recipes. Is something keeping you up at night?"

Since Rhoda had arrived on her doorstep two weeks ago in need of a place to stay, Camilla had voiced concerns over why she'd left the farmhouse. She wished Camilla would stop asking, and so far Rhoda had managed to sidestep the questions. Nonetheless, of all the people she had ever known, Camilla was one of her favorites.

Rhoda continued drying the floor. It was tempting to open up...except she couldn't bear to know what Camilla would think of her once she heard. Truth was, Rhoda had no one else she could talk to right now. Even her brother and sister-in-law were disappointed in her. Since Leah was Samuel and Jacob's younger sister, Rhoda couldn't confide in her either. It'd be wrong to put Leah in the middle of this mess.

What had possessed Rhoda to think that two families—the Kings and the Bylers—could live under the same roof while trying to establish a new Amish community?

It had been naive.

Camilla wandered to the couch and picked up Rhoda's prayer *Kapp*. Rhoda had placed it there hours ago, meaning to put it on before anyone else was up. Camilla ran her fingers down the long strings of the *Kapp*. "I read once that Amish women wear these even in their sleep."

Was she changing the subject or aiming to start an easygoing conversation in hopes Rhoda would open the floodgates?

“Some do.” Rhoda flipped the towel and pushed it across the floor. The women who wore them at night were the kind who might wake and start praying. But lately Rhoda was more the kind who woke and stewed.

She was beyond disappointed in herself over this mess. But what had Samuel been thinking? And Jacob... What kind of a man was he to cut her off the way he had?

She wasn't sure who she was the angriest with—Samuel, Jacob, or herself. But her frustration with the trio kept her in turmoil.

Camilla put the prayer Kapp back and crouched near her. “Rhoda.” She touched the back of Rhoda's hands, stopping her from cleaning up the water. “I only want to help you the way I wish someone had helped me when I was your age.”

Rhoda eased from Camilla's gentle touch and ran the towel in wider circles.

Camilla stood. “Bob and I don't mind being awakened. But I believe you need to talk about why you're staying with us.”

“I can't.” She took the wet towel through the kitchen and into the laundry room. What could she say—that she was a hypocrite, a girl who dressed and lived plainly because she wanted to honor God but had let two good men, devoted brothers no less, each kiss her?

Rhoda was desperate to talk but not to Camilla. If she could get to the one man who could restore some measure of peace to her, she would. But neither brother had any desire to talk to her. She loved Jacob, but she needed to talk to Samuel...after she yelled at him for messing up her life as well as the relationship between the three of them. He would have answers, half-baked ones most likely, but by the time they were finished, she'd at least feel some clarity, enough to start sleeping again.

When she came out of the laundry room, Camilla was in the kitchen with the lights on. “Were you making apple butter by candlelight?”

Rhoda blew out the candle. “Between it and the glow from the gas burner and all the electronic things in the room, I could see well enough.”

Camilla's wry smile didn't quite override the hint of bewilderment in her eyes. “I'm sorry, but I need to say what's on my mind. I didn't ask why Jacob never accompanied you when you came to visit us or why he disappeared altogether when your legal troubles began. *And I* let you push Bob and me away during that whole mess of false accusations of drug trafficking. But aren't you ready to talk?” Camilla moved in closer. “For your sake, child.”

In spite of her desire to keep Amish matters among the Amish, Rhoda's resolve began to falter. The whole situation was ridiculous. Jacob was finally home after months of being in hiding, and yet Rhoda had never felt so lonely. For her, that was really saying something. She'd spent so much of her life ostracized and alone. Then Jacob swooped in and made the pain of all those days vanish like apples from trees during the harvest.

A faint smile crossed Camilla's face. “Las Vegas has a motto: what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. But they have nothing on the Amish or on Rhoda Byler, do they?”

Rhoda leaned against a counter, lost in her heartache. “I don't know how I got to the place of living with the Englisch. It all happened in the blink of an eye.”

Actually, it'd happened in the length of a kiss.

Samuel.

She ran her cold, damp fingertips across her lips, remembering the power of those few moments. “Do you understand men?”

Camilla set a few dishes in the sink. “It took me a lot of years and many a mile traveling down a rocky path after the wrong men, but eventually...after...”

Rhoda heard the rest of Camilla’s sentence as if she’d spoken it aloud—*after my poor decisions caused my son to walk out, never to return.*

Rhoda’s heart turned a flip. It was the strongest confirmation she had felt that Camilla did have a son. The day Rhoda moved into the farmhouse, and even before she met Camilla and Bob, she had often sensed a man and a child trying to tell her something. It was eerie, and Rhoda wished it would go away, but since then, whenever she gently hinted about Camilla having children, Camilla denied it, retreating like a stray dog being chased off by a landowner.

Camilla picked up a kitchen towel and wiped her hands. “The important thing is I have a bit of a handle on the subject of men these days, and I’ve been biting my tongue since you arrived. But here goes... Are you here because of an abusive man?”

Was that what Camilla thought—that Jacob, with all his hidden, mysterious ways, was violent? “No.”

“You’re sure? I told Bob last week that I was suspicious of why you needed to get away from that house.” She shrugged. “He said I should mind my own business. But, well, did your boyfriend hurt you? Are you afraid of him? Or was it that man who came here looking for you one night? What was his name?”

“Samuel. He’s Jacob’s brother.”

She hadn’t told Camilla the truth of why she was here because she’d thought it would sound sordid and ugly, but her thinking Jacob or Samuel was violent was even worse.

“Both men are the reason I’m here. But it’s not what you’re thinking. And probably one good argument could clear the air between me and Samuel.”

“He’s the one who was angry the night he came here looking for you.”

“He wasn’t angry. He was worried. It was the middle of the night, the temperature was dropping, and I was missing.” How could Camilla not put that together even without knowing Samuel? “They’re good men, truly.”

Camilla pursed her lips. “You’re welcome to live here for months if you need to, so don’t misunderstand me. But if you get on so well with them, why do you need a place to stay?”

Rhoda hesitated. How much should she tell her? She turned on the heat under her batch of apple butter, hoping she hadn’t altered the quality by turning it off in the middle of the cooking time.

Camilla picked up the wooden spoon and stirred the concoction. “Perhaps I’ve been wrong about why you moved out. It’s possible I’m seeing things that aren’t there.” She tapped the spoon against the pan before setting it aside. “See, I was married for seventeen years to an abusive man.”

Rhoda wasn’t sure what to say. She knew a little bit about Camilla’s past because she’d had an intuition about Bob and Camilla, and when they both denied having children, she’d asked Landon to run a Google search on them. She still didn’t have any proof about a child, but she had learned there were police reports on a man Camilla was once married to. Even so, hearing the pain in Camilla’s voice was quite different from Landon reading random facts on a computer screen. Rhoda’s knees felt shakier than when she’d heard the voice earlier. “I’m sorry.”

“I refused to talk about it, just as you’re doing. When forced to discuss it, I made excuses for his behavior. Year after year and injury after injury. To say I have a suspicious nature toward men is an understatement. I know how they can lie and manipulate us. Nowadays I can’t make myself sit by if any woman I know is caught in that.” She lifted her head, her eyes searching Rhoda’s. “You most of all. Can you understand that?”

It never ceased to amaze Rhoda how the most unexpected people carried invisible and unbearable weight while looking as whole and happy as the next person. Rhoda still carried the grief of losing her sister, but, fortunately, Jacob had helped her let go of her guilt.

She nodded. Camilla’s concerns made more sense in light of what she’d been through. Rhoda had felt drawn to Camilla from the day she met her, when Rhoda followed the sound of an unfamiliar instrument through the woods to find Camilla, on the patio, playing what she said was a cello. She and Bob had been warm and friendly, so it surprised Rhoda to learn later that they were known for being reclusive.

“I get your desire to protect me, and I appreciate it, but you have to believe me. Neither Jacob nor Samuel would ever hurt a woman.” Samuel would raise his voice and snap his answers. Apparently Jacob would walk off and refuse to talk. But both would die before using their strength against a woman.

Camilla studied her and slowly slid her hands into the pockets of her thick terry cloth housecoat. “Okay, if you’re sure, because—” Her expression changed and apparently so did the subject on her mind. “Oh, yeah.” She pulled out a folded envelope. “Saturday morning Bob brought in a letter for you, but you’d already left to go work at the farm, so I slid it into my pocket without thinking. I forgot all about it until now. I hadn’t worn this housecoat since—until I heard the crash a few minutes ago.”

It was a business-size envelope, and excitement skittered through Rhoda. “From Jacob?” Camilla shook her head.

Disappointment erased Rhoda’s hope, but she took the letter. The return address had a government seal from Orchard Bend, Maine, on it. She had a response from them already? Maybe it wasn’t going to take as long as she thought to get licenses for her canning business.

She opened the envelope and pulled out the papers.

“Good news, I hope.”

“I...I’m not sure.” She flipped through the pages of forms.

Clearly she had a lot to fill out. She was still paying the price for some teenagers’ accusations that she supplied them with marijuana, and it still angered her. While her life was in limbo due to her legal troubles, she hadn’t had the time or the presence of mind to pursue the licenses she needed to set up her canning business and be fully functional by harvest—a mere four and a half to five months away. But she’d expected that once she was cleared of the accusations, Samuel and Jacob would help her make up for lost time.

Since that wasn’t happening, she’d come up with Plan B: pretend her heart wasn’t broken, act like a woman with a brain, and do what she could without their help. If she intended to sell canned goods throughout the Northeast and parts of the Midwest, she didn’t have time to wait until the King men were ready to talk to her again. She had to keep moving toward her goal, including creating new recipes for her label.

Looking at the cover letter again, she began to understand the situation better. “It’s an explanation of what type of kitchen facility will and won’t be approved.”

Ach, there was so much she needed to discuss with Samuel and Jacob. Instead, she was forced to make all the tough decisions on her own.

“And?” Camilla peered over the top of the papers.

Rhoda’s mind and heart felt as if they were mired in quicksand. “For the type of license I need, the facility can’t be an in-home kitchen that is also used concurrently for family purposes.”

“You didn’t check the licensing laws before moving?”

“Sure, but most of our plans were undermined because of my legal issues—like the two families who backed out of coming. They were supposed to lift some of the workload of restoring the orchard while we put our energies into solving the kitchen issue. And because those families aren’t here, Phoebe and Steven haven’t had time to find a home of their own. We had been sure we could find a house with either a second kitchen or the space and plumbing to add one. My legal mess is one reason Jacob was gone so much and hasn’t had time to add a canning kitchen onto the farmhouse. I had to help do Jacob’s work while he was gone, so I wasn’t able to deal with any of this before now.”

“But he has time now, right?”

“Time, maybe.” Although their workload in the orchard was increasing as rapidly as the spring temperature. “But no desire.” Rhoda folded the letter and shoved it back into the envelope.

“So now what?”

“I don’t know. Jacob is the one who comes up with ideas out of thin air. Samuel is the one who has the know-how to change thin air into reality.”

“But?”

Rhoda shrugged. Camilla knew enough to draw her own conclusions. Neither man was talking to her. Actually, she knew Samuel would talk to her if she could get him alone. But if she was going to restore Jacob’s faith in their relationship, she had to avoid being seen with Samuel.

She went to the kitchen window and pulled back the thick, insulated drapes. Dawn had begun to chase away the darkness, and soon sunlight would shimmer off the patches of remaining snow. It was already the second week of April, but the ground was cold and wet, and mounds of snow still dotted some places, especially in the woods. She needed to dress warmly and head to the farm for another day of partnering with Landon—while being avoided by both Jacob and Samuel.

Had they moved all this way and gone through so much only to face defeat because she’d kissed—or been kissed by—one brother while the other was away?