

CHAPTER ONE



THERE WOULD BE NO MORE GENTLE DAYS.

Joseph Hochstedler knew it the minute he stepped out of his parents' Tennessee farmhouse into the predawn darkness. December had been showing on *Mamm's* kitchen calendar for almost a week, but today was the first time he'd felt the bite of winter. And at twenty-six, he'd spent enough seasons working outside to sense that this sullen chill had hunkered down to stay.

His mind on the weather, Joseph walked halfway across the side yard before he realized his mistake. Before him lay the stone dairy, his automatic destination every morning up until about a month ago. He stood for a few heartbeats, studying the silent building that until recently had loomed so large in all their lives.

For six generations the habits of the Hochstedler men had been regulated by the unyielding discipline of twice-daily milkings. Dairy farming was regarded as one of the hardest ways for Amish men to earn a living, but that had

never mattered to the Hochstedlers. They'd never been afraid of hard work.

Ever since he'd been old enough to follow *Daed* outside in the early mornings, Joseph had considered himself a dairyman. He'd grown up with the baritone lowing of the cows, the smell of the barn, the rich tradition of hanging his own hat on the same worn peg his great-grandfather had used. *Grossdaddi* had done this from necessity because he could milk faster bareheaded, pressing his forehead close to the Jersey's warm flank. Joseph's father had been allowed to use surge milkers in the dairy, but he had trained Joseph and his brother Caleb to hang up their hats in the barn, just the same.

Traditions died hard with the Hochstedlers.

At least *Grossdaddi* hadn't lived long enough to witness the death of the Hochstedler Dairy. Joseph was thankful for that.

He exhaled, his breath fogging the sharp air. Then he turned toward the smaller wooden barn, already glowing with the light from *Daed's* lanterns.

"You're almost too late." Caleb, Joseph's younger brother, sat hunched in a stall, milking their last remaining Jersey. Sure enough, the steel pail was almost full; each hissing stream of milk sent splashes over the sides. "With only Daisy to milk, the chores go fast. Wouldn't you know? Not until I marry and leave home does *Daed* decide to sell the herd and take up the lazy life of a shopkeeper!"

Their father barked a laugh from the feed room, where he was measuring scratch for *Mamm's* hens. "No time for laziness here, cows or not. Plenty of hard work yet, building up the store business."

"From what I hear, you already have plenty customers coming by. That's *gut*. A lot easier to spend your mornings adding up sales behind a shop counter instead of mucking out after two dozen cows, ain't so, Joseph?"

Joseph didn't answer. Keeping his back to his brother, he

forked the morning's ration of hay into the stalls of the family's buggy horses. His favorite gelding nickered appreciatively, and Joseph paused to stroke Titus's muscled neck.

He'd found nothing easy about any of the mornings he'd spent working in his parents' new store, selling jams and quilts and faceless dolls to *Englischers*. This particular morning, though, was turning into the hardest yet.

Yesterday, Caleb and Rhoda had returned to Johns Mill after their monthlong wedding trip visiting family in Kentucky and Ohio. Joseph had braced himself for that, and he thought he'd been prepared. Then last night Caleb had pointed out there was more room at the Hochstedlers' than with Rhoda's folks, and he'd asked if they could stay on for a few weeks while they looked around for a place of their own.

Joseph had caught the quick glance his parents had exchanged. They suspected, as he did, that Caleb's request had little to do with space and more to do with his headstrong brother's reluctance to live under the roof of the local bishop. Nonetheless, the request had been promptly granted. It was their way to take in family whenever needed, and *Mamm* was pleased to have the chance to spend more time with Caleb and her new daughter-in-law. The arrangement had been accepted matter-of-factly by everybody involved—except for Joseph.

He'd said nothing, of course, although the prospect of living elbow-to-elbow with the happy couple chafed him. The idea of seeing Rhoda every day, passing her in the hallways, seeing her seated at the family table as his brother's wife . . .

That was pain he could have done without.

Caleb started his new job on Samuel Christner's construction crew this morning. Joseph had hoped for a break from his brother, but Caleb had risen early and headed to the barn for chores, as if nothing had changed.

Joseph had lingered in the kitchen after *Daed* and Caleb

had gone out. The less Joseph saw of his brother with that scruff of new-married beard on his face, the easier it would be to hold his tongue. That was exactly what he had to do, until his stubborn heart fell in line with the faith he'd been born and baptized into—a faith that required forgiveness, regardless of the offense. Seeing Caleb wreathed in smiles, shooting possessive glances at Rhoda as she moved quietly around the kitchen helping *Mamm*, was testing Joseph's determination to its limit.

Joseph leaned the pitchfork against the weathered wall with the other tools just as Caleb clanged the lid on the milk pail.

"Are we about ready to head in for breakfast, *Daed*?" Caleb asked. "Rhoda's frying up that venison sausage we brought from Melvin's. Wait until you taste it!"

"*Ja*," their father answered. "I heard my brother was happy with his sausages this year."

"And that was the only thing he was happy about," Caleb replied. "It is hard to believe Melvin's your brother, *Daed*. Our *onkel* is the sourest man I have ever met."

Daed sighed. "*Ach*, well. He's had his share of sorrows, has Melvin. To have only the one son and then to have him crippled in an accident, not just in body but in his mind as well . . . that would be a hard blow for any man to bear without bitterness."

"Henry needs a lot of looking after, for sure. Rhoda helped Nella all she could while we were there, and I pitched in with the dairy work. There was more work than hands to do it, even so."

"It's hard for Nella and Melvin since their girls married into different districts," *Daed* agreed.

"I don't blame the *kossins* for leaving. Oak Point is stricter than most. Rhoda was spoken to for wearing a dress in too light a color. Can you believe that? Rhoda's never been in trouble in her life, and she was only a visitor there. It shamed her, and it made me mad."

“That does seem harsh. The both of you can count your blessings now you’re back home, *ja*? You can go on to the house, Caleb. You’d best get that milk in and get ready for work. Your *bruder* and I will finish up.”

“I’ve time yet before my driver comes. Rhoda and I want to do our share of the work while we’re here.” Caleb darted a look in Joseph’s direction, but Joseph turned his head, focusing on the grain he was scooping into the horse’s bucket.

Daed shooed his younger son away. “Right now, your share is to get that milk to your *mamm* for straining. If you don’t, Melvin’s sausage won’t be the only thing frying in the kitchen this morning. She’ll have your hindquarters up on the griddle, married man or not.”

“She might at that.” Chuckling, Caleb picked up the milk pail and started for the house. Joseph’s glance strayed after his brother, then caught on the scene framed by the wide kitchen windows.

Rhoda stood at *Mamm*’s stove, a spatula poised in her hand. His heart thudded hard at the sight of her. It always did, ever since the afternoon he’d come home from the fields and found Rhoda Lambright and his sister Emma frying cherry pies to sell at the annual horse auction.

She’d worn a plum-colored dress that day, and her cheeks had matched it, flushed bright from the heat of the bubbling oil. Rhoda and Caleb’s twin, Emma, had been friends since their schooldays. Joseph had never paid much attention to her before, but when she’d glanced up at him, Joseph had suddenly realized that little Rhoda wasn’t so little anymore.

And that she was the prettiest thing he’d seen in all his life.

He’d set his heart on her in that moment, but she was only sixteen, barely old enough to think about courting. He was twenty-one, a bumbler when it came to talking with the girls, and the dairy was in its death throes. There was time

enough, he'd figured. He'd wait for Rhoda to grow up some, wait until he had more than a pile of unpaid bills to offer a wife before he spoke.

He'd waited too long, and his brother had spoken first. Nobody had seen that coming. Headstrong Caleb, the Hochstedler who'd had more trouble with the deacons than all the rest of them combined, had somehow won the heart of the bishop's only daughter.

It would have been funny, that, if things had been different.

Joseph pulled his gaze away from the window. Rhoda was Caleb's *fraw* now, and she would be until death parted them. Somehow Joseph had to find a way to think of her exactly as he did Emma and Miriam, as a sister. Nothing less and certainly nothing more.

As impossible as that seemed right now, Joseph had a feeling it would be easier than coming to love Caleb as a brother again.

"Chicken feed is mixed. Are you done with the horses?"

Joseph jumped. Lost in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed *Daed* standing beside him on the hard-packed earthen floor of the barn. His father was dressed in his chore clothes, so soiled that they were no good for regular wear. He smelled like all the mornings of Joseph's memory—better mornings—of grain and manure, of horses and cows, and the warm sweetness of fresh milk.

Joseph missed those days, but it was clear enough that his parents did not. Years of relentless work and financial strain had taken a heavy toll. As the dairy and other local farms failed, Elijah Hochstedler's brothers and sisters had relocated to different communities, one by one, and each time, the lines in *Daed's* face had deepened. Family, Elijah believed, was second only to *Gott*.

At least he seemed happier now that the difficulty of closing the dairy was behind him. He appeared to like the store work well enough, and he enjoyed spending his days

busy with *Mamm*, interacting with folks. *Mamm* was happier, too. Since the herd had been sold off, she looked ten years younger.

It was *gut* for his parents, this change, and although Joseph would never be happy about the decision, he was thankful for that.

It made what he needed to say easier.

“*Daed*, I have been thinking. The store is running fine, and you’ve not much need of me here. Maybe I should go to Melvin’s for a while, help him with his dairying. If you think he’d be agreeable, that is.”

His father shot him a measuring look. “I think my brother would jump at such a chance. I also think he’d work you into the ground and give you little in return for your labor. And what of your woodworking? Don’t you have projects to finish that folks have put money down on?”

“A few. I’ll get them done before I leave.”

“How long would you plan to stay?”

“I don’t know.” *Until this pain ebbs off. Until I can look at my brother’s wife and not see only the woman I wanted for myself.* “A good while, likely.”

His father sighed. “Is it so bad here, then? That you’d go to such a place as your brother described? I’ll not stand in your way if you’re bound to leave, but we’ve other family. You could go to Pennsylvania, maybe, and help Norman with his grocery store, if you’re looking to spend time away.”

“I’m no storekeeper, *Daed*. I’m a dairyman. You heard for yourself that Melvin needs the help.”

“*Ja*, maybe that is true, but I don’t think it’s what’s driving this buggy. It is a hard thing for you, seeing your brother married to the girl you’d chosen for yourself. I am sorry for that, but you should not let it push you into making a rash decision.”

Joseph glanced up sharply. He’d never spoken to *Daed* about his feelings for Rhoda. In their community, such

things weren't discussed until relationships were firmed up and headed for marriage. "You knew?"

"*Ja.*" His father's lips twitched above his salt-and-pepper beard. "I have eyes, son, and I was once a young man myself. I knew. Just as I know that you are struggling now to set aside your own feelings for the good of the family, like you did when it came time to sell the herd. Two such hard blows back-to-back are not so easy to bear, but you must keep trusting in the Lord. When our world goes dark, then we must hold hard to the rope of our faith, and trust *Gott* to lead us out. He is merciful and will bring the good out of our troubles, in His own time."

Joseph blew out a slow breath. "I am not seeing so much *gut* right now."

"That will get easier. In time I believe you will join the rest of the family in thanking *Gott* for the blessing of this marriage. I was worried about Caleb and so was your *mamm*. He was born muleheaded, and he only got more stubborn as he got older. *Gott* knows His business, Joseph. He knew it would take strong ties to keep such a heart here among us. Rhoda's life is steeped in our faith. She and the *kinder* they will have together will steady Caleb's faith as well. It is a *gut* match."

"*Ja.* For Caleb." Joseph couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"For Rhoda, too. She's too serious, that one, but Caleb will liven her up. Before long, she'll be laughing as easily as our Emma." His father frowned suddenly. "Speaking of Emma, I've asked her to stay home and help Rhoda get settled in. *Mamm* and I will be taking Miriam with us at the store today."

Joseph lifted his eyebrows. Even at twenty, Miriam was painfully shy, and unlike her friendly older sister, she always went tongue-tied and red-faced around strangers. She'd be even more miserable working at the store than he was himself.

He hadn't asked his question aloud, but *Daed* answered it anyway. "An *Englisch* boy's been coming around since we started work on the store building back in October. His father's that lawyer who has the office in town. Abbott is the name. You and Caleb did some work for the family some time back, *ja*?"

Joseph nodded. "Two or three years ago, some cabinetry work in the kitchen." He remembered it well. It had been his most profitable job to date, even though Abbott had conveniently forgotten to pay for the upgraded cabinet pulls he'd added on at the last minute. "Trevor is their only child. Caleb and I didn't see much of him. He stayed in his room, mostly. Slept late. His *mamm* wouldn't let us make noise until after eleven in the morning." He and Caleb had marveled privately over a healthy boy being allowed to hold up men's work because of such laziness. *Daed* would have put a quick stop to that, certain sure. "Is he causing trouble?"

"He likes to talk to our Emma. At first, we thought little of it. The boy seemed lonesome and awkward, and you know your sister. Any wounded thing she sees, she wants to help. Since we opened the store, she takes her lunch break first, down at Miller's Café. It seems he's been coming to sit with her, bringing her things. Gifts that are not appropriate for her to accept, some very costly. So *Mamm* and I talked it over last night, and we think it best for Emma to be away from the store for a bit. You didn't know about any of this?"

"I did not. Emma told you about it?"

"She told Caleb. She did not know how to discourage the boy without hurting his feelings, and she wanted his advice. Caleb thought it best to tell me."

If Emma had wanted *Daed* to know, she'd have gone to him herself. Still, in spite of everything, Joseph couldn't fault his brother's decision. He'd have done the same. Sometimes Emma was too kindhearted for her own good.

"Like most *Englischers*, the Abbotts don't understand

much about our way of living. I can have a word with Trevor, if you want." Talking wasn't Joseph's strong suit, but he could make himself clear enough to get this job done.

His father gave him a knowing glance. "Nee, best I handle that. I just wanted to hear your thoughts on the matter, see what you knew of this boy."

"Not much. He wasn't so cocky as a lot of *Englisch youngies*, I remember that. He had the look of a whipped dog, never said too much. I'm not surprised Emma felt sorry for him or that he took to her. He'd likely take to anybody who showed him attention. Once Emma's gone from the store, I doubt he'll cause any more trouble."

"Gut." His father nodded. "Then this will be easily remedied. In any case, it will do Miriam good to spend time in town. We have coddled her too much, her being the youngest. She must make the effort to get past her shyness when it's necessary."

"Well, one thing's certain sure. You won't have to worry about Miriam striking up any friendships with *Englisch* boys. They scare her to death."

Just then *Mamm* stuck one arm out and clanged the large dinner bell mounted beside the back door. The sound echoed against the surrounding hills, Levonja Hochstedler's earsplitting warning that her menfolk were late for breakfast.

"We are coming!" his father called.

"Gut!" *Mamm* answered shortly. She disappeared, banging the door shut.

His father chuckled. "Nothing riles your *Mamm* like seeing her good food going cold. We'd best get ourselves inside."

"You can go on in. I've no time to eat this morning. I'm taking a crib next door to Aaron Lapp's. Katie's *boppli* is six weeks old already, and I just finished the thing last night. I'll head to the store after."

"Nee. You'll come back here after and work on finishing

your carpentry projects. If you're sure Ohio is where you want to go, I'll write a letter to Melvin this evening, and we'll get your visit arranged. Who knows? Maybe this is *Gott's* plan. Likely you'll find yourself a nice girl while you're up there, and all this trouble will be forgotten." His father clapped him hard on the shoulder and winked. "But maybe you learn something from your old *Daed*, and you don't give your *fraw* such a loud bell by the back door, *ja*?"