



IN PLAIN
View

VALLEY OF CHOICE



OLIVIA
NEWPORT

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VALLEY OF CHOICE BOOK 2

OLIVIA
NEWPORT



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Dedication

For Sonja

Acknowledgments

It is hard to know how to say thank you to all the people who helped bring this book into being. My agent, Rachelle Gardner, believes in me, which probably spurs me on more than she knows. How blessed I am to call her friend as well!

I have no doubt about Barbour's commitment to make the book the best it can be. After all, they had the good sense to connect me with Traci DePree to work as editor on the Valley of Choice series.

My husband is always game to gallivant off somewhere with me, literally or cyberly, in search of information. Every writer should be so lucky.

And Sonja. What can I say?

Sometimes writing feels like a lonely enterprise, but when I lift my eyes from the screen I see a host of people cheering me on. I am thankful for each one.

Annie Friesen had a lot to learn about how to ride a bicycle in a dress that brushed her ankles.

The late-April day slushed with spring snow vacillating about whether to melt. Temperate Colorado mountain air beckoned a population sick and tired of huddling indoors all winter, Annie among them. Five miles stretched between her and the Beiler farm, five miles she was determined to traverse without depending on Rufus Beiler and his buggy to pick her up. She could walk or she could bicycle from her house in Westcliffe to the Beiler home, where Rufus's family expected her for supper, and she would surrender herself to their long arms of hospitality and acceptance. The moment to begin the walk and arrive on time had passed thirty minutes ago, though.

Annie turned the bicycle around in the narrow, century-old garage and assessed its readiness for the first outing of the spring. The tires seemed acceptable, the pedals spun appropriately when she kicked at one, and the brakes squeezed when cued. She walked the bike into the sunlight and laid it down on the ground while she heaved the garage door closed. Then she situated herself on the seat, straightened the heavy wide-knit navy cardigan she wore, and hiked up the skirt of her deep purple dress as far as a good Amish girl dared.

Annie was not a good Amish girl. At least not yet. She did not even always wear Amish clothing. After eight months of friendship with the Beilers and regular attendance at the district's worship services, she would have to rate her German as pitiful. She understood more every week, but she could not get her mind and tongue to cooperate in speaking. Private lessons were some help, though she often left more frustrated than when she arrived. Singing hymns from the *Ausbund* might as well have been reading a census listing, which meant she had a lot to learn about both patience and devotion. The *Ordnung* was a mystical obscurity she wished someone would translate to bulleted points in plain English. The hairstyles seemed severe—but only when she looked in a mirror, which she did less and less these days. The ties to her prayer *kapp* annoyed her whether she tied them or let them hang loosely on her shoulders.

But she was trying. For one thing, she had given up driving her own car, which was up on blocks in her parents' garage in Colorado Springs.

Annie checked the strap on her helmet—a promise she made to her mother when she gave up driving—then put her weight on the top pedal and leaned into the bike's forward movement. The streets in town were wet but friendly enough for cycling. Once she got to the highway, though, Annie scowled at the sludge passing vehicles sprayed at her. She knew what the drivers were thinking because she used to be one of them. *What kind of idiot rides a bike on a high-speed road? If they can't go the speed limit, they should get off the road.* She was lucky if drivers moved three inches toward the center of the two-lane highway when they whizzed past her.

Rufus had offered to pick her up. All winter long he fetched her when she needed to venture beyond the confines of Westcliffe, where she worked on Main Street and lived on a side street. But Annie did not want to depend on Rufus for her every move until she learned to care for a horse and drive a buggy of her own. The promise of spring allowed independence, as far as she was concerned. Milder weather meant she could come and go as she wished, as long as she did not mind the rigors of riding or walking at high elevation. This first ride of the season made her want to lengthen her stride and let her feet hit pavement in heart-pumping rhythm. Did good Amish girls run cross-country?

By the time Annie turned into the long Beiler driveway, she was refusing to shiver in her damp sweater, and the sodden hem of her skirt was slapping against drenched stockings. The best she could hope to do was keep her headpiece on straight. The Beilers had taken her into heart and hearth as she was, but she still wished she could arrive without looking a mess once in a while.

Seven-year-old Jacob was the first to spot her, as he always was. He loped down the wide porch steps and across the yard with one hand holding his straw hat in place and his black winter-weight wool jacket flapping open. Annie checked to be sure he was at least wearing shoes, knowing that as soon as the ground dried up he would leave his boy-sized brown work boots neatly under his bed.

“Annalise!” The boy flung himself into her arms even before she could properly dismount. The bicycle tumbled on its side and she let it go in favor of his enthusiasm against her torso. Jacob knocked her slightly off balance, and her cell phone spilled from a sweater pocket. Jacob squatted to scoop it up. “Do you ever miss your old phone? I liked your old phone.”

Her iPhone had been her lifeline to another world—e-mail, texting, Internet, Facebook, Twitter. She had done it all on her phone, and she never turned it off. She ran her whole company from that phone sometimes.

“I would trade a thousand phones just to know you.” Annie wrapped her hand around the simple flip-style phone. This one was not even turned on. So far, in the last six months, Annie managed to avoid any emergency calls. Otherwise she only turned it on for her weekly calls to her mother, a compromise that helped keep the peace. Her parents had the number Rufus used for his woodworking business, so if one of her parents had a true emergency, they could reach her.

Annie glanced toward the house, ready for her pulse to quicken at the sight of Rufus.

“The Stutzmans are here.” Jacob took her hand and tugged.

“Who?”

“The new family.”

Annie managed a smile for Jacob’s sake. She was expecting supper with only the Beiler family. They knew her well and patiently guided her through the path of learning Amish ways. The presence of another family, especially a new one, took the edge off her anticipation of the evening—and immediately she felt remorse at her ungenerous thought.



When Rufus Beiler heard the screen door slam behind his little brother, he lifted his eyes to the back window that looked out the front of the house. As it often was, Annalise’s *kapp* was cockeyed, an unintended habit that made him smile.

“Excuse me,” he said to Beth Stutzman, who hardly broke her chatter to breathe. “I’ll be back shortly.”

On his way out the front door, Rufus grabbed his coat off the rack. He met Annalise and Jacob halfway down the driveway.

“I told Annalise the Stutzmans are here,” Jacob said.

“Thank you, Jacob.” Rufus tilted his head toward the house. “Maybe *Mamm* needs your help.”

“I hope she’s all out of beets from the cellar.”

“Jacob!”

“I’m sorry.” The boy huffed. “I will be thankful for whatever is put in front of me to eat.”

Rufus watched his brother start to kick the dirt beneath his boot and then think better of it. As the little boy clomped up the porch steps, Rufus laid his coat around Annalise’s shoulders. She had, as she nearly always did, underdressed for the spring temperatures.

When she turned toward him and lifted her face in thanks, he wanted to kiss her right there. She was so lovely. Bits of moisture clinging to her face shimmered in waning sunlight. He barely kept himself from smoothing her blond hair back into place under her *kapp*.

“Stutzmans?” Her wide gray eyes questioned.

“’Fraid so.” He straightened the jacket around her.

“I’m not cold, you know.” Her eyes smiled even if her lips were turning blue.

“So you often tell me.” He would never admit he hung his coat around her so her scent would be on

it when he wore it next.

“Anyway, Stutzmans,” she reminded him.

“Just moved from Pennsylvania to join the settlement here.”

“Did you know them in Pennsylvania?”

“Quite well. They are second cousins of my brother Daniel’s wife and had a farm only four miles from ours.” He paused and put his hand on her elbow.

“Oh. That’s nice.”

He heard the disappointment in her tone. “If you don’t feel up to meeting new people tonight, I can take you home.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m here. The Stutzmans are here. I’m sure we’ll get along famously.”

Rufus was not so sure.



Instead of making a dripping entrance through the front door, Annie asked Rufus to walk her to the back door. She could slip into the kitchen and up the back stairs to dry off and straighten herself out. When she glanced in the small mirror in the bathroom, she rolled her eyes. Why did she seem to be the only Amish woman—well, almost Amish—who could not seem to wear a prayer *kapp* properly?

Under her thick sweater, the dress was surprisingly dry. She could do little about the hem of her skirt, which had plunged through one puddle too many. It would have to dry in its own time.

Downstairs, the table was extended to its full length and Jacob was rounding up the last of the extra chairs from around the house. Eli and Franey, Rufus’s parents, shared their home with five of the eight children. In between their eldest son, Rufus, and youngest son, Jacob, were Joel, Lydia, and Sophie, all teenagers.

Hospitality oozed out of Franey Beiler’s bones, a trait that first brought Annie into the house last summer. Franey would not blink twice at accommodating seven extra people for dinner.

She suggested the Stutzmans sit where they pleased and the Beilers—and Annalise—would fill in. Annie’s stomach heated as the tallest Stutzman daughter took the chair directly opposite Rufus. Annie pressed her lips together and took another chair. As Eli Beiler presided over the silent prayer at the beginning of the meal, Annie could not help but wonder about one empty seat. Joel Beiler was missing.

Ike and Edna Stutzman’s daughters—Beth, Johanna, and Essie—seemed to Annie close enough in age that she would not be surprised to discover a set of twins among them. She guessed they were between nineteen and twenty-two. The boys—Mark and Luke—were younger, perhaps recently finished with eighth- grade formal schooling.

They were loud. *Laut*. Jacob had taught Annie that word.

Annie could not summon a more polite description that remained honest. The entire family spoke Dutch if they were addressing a deaf grandfather, and one on top of the other. They were full of news of their former neighbors in Pennsylvania, and Franey and Eli lit up in gratitude for stories of people they had known and lived so long among, including their own two married sons.

For Annie’s sake, the Beilers often spoke English. The Stutzmans, however, made no such effort beyond initial introductions. Pennsylvania Dutch flew around the table too fast for Annie to keep up with much of the conversation. Jacob sat beside her, as he always did when she came to dinner. Occasionally, he leaned toward her and offered a brief translation, which helped Annie to smile and nod in appropriate lulls.

Annie did not need translation to see that Beth Stutzman directed many of her remarks at Rufus in a way that forced him to respond. *She must be the eldest*, Annie decided. Johanna and Essie made no effort to compete with their sister but instead sat quietly, observing the conversation and smiling benignly. Beth would have been finishing the eighth grade when Rufus left Pennsylvania, when he was

a grown man already. But now she was grown up—and quite pretty, Annie had to admit. Had Beth Stutzman swept into town and thought she would snag Rufus Beiler on her first evening?——

Jacob leaned toward her and whispered. “The Stutzmans are going to stay with us for a while. They want to paint their house before they move in. I hope they will let me help paint.”

Annie smiled. “I’m sure you’re a very good painter.”

“No one ever gives me a chance to try.”

Annie reached over and scratched the center of his back then laid her arm across the top of his chair, angling toward Rufus as she did so.

Despite the decibel level and Beth’s brazenness, the evening was drenched in friendship going back generations. Annie could see for herself that these were not like the unfamiliar families in Colorado Springs who intersected each other’s routines at swim classes and soccer matches for three years until someone transferred to a new job. They shared each other’s days and nights, and various branches of their families had intermarried. Ike and Edna had come west for many of the same reasons Eli and Franey had come six years earlier. Unlike the Beilers, though, the newcomers had a community ready to welcome them and give them aid.

Even after six months of living as plainly as she could, and despite her dress and *kapp*, Annie felt very much the *English*. And she had been at the Beiler table enough times to feel the undercurrent that grew between Eli and Franey as conversation rose and fell and Joel failed to appear. Annie glanced at Rufus, catching his eye in a fleeting connection before Beth launched into another story meant for Rufus’s benefit. The evening was nothing like what Annie craved when she had started out on her bicycle.

Eli’s eyes, Annie noticed, moved between the clock and the front door.

Joel was going to have some explaining to do.

Johanna Stutzman and her brother Mark sat on either side of Joel's empty seat. As the meal progressed, both seemed to absorb a share of the available space, as if they no longer expected someone would arrive to occupy the chair.

Annie regretted putting so much food on her plate. She felt left out of the rapid, reminiscence conversation in the language she still struggled to learn, and whenever she looked at Eli, her anxiety for Joel heightened. Both factors dimmed her appetite.

This was not the first time Joel had been late for dinner, she knew. That only made things worse. Had he not known the Stutzmans would be there? If he had, would he have made an effort to be present?

The creak of the front door's hinges raised eyes around the table. Joel entered and closed the door carefully behind him. A still-growing seventeen-year-old, his trousers inched off his ankles as he turned to face the gathering at the table.

"Ah, Joel." With just two words, Eli's voice bore through the chatter.

"I'm sorry, *Daed*." Joel moved toward the table, his back erect. He brushed a bookcase, and a cell phone clattered to the polished wood floor.

"Hey, that's just like Annalise's." Jacob clambered out of his chair and picked up the phone.

"Jacob, get back in your seat." Eli's eyes remained on Joel. Jacob handed the phone to Joel and obeyed his father.

"It's Carter's phone." Joel took his own seat. "I forgot he gave it to me to hold."

"We'll talk later," Eli said. "Just turn it off and put it away."

Annie winced on Joel's behalf. She saw Joel reach under the table and fiddle with the phone, which was indeed on. Eli was not going to embarrass Joel in the presence of guests—even old family friends—but even if the phone was not Joel's, Eli would want to know what his son was doing with it.

"Carter is the son of Tom Reynolds." Speaking English, Rufus deftly explained. "You'll want to meet Tom as soon as possible. He does a fair bit of taxiing and hauling for our people, and he doesn't mind the distances involved in our district."

"That's good to know." Ike Stutzman's voice was deep and commanding. "I heard that because of the distances, your district allows the use of telephones."

Oops. Annie caught Rufus's eyes and saw the flicker of dismay that his effort to deflect the conversation had been short lived.

"That's true," Eli said, "but the concern is for safety, not convenience or amusement."

His expression was not lost on Annie, so she had no doubt that Joel understood perfectly.

"Carter's dad was out looking at the new recreation area," Joel said. "He took some pictures."

Oops again. Not the best topic of conversation Joel could have introduced to take the heat off himself.

"No one has made any decisions about the use of that property," Eli said.

"What property is that?" Ike's inquiry sounded idle enough.

Annie pushed peas around on her plate. At least they were not beets. She stood in solidarity with Jacob on the beets question. She was relieved to hear Rufus's voice again.

"The county owns a few acres not far from here," Rufus explained in English. "There is some thought to developing a park. The organizers would like volunteers to offer their labor in order to keep costs to a minimum. They have invited everyone to participate."

"Even the Amish?" Edna Stutzman asked from beside Franey. "Surely they understand that we live apart."

Rufus tilted his head. “The park would be for everyone to use. If everyone shares the load, the everyone benefits as well.”

“But this is an *English* project, is it not?” Ike thumped the table as he persisted with the distinction.

“Well, yes, I suppose,” Rufus said. “It was the idea of Tom Reynolds and a few others. They propose a simple shelter from rain and sun, a children’s play area, and trails for families to use.”

“But this is an *English* project,” Edna repeated.

Annie did not need a translation for the consonants spitting from Edna’s mouth when she said *English*. She reached up and tugged on the two strings of her *kapp*, a habit developed over the last several months in nervous moments. While she was living largely plain until she decided whether to join the Amish officially, Annie resented Edna’s inferences about the *English*.

“Do you often cooperate with the *English*?” Edna bristled as she broke open a biscuit.

“The *English* are our neighbors here,” Rufus said, persisting in English. “When do you hope to move onto your farm?”

And that was it. He let it go and moved on.

Annie stifled a sigh. How did he do that? Just let things go when the tension mounted?

Relief blew out on Franey’s breath, Annie noticed. She was not opposed to a park. She was not even opposed to working with the neighbors. Franey simply did not want to get involved with this particular plot of land. Annie did not know why.

It had something to do with Ruth. Annie knew that much. Annie missed Ruth. Rufus’s sister would have known how to navigate the emotions in the room.

Franey’s reticence about the land proposed for the park.

Joel’s running around with Carter Reynolds and the boys from town.

Eli’s need for order.

Even Beth Stutzman batting her eyes at Rufus.

Annie was glad that she could picture where Ruth was—the roadways of Colorado Springs bearing the buses Ruth rode to work and school, the university she attended, the small dorm room she lived in. Even though she knew Ruth was sure of her choice, Annie felt Franey’s sadness.

Franey stood up. “How about dessert?” She smiled around the table. “I have peach pie, apple schnitzel, and rhubarb crisp.”

Rufus’s sisters Lydia and Sophie took the cue and began clearing the table. Annie did the same.

The Stutzman daughters rested comfortably in their chairs. Beth even put her elbow on the table, supported her chin in her hand, and leaned toward Rufus. Annie shoved down the resentment that welled.

Humility, humility, humility, she told herself. No matter what she thought of their manners, she would serve them with a smile.



Rufus remembered the Stutzman girls differently. Perhaps it was because they were so much younger than he was that he never paid close attention to them when the families lived near each other in Lancaster County. They were taller now, more filled out. Beth’s hair was much the same color as Annalise’s, he observed. He supposed that her forwardness would wear off soon enough when she saw that he did not return her feelings, and when she met some of the other families who had sons looking for wives.

He looked at Annalise across the table. Concentrating so hard to follow conversation in Pennsylvania Dutch exhausted her, he knew, and the evening’s exchanges had been particularly rapid. Several times during the evening he had switched to English in an effort to include her, but clearly the Stutzmans were not used to using English at home and inevitably switched back within a few sentences. As they told stories of Lancaster County, their enthusiasm spilled out in a torrent of Pennsylvania Dutch.

Annalise smiled at him in an expression he had come to know meant, *I'm tired and I want to go home.*

Rufus pushed back his chair. "It's been good to hear so much news from home. Now I think I better make sure Annalise is home before it gets later."

Annalise stood. "Thank you, Rufus. I do have to open the shop early tomorrow."

"You work in a shop?" Edna asked. "What sort of shop?"

"Antiques, collectibles, odd and ends," Annalise said. "It's right on Main Street."

"They sell some of my jam," Franey said. "Weekend visitors seem to like it."

"Beth makes excellent jam," Edna said, smiling at Rufus.

Rufus nodded politely and stood up. "I'll take Annalise home now."

"Let Joel take her," Eli said.

Rufus stopped in his steps. He always took Annalise home. In fact, often the quiet ride home was the part of an evening he looked forward to most. Talking freely with Annalise, holding her hand, hearing the way she laughed when only he was around. Rufus would not counter his father, though especially in front of guests.

Eli lifted his chin toward Joel. "Stop on your way back and return Carter's phone, please. I don't want it in the house."

The phone could have waited until the morning, Rufus thought.

"I'll walk out with you." Rufus gestured toward the front door. "It will take Joel a few minutes to bring the buggy around."

Annalise followed him to the front door, where she retrieved her half-dry sweater. He read the mixture of disappointment and gratitude in her face when they stepped out under the porch light and she turned her face to him.

"I'm sorry," Rufus said. "I thought we would have some time to talk."

"Me too. But we must respect your father."

Rufus sighed gently. "You are learning our ways."

They descended the steps together.

"I really do have to open the shop early," Annalise said. "Mrs. Weichert is going into Cañon City to visit an old rancher's house. The family claims some of the pieces have been in the family for well over a hundred years. They may be an easy sell to the weekend antiquers."

"Will you be at the shop all day?"

She shook her head. "She promises to be back before noon."

"Then you'll be back here tomorrow?"

"My Saturday quilting lesson is the highlight of my week. Wouldn't miss it."

He nodded in satisfaction. "I'm sure I'll see you."

They walked halfway down the driveway to where her bicycle still lay on its side.

"I should check your brakes," he said.

"The brakes are fine. The tires, too."

"It can't hurt to double-check."

"It's fine, Rufus. You're sweet, but I built and sold two hightech companies. I think I can keep my bicycle in working order."

Joel arrived with a horse and the small cart.

"You should have brought the buggy," Rufus said. "It's getting cold."

"I thought this would be easier to put the bike in." Joel was already gripping the frame in two places and lifting the bike into the cart.

"This is fine," Annalise said. "I'm not cold, you know."

Rufus smiled. "So you often tell me."

"You two can hold your smiling contest later," Joel said. "Let's get this over with."

Rufus did not much care for his brother's attitude, but this was not the time to challenge him. He turned to Annalise and offered a hand to help her up into the cart. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Right after lunch."

"Have you got the phone, Joel?" Rufus asked.

Joel raised the reins. "I'm not an idiot."



"I know you didn't want to do this." Annie gripped the seat. Joel was letting the horse have a little too much head.

"Don't worry about it." He did not turn an inch in her direction.

He was seventeen. Annie had never been an Amish boy, but she did remember seventeen. She let an entire mile roll by before she spoke again.

"You and your father are going to work this out."

"Work what out?"

"This thing between you. That keeps you from talking to each other."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Another mile.

If Joel did not choose to be baptized and join the Amish church, it might just take Franey around the bend. His older sister Ruth had already left home without joining the church, and while the relationship between mother and daughter had tenuously stitched itself back together over the last few months, Annie was sure Franey was not ready to go through that again with another child.

"I'm not Ruth, you know," Joel said.

How did he do that? "I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to. I'm not stupid. I know *Mamm* wants me to be baptized, the sooner the better."

"You have to do what is right for you."

"Look where that got Ruth."

"Still. It's true."

Another mile. Two more to go.

"I'm going to be baptized," he said. "I'm just not on a time schedule. There's no hurry unless I decide I want to get married."

"True enough."

"And I'm not getting married any time soon."

"I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"About as much as you do."

Everybody she knew back in Colorado Springs thought she needed a good shrink. Sell her business for millions of dollars and park the money where she could not touch it? Give up modern technology? Move into a decrepit house one-third the size of her custom-built condo and immediately get rid of the electricity? Take classes—in German—to learn the Amish faith?

"I stumble through one day at a time," she said.

"It seems to me you've got a pretty good grip on things."

"Smoke and mirrors, I assure you."

"I'm Amish," he said. "I'm not supposed to know about magic tricks."

Annie elbowed him and laughed. They turned off the main highway and onto Main Street heading east. A few blocks later, Joel turned the horse north.

"Lights are on in your house," he said. "Did you leave them burning?"

Annie leaned forward. "No."

"Well, somebody did."

The living room was well lit. Annie wondered if there were such a thing as an Amish thief. What else would know not to reach for a wall switch?

Joel slowed the horse and reached to extinguish the lantern hanging from the front of the cart.

“I guess I forgot,” she said.

“You don’t forget, Annalise. Even I know that.”

They stopped in front of the house. “Should we call 911?” Annie pulled her phone out of her sweater pocket and flipped it open. Westcliffe was the seat of Custer County. A county sheriff’s car would be just minutes away.

“I can’t just leave you here.” Joel put a hand on Annie’s arm.

They watched the house for a few silent seconds.

“I’m going in with you,” Joel finally said. “But turn on the phone just in case.”

Three

Joel looped the reins around the mailbox at the curb. Staying in the shadow of the house, Annie led the way up the driveway and around the back of the house.

“How do you think they got in?” Joel’s whisper might as well have been a megaphone.

Annie put a finger to her lips and stepped onto the small porch outside her back door. With one hand still gripping her cell phone, she slowly lowered the handle on the screen door. Ready to wince at the contrary spring at the top betrayed them, she opened the door inch by inch and slipped into the opening. Joel was right behind her when she tested the knob on the main door. She was sure she had locked it when she left, but it turned easily now.

Inside, her fingers found the edge of the counter and she felt her way along it across the small dining room kitchen. A shadow crossed the light seeping around the edges of the swinging door between the kitchen and dining room. Someone was definitely on the other side—and moving around.

“I can’t see anything.” Joel’s feet dragged on the floor.

“Put your hand on my shoulder. Watch out for the trash—”

But Annie’s hushed warning was too late. Joel stumbled and sent the metal can clanging across the floor. She halted and froze. Joel’s tumbling weight against her back nearly knocked her over.

The door from the dining room opened. “Annie, is that you?”

The air went out of Annie so fast she almost whistled like a balloon. “Mom!”

Annie reached for the small propane lamp she knew was at the end of the counter and turned the switch. Her father now stood behind her mother in the doorway. Myra Friesen looked from her daughter to the young man behind her.

“This is Joel,” Annie said. “Rufus’s brother. Joel, these are my parents, Myra and Brad Friesen.”

“Hello, Joel,” Myra said.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Joel nudged Annie. “Everything’s okay, *ya?*”

She nodded. Whatever brought her parents to her home without prior arrangement was nothing she needed Joel for. “Thank you for seeing me in.”

“I’ll leave the bike on the side of the house.”

“*Danki.*” Thank you.

The screen door slammed behind him, and Annie closed the solid inner door. Then she righted the trash can, grateful she chose the covered model when she outfitted her kitchen.

Myra glanced around the kitchen. “You’ve done a nice job making something of this room...with its limitations.”

“Thank you. Mom, what’s going on? How did you even get in?”

“You’ve got a tree in the backyard just like the one at home. It even has the same low branch—good for climbing. It was simple enough to think you’d hide a key there like we do at home.”

“Busted. Where did you stash your car?” If she had seen their sedan, she might have spared a few extra heartbeats moments ago.

Myra set the house key on the counter. “We figured your garage was empty, considering your car isn’t in our garage at home.”

Home. Was her mother going to work that word into every sentence? Annie let the comment pass and instead gestured to the dining room. “Why don’t I make some coffee and you can tell me why you’re here?”

Along with the coffee, Annie produced half a chocolate cake. They sat at the oval table up against the window in the dining room.

“Mmm. Delicious!” Myra jabbed her fork in for a second bite of cake. “Is this from a bakery

town?"

"No. I made it."

"You made this? You never used to like to bake."

"I'm trying a lot of new things these days." Annie nudged a small pitcher of cream toward her daughter who she knew would want a generous portion.

"Well, I miss some of your old habits." Myra licked chocolate off her top lip. "Like calling your mother."

"I call you every Saturday and we yak the charge out of my phone." Annie twirled her finger balancing a piece of cake. "I would have called you tomorrow like always." So why were they here?

Brad cleared his throat. "We're here on a special mission."

"Which is?"

"Penny is coming home." Myra looked at Annie hopefully.

Annie had not seen her sister in almost a year and a half. Though Annie had gone to Colorado Springs for Christmas, at the last minute Penny had to cancel her flight from Seattle and missed the holiday.

"When does she arrive?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow!" Annie set her mug down. "Why didn't we find out sooner?"

"We found out last Saturday. She called right after I got off the phone with you. I meant to send you a note, but I never got to it. I'm just not used to communicating the old-fashioned way, I guess."

Annie wondered how many times she and her mother would have to go around this loop.

"I wanted to leave a message on your phone," Myra said, "but you have all these rules about what a true emergency."

"It seemed the simplest thing to drive out here," Brad said.

"I'm sorry I wasn't home." Annie reached for the pot and warmed up her coffee.

"We can take you back with us in the morning," Myra said.

"You're staying the night?"

"Certainly. Not here, of course. We've already checked in at Mo's."

Annie nodded. Mo's motel. Where they had electricity. And complimentary Wi-Fi.

"I'm sure you'll be comfortable there." She paused. "I'm not sure about going back with you though."

Myra's fork hit the bare plate. "But you have to. I told you. Penny's coming. It's hard for her to get away."

"It might be hard for me to get away on short notice, too, Mom."

"But Penny's only going to be here for a few days. She's coming all the way from Seattle. Can't you come seventy-five miles? I'd like to have you both home at the same time."

"I know, Mom. I'm not sure about tomorrow, that's all. I'll have to figure out my work schedule."

Myra waved a hand. "You don't even need that job."

"I need work for reasons other than money."

"If you need something," Brad said, "you let me know."

"Don't be silly, Brad." Myra pushed her empty plate away. "She has more money than you and I can never dream of."

Annie groaned. "Mom, we've been through this. I only have what I made when I sold my condo. I have to be careful. It has to last me indefinitely. All the profits from the sale of the business went into a charity foundation. I can't touch it."

"Your compassionate humanitarianism is admirable, but why you left yourself in need, I'll never understand."

"I'm not in need," Annie said. "I'm just living more simply, and it's good to have work."

"But in an antiques store? Why don't the Amish rules let you make money with what you know how to do—technology?"

"This is what I want, Mom. You have to accept it."

"But they put such value on family. We're your family. Surely They would want you to see your sister."

"I do want to see Penny." Annie missed her sister, who had not written so much as a thank-you note in at least five years. They used to communicate by texting most of the time. Annie had written two letters explaining the changes in her life, but she heard Penny's reaction only through their mother on the phone. "How long will she be here?"

"Just until Thursday. It's a short visit. You must come home."

"Please come," Brad said. "We can have dinner together a few times and catch up."

As determined as Annie had been over the winter to live without electricity and a car, and to learn to cook her own food instead of ordering takeout every night, she would be lying if she said she did not miss her family. But Mrs. Weichert was counting on her to look after the shop in the morning, and Franey Beiler was expecting her tomorrow afternoon.

"I'll figure something out." Annie's eyes suddenly ached to close, and she clamped her jaw against the urge to yawn.

Brad stood up and started stacking dishes, a habit Annie had always admired in her father. If she did not stop him, he would take the dishes into the kitchen and insist on washing them.

"That's a beautiful shelf." Brad glanced at a white oak shelf fixed to the wall beside the dining room window.

"Thank you. Rufus made it."

Brad inspected the carved pattern along the front ledge. "He's quite skilled."

"I know." Pride flushed through Annie, and she reminded herself. *Humility, humility, humility.*

"And these books?" her father asked. A dozen or so volumes in various colors and thicknesses populated the shelf.

"Various genealogy books," Annie said. "Several have come from Amish families, but the rest have come through the antiques shop. Mrs. Weichert doesn't mind if I take them."

"Are they all about the Beilers?"

Annie shook her head. "Most of them are not. I've gotten interested in the whole idea of tracing the generations back in any family."

Brad pulled a slim black binder off the shelf and opened it. "Is this the book you found in our basement?"

"Yep. That's your Byler roots, going all the way back to Jakob Beyeler in 1737."

"I thought it had a spiral binding," Myra said.

"I figured it would hold up better in a notebook with page protectors."

"That's a nice thought."

"That red volume is all about the Bylers of North Carolina."

"Are we related?"

"I'm pretty sure. I'd like to spend more time studying the family lines than I have."

Brad chuckled. "I'll let you give me the abbreviated version, but I admit I find it fascinating that my mother's family may be related to the very people you've become so attached to here."

"Me, too." Annie covered a yawn. "Sorry."

"We're all tired." Myra stood and picked up the coffeepot and creamer. She disappeared into the kitchen, still talking. "We'll pick you up for breakfast. Not too early, though. How about eight thirty?"

"Sorry, Mom. Mrs. Weichert is going to an estate sale in the morning. I have to be in the shop."

“Will it matter if you’re late? How many customers do you get, anyway?”

Annie had to admit traffic was slow most days, but Saturday was likely to bring weekend lookers. Mom had promised her, Mom. She’s counting on me.”

“Well all right, then. We can have lunch in that quaint bakery down the street before we head back to town.”

“Let’s figure that out tomorrow.” Annie stifled another yawn.

“Will you have your phone on?” Myra looked as if she already knew the answer.

Annie wondered why her mother insisted on pressing the question. “I’m sure I can get a message for you at Mo’s. I’ll use the phone in the shop.”

“But you’ll definitely go home with us as soon as you’re free?”

“Mom, I do want to see Penny. I’m just not sure about tomorrow.”

October 1774

Push!”

At her mother-in-law’s command, Katie Byler grunted and bore down.

In the other room, Jacob heard the urgency in his mother’s voice and the resolve in his wife’s guttural response. It would not be long now.

Jacob soothed one of the twins by jiggling the child on his knee. He welcomed the other to lean against his leg. At two, the twins were too young to know what caused their *mamm* to make those sounds, and he saw terror in their round, ruddy, silent faces. At seven and five, their older brothers Jacob Franklin and Abraham, remembered the twins’ arrival and were less concerned about the event.

Four boys, all of them sturdy and healthy. Katie wanted a girl this time. A little sister.

Jacob’s own sister was supposed to come from Philadelphia to help, but Katie had gone from uneventfully stirring the morning porridge to digging fingernails into his arm in the space of forty minutes—three weeks earlier than anyone imagined. All the boys had been tediously late, even the twins. So with or without Sarah’s presence, this baby was coming. It was all Jacob could do to see the seven-year-old Jacob Franklin sprinting across the acres to fetch his grandmother from the big house. Soon after her arrival, Elizabeth Byler pronounced the child would appear before lunch. Jacob could not see how it was going to take even that long. Katie’s scream melded into the wail of the new baby protesting an abrupt arrival into the chilly room.

“A girl!” Jacob’s mother called.

Jacob stood and thrust the reluctant twins toward Jacob Franklin. He had to see for himself that Katie was all right.

At the bedroom door, he stopped and smiled. Katie was already grinning. She eagerly caught his eye.

“A girl,” she said.

“A girl!” Jacob softened in satisfaction. Their daughter continued her objections while his grandmother wrapped her in a towel and placed her on Katie’s chest. Katie counted fingers and toes as she had with all their children. Jacob moved closer to the bed.

“She has your forehead, Elizabeth.” Katie gently rotated the child to get a good look at both sides of her face.

“Perhaps not my best feature.” Elizabeth discreetly positioned a clean rag under Katie to await the afterbirth.

Jacob soaked up his wife’s pleasure, glimpsing the depth of her yearning for a girl after four boys.

“Her aunt Sarah has four brothers,” Katie said. “Your sister will have to teach this little one how she survived.”

Jacob put his massive hand around the back of the baby’s head. “For starters, Sarah never once let us take advantage of her.”

His mother laughed as long-past years lit her eyes. She had borne five children but mothered ten, taking into her heart Jacob’s older Amish half siblings.

He knew the story well. Both his parents had told it often. More than thirty-five years ago, after surviving a treacherous sea journey without losing anyone in their family, his five older siblings were abruptly left motherless in Philadelphia, their father crushed in loss. And then Lisbetli found Elizabeth’s heart in a stationer’s shop, and Elizabeth found his father’s heart. The bookish woman from the city married the homesteader and moved to the wilderness, where she labored with five children.

she could call her own no matter what.

No matter what.

His Amish siblings loved her. Jacob believed that. Who could not love Elizabeth Kallen Byler and her gentle, self-sacrificing ways? Yet she refused to convert to the Amish faith, and for that the Amish siblings put on her the weight of luring their father away from the church.

And now this woman who had loved them all moved about the room cleaning up and delicately setting aside a bucket and soiled cloths. Her movements were swift and efficient, as she made sure Katie was as comfortable as possible. She stepped to the other side of the bed and pulled a quilt up over her daughter-in-law then paused to lay one last damp cloth across Katie's forehead.

His father had made his own choice. Jacob had no doubt. And his mother made hers.

The others were gone now. Lisbetli was in her grave, and Maria disappeared years ago, run away and who knew where. Unwilling to raise arms in skirmishes with Indians or the French, Christian sold his land and moved to the Conestoga Valley, farther from the frontier. Land the Amish had labored to clear and make farms of was now quite valuable, so other Amish families followed Christian, including Jacob's half-sisters Barbara and Anna. Eventually many of the Amish settled in the reconfigured Lancaster County, while Jacob remained on land that became part of Berks County.

"We should write to them." Katie looked up at Jacob, reading her husband's mind as she always had. "Your sisters will want to know about the babe."

Jacob nodded. "What would you like to call her?"

Katie shifted the infant into Jacob's arms. "Her name is Catherine."

"That's a big name for a little one."

"She'll grow into it. They all do."

A wail from the front room reminded them that Catherine's four older brothers were unattended.

"I'll go, Jacobli. You should be here now." Elizabeth laid a small quilt over the child nestled in her arms, quieted now. Jacob recognized it. All his children had slumbered under it in newness, warmed by a token of their grandmother's love.

Elizabeth left the room, and Jacob handed the baby back to Katie.

"I'll stoke the fire," he said. "It's too chilly in here for a babe."

Katie pulled the bedding up to where she held the child against her chest.

"Then I'll get you some food," Jacob said. "And tea."

"Your brothers will be along soon, I suppose," Katie said.

Jacob nodded. "By now John will have noticed I'm not at the tannery today. He'll call Joseph and David in from the fields."

"Your family does rally around a new babe. I have to say that about them."

"You might say a great deal more about them, but God has graced you with forbearance."

She laughed. "They are my family, too," she said. "Send them in as soon as they come. Sarah should be here tomorrow."

Tomorrow. Jacob was relieved it was not next week after all.



Magdalena Byler stood at the end of the lane, shading her eyes with one hand. Nathanael was late. Pressed, she would have to admit he was late habitually, but no matter when he turned up her heart quickened. He was twenty-two to her seventeen years. If they spoke to the bishop soon, they might yet marry before this year's wedding season passed.

The approaching cart stirred up dust before she heard the clatter of horses' hooves and wagon wheels. Nathanael would have come on foot. This must be Nicholas, the *English* who carried mail from Lancaster to the outlying farms twice a week. Magdalena raised one corner of her shawl to spare her lungs the whirling dust.

Nicholas waited till the last moment to pull on the reins, just as He always did.

~~“Guder mariye, Nicholas. Good morning. What do you have for us today?”~~

He passed her a bundle of envelopes tied together with string. “One is from Berks County.”

“My *onkel*.” Magdalena pulled the knot out of the string and began to flip through the stack. She paused when she recognized the blockish lettering of Jacob, her father’s younger half brother. “It must be news of the baby.”

“You can tell me all about it next time,” Nicholas said. “Nothing going out?”

“Not today. *Danki*, Nicholas.”

The horse resumed its trot. Magdalena scanned the road again, looking for any sign of Nathanael. Nothing stirred on the horizon. She was tempted to tear the end of the envelope, but it was addressed to her father and his wife. After one more glance around, she chose to take the letters to her father. Nathan could find her there.

Her parents had brought the family to the Conestoga Valley several years earlier. Her mother’s death, just two years ago, stunned them all. But Christian Byler, her father, lost little time in marrying again to another Yoder daughter. Now he and Babsi coddled a baby of their own. With three brothers and three sisters, Magdalena had thought herself too old to become a sister again, but of course no one could resist baby Antje’s blond curls and violet-blue eyes.

Magdalena decided to go to the barn rather than the house. Her father was sure to be there. She was curious enough about *Onkel* Jacob’s news to want her *daed* to open that letter, even if he read the rest when he was sitting comfortably in his chair by the fire. Magdalena found him right where she expected, standing in the hayloft with a pitchfork in his hands. When he saw her, he thrust the implement upright into the hay and leaned on it to look at her.

“*Onkel* Jacobli has sent a letter.” Magdalena waved the entire mail packet up for her father to see.

Christian Byler wiped his hands on his pants then carefully maneuvered down the sturdy ladder to the main floor. At fortyfive, he still seemed robust to Magdalena. He did not ask younger men to do what he was not willing to do himself. The end of his brown curly beard rested against his chest as he took the stack of mail from Magdalena.

She had laid Jacob’s letter on top. Her father now carefully broke through the end of the envelope and extracted a single sheet of paper.

“*Maedel*. A girl,” Christian said a moment later. “They’re calling her Catherine.”

Magdalena smiled. “A pretty name. When did she come?”

“Nearly three weeks ago. Sarah is there now. All is well.” Christian looked up. “I thought you were to walk with Nathanael Buerki this morning.”

“I am.”

“He’s late.”

“I know.”

“Are you sure you want to spend your life waiting on this man?”

Magdalena nodded. Nathanael’s perpetual tardiness bothered her father more than it did her. “He’s worth it.”

“You had better be sure.”

“I am.”

“You could have been married last year. He has his own land with a cabin. It’s not the house you’re used to, but it would serve you well for now.”

“The cabin is fine. We’ll marry when the time is right.” Magdalena hoped it would be soon. “I’ll better go back up to the road to wait for him.”

Nathan was there when Magdalena reached the end of the lane again. He looked over his shoulder and he hustled her down the road.

“What’s wrong, Nathan?”

“Patriots,” he said. “I saw a gang of them on the ridge.”

“They could be there for any number of reasons,” Magdalena said. “One of their meetings perhaps.”

“I had a bad feeling, Maggie. From up there they can see the road in both directions. You never know when they will drop down.”

“I don’t understand why they cannot leave us alone. Is it so terrible that the Amish want to be neutral and peaceful?”

“Ever since the Patriots dumped tea in the Boston Harbor, there is no such thing as neutral in the minds.” Nathanael slowed his steps and reached for Magdalena’s arm when she got a few steps ahead of him.

“You said they were on the ridge,” Magdalena said.

“I think they’ve moved,” Nathan whispered.

Magdalena gasped and clutched Nathanael’s hand as four young men lunged from bushes beside the road.

One of the men broke from the others and sliced between Magdalena and Nathanael, knocking her down at the side of the road and pinning her shoulders there. She stared into his gray eyes. He was Stephen Blackburn. His family had arrived in the Conestoga Valley the same year hers had. They were hardly more than children when they first met. He was *English*, but he had never threatened harm.

“Don’t try anything.” He gave her shoulder an extra shove; then he stood up.

What did he think she would try? She was Amish. She would not strike him or purposefully cause him harm. And neither would Nathan.

The foursome now circled a frozen Nathanael.

“Have you considered the hypocrisy of your position?” Stephen taunted. “Your people came to America seeking freedom, but now that the British threaten the freedom of all the colonies, you will not stand up against persecution.”

Magdalena watched Nathanael’s Adam’s apple descend in a slow swallow.

“We are peaceful people,” Nathanael said. “We would be hypocrites if we were suddenly to take up arms.”

“There will be a war, you know,” Stephen said. “You will have to decide whether your allegiance belongs to Britain or America.”

“My allegiance belongs to God alone.”

“But you live in Pennsylvania. You must have some sense of patriotism.”

Nathanael did not answer. Still tasting dirt, Magdalena was afraid to move.

Stephen slapped Nathanael sharply on one side of his face. “Are you going to turn the other cheek to me?”

Nathanael did not move. Stephen slapped him again, this time with the back of his hand. Nathanael stumbled back a few steps but did not lose his balance.

“How does that feel?” Stephen jeered. “Are you holier now because you turned the other cheek?”

A sob shuddered through Magdalena. She was on one knee now, trying to stand on rubber legs.

“Take him,” Stephen said, and two others twisted Nathanael’s arms behind his back.

“Where are you taking him?” Magdalena tried to catch Nathanael’s downcast eyes.

“Hypocrites need to learn a few lessons in basic loyalty. Let’s just say we’re taking him to a school where he can learn.”

“Please, we mean no harm to anyone.” She stood firm on her feet now, her stomach turning itself inside out.

Stephen shoved Nathanael in the back, sending him stumbling into the bushes. He rotated toward

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