

A Season for Tending

Amish Vines and Orchards Book 1

CINDY
WOODSMALL

New York Times Best-selling Author of *When the Soul Mends*

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The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*In memory of Raymond Woodsmall Sr. (1897–1977)
and my father-in-law, Raymond Woodsmall Jr. (1922–2011)
and dedicated to Uncle Jack Woodsmall*



These men are the original apple orchard overseers.



Apple orchards are a large part of the Woodsmall family history, and while writing the Amish Vines and Orchards series, I relied on the skilled experience and vivid recollections of a former apple farmer, Jack Woodsmall of Sterling, Massachusetts. His wife, Marion, welcomed our intrusions and was a patient hostess who understood our passion to know and understand more.

For nearly fifty years, Raymond Woodsmall Sr., my husband's grandfather, was an overseer of an apple orchard in Leominster, Massachusetts. My father-in-law and his younger brother Jack worked on that apple orchard from the time they were little boys until they left home to serve in the military.

That orchard is called Sholan Farms, and the original farmhouse was built in the 1730s. Although Raymond Woodsmall Sr. never owned the land or the house, he moved into the original farmhouse before the Depression as a young man in his prime and remained there as an overseer of the orchard until he was no longer capable of such hard work. He then made room for a younger overseer and moved from the original farmhouse to a smaller place on the land, but he continued helping with the orchard until a few years before he died.

My husband grew up making yearly visits with his family to that farmhouse where his grandparents lived, and he spent hours walking the orchard with his grandpa and sitting under apple trees, mesmerized by the stories his grandpa told. Our children sat around the dinner table listening to their dad share those same stories.

Grandpa Woodsmall saw the apple orchard through droughts, floods, blizzards, pestilence, and the worst tragedy of all, the Great Hurricane of 1938, which nearly destroyed the orchard. He and his two sons worked long, hard years to restore the apple trees.

Years passed, and his two sons joined the military. They never returned to work the orchard again.

In 1982 the house sustained damage from a fire, and what was left of the home was dismantled, sold, and shipped to unknown destinations. Later, the

orchard was abandoned. It was during this time I first walked that land. While viewing the acres of dying trees, I longed for what had once existed.

Clearly others were stirred too. In 2001 the Sholan Farms Preservation Committee (SFPC) purchased the land. Soon afterward, a new group was formed, Friends of Sholan Farms (FOSF), and they took on the task of revitalizing as much of the orchard as possible. Today on twenty acres of the original sixty-acre farm is a thriving orchard where families from across the States can come and pick their own apples. The land now produces four thousand bushels of apples per year. I know Grandpa Woodsmall would be pleased.

Welcome to Amish Vines and Orchards.

Come with me into the Amish Country of Pennsylvania, into an apple orchard farmed in the same way Grandpa Woodsmall and his sons farmed all those years ago. Let's take a journey that will be a tapestry of what was, what is, and—perhaps—what will be.

ONE

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. Heady 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 only with 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, a 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 Rueben’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 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 English 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.

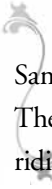
She heard men talking, and she turned to see her Daed, Rueben, and Naomi coming out of her home. If her Daed had been able to settle the matter, Rueben and Naomi would have left her house by themselves and gone home. Instead, the three of them were walking toward her, and now she would be pulled into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

TWO



Samuel put his forearms on the antique oak desk while he pored over the bills. The sweet scent of apple blossoms flowed in through his bedroom windows, riding on the May breeze, and the waning sunlight made shadows bob and dance across the paperwork. As he studied the numbers, he could hear his grandfather's voice rumbling aged wisdom: *Take care of the orchard, Samuel, and it'll take care of you. Never give up. Loyalty is the key.*

He missed his grandfather. It'd been eight years since he passed. But if he could see Kings' Orchard now, Samuel believed he'd be pleased. They'd suffered a few disappointing harvests in the last several years. That wasn't unusual for an orchard. But it'd been a good spring thus far, promising an excellent harvest. If Kings' Orchard could have a bountiful harvest this fall, he would ask Catherine to marry him.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the smell of rain mingled with the sweetness of apple blossoms. He tossed his pen onto the bills and walked to the window. He looked beyond the yard and the barns to the rolling hills filled with acres of apple trees, all of them lush with white and pink blossoms.

The image of his grandfather's rough, weathered hand reaching for the first ripe apple of the harvest was vivid. He always gave it to Samuel during his growing-up years. Always to him. Not to Samuel's grandmother or to his Daed or to Samuel's brothers. And *Daadi* would say, "A good man is loyal to what God has given him." Then he'd place the apple firmly in Samuel's palm as if bestowing on him the responsibility of the orchard and instilling in him the loyalty to see the job through.

These days Samuel gave the first apple of the harvest to Catherine. She was the one who understood him. What he thought often didn't line up with what

actually left his mouth. But Catherine heard him when he spoke, and she knew what he meant before he did.

A banging on his door vibrated through the room. “Samuel.” Leah knocked again.

“Kumm.”

She walked in, carrying hangers with shirts on them. “I’ll just put these in your closet.”

Samuel held out his hand.

She huffed, but she stopped and passed him the ten hangers. He inspected the shirts that draped from them.

Leah put her hands on her hips. “I have plans for tonight. Can I get paid?”

There wasn’t much way of telling where she’d go tonight, and if he asked, she’d lie. Nothing like the *rumschpringe* years to keep the family in the dark about where young people spent their evenings, so he was in no hurry to give her money. He consoled himself with the reminder of his own running-around years. Now twenty-four, he had left behind his time of extra freedoms quite awhile ago, but he’d learned some valuable lessons the hard way—like going to a theater cost a lot more than it was worth, and playing video games never won you anything. In fact, the opposite was true. He’d lost valuable time that he’d never regain.

He thumbed through the shirts. She’d done a half-decent job. The collars were clean, and his Sunday best were well pressed. He’d pay her for those. But his everyday shirts hadn’t felt much heat from her iron.

Leah extended her palm toward him. “Anytime today would be really nice.”

He held up three hangers with half-ironed shirts. “These need to be redone.”

“No way.” She huffed. “You only wear them to work in the orchard. I see no reason to heat a pressing iron and work up a sweat to make them crisp.”

It didn’t actually matter how his work shirts looked, but she hadn’t done an acceptable job. He continued to hold out the hangers with the wrinkled shirts. “The principle is always the most important.”

Leah took the three hangers. He gave a half nod to affirm that she'd made the right decision to redo the shirts. But instead she went to his closet and hung them up. "You've never washed or ironed anything in your life. If you ever do, we'll have this conversation again." She returned to him and got the rest of the hangers. "I'm not laboring one second longer on any of those. It's a complete waste of time."

Samuel went to his sock drawer. She deserved a reasonable fee for what she had done well. "If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well."

"Ya, right. Like you'd spend any time on something as boring as doing laundry or dishes. Maybe if your work were as dull as mine, you'd do something with your money besides save every penny. You should use some of it and enjoy today, but we all know that's not going to happen."

He hadn't removed money from his savings account since he put the first twenty dollars in it at fourteen years old. Leah spent every penny she earned.

By offering to pay her to do his laundry, he'd hoped to encourage her to want to work. If she didn't develop a desire to do something other than read novels and go out with her friends, he didn't know what her future held.

He placed seven dollars in her hand. "You'll get the other three when you redo the shirts that need it."

She tightened her fist around the money and walked back to his closet. After grabbing the hangers that held the wrinkled shirts, she went toward his door.

Samuel smiled. "I'm glad you know I'm right."

"Ha." Leah swung them over her shoulder. "You'll get these shirts back when you pay for the labor I've already poured into them."

The old wooden floor creaked as he followed her into the hallway. Where was she going to hang them? He'd need those before the end of the week.

She pulled them off the hangers and twisted them into a ball. Apparently her plan didn't include hanging them anywhere. "Let's see you wear them now, Samuel." She bent over and scrubbed the wooden floor with them and then took them into the bathroom, where she picked up a bottle of pine cleaner and squirted them.

“That was very mature of you, Leah. You should be proud.”

She left them in the bathroom sink, went into her bedroom, and slammed the door.

Catherine was right. There was no way to get a point across to a fence post or to Leah.



Rhoda caught her father's eye while he, Naomi, and Rueben crossed the wide driveway toward her. He carried so much these days, more than any man should have to and more than her aunt or even the church leaders knew, but his shoulders remained broad and strong. He was determined to see his family through these dark days and into good ones again.

Did better times exist for them?

Daed stopped and studied her. “Fresh concerns have been raised.” He moved next to her. She knew he longed to defend her. If she was innocent.

Rueben eased forward a bit, his gray eyes carrying more hardness than the last time she'd looked into them, the day she'd uncovered his deceit in front of his girlfriend. “I know what you've been doing.” He said it quietly, and she knew he hoped to convince her to own up to her rebellion.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw an image. A young Amish woman stood near the house. Rhoda turned to see if one of her sisters-in-law had come outside. But no one was there. Just her imagination conjuring up a vision of Emma—her dainty features, beautiful green eyes, and her gentle smile.

Was this what “*It's time*” meant? Did Emma want her to give up her garden? Rhoda couldn't do it. Not then. Not now.

At first Emma's death stole all of Rhoda's desire to set foot inside her garden ever again. The very idea turned her stomach. But she soon learned it was the only place she could hide from her family's watchful eyes. They wanted to comfort her and be comforted by her. She couldn't manage either, and she discovered that the harder she worked, the more her family accepted her pull-

ing away from them. The distraction the garden offered became like a drug, and she was an addict. Her source of guilt became her place to escape.

Rueben studied the area near the house that had captured Rhoda's attention. Of course he didn't see what she had. He frowned, looking uneasy. "The Amish in this town take a black eye because of the rumors and nonsense that surround you. We've had enough."

Rhoda folded her arms. "What is your accusation this time?"

He shifted. "You make it sound as if I bring false claims. I have the truth."

Her aunt rubbed her hands down the front of her apron. "Rhoda, why don't you tell us what you've been up to the last few months?"

"I've been tending to my berry garden mostly, canning the early strawberries and getting ready for another abundant summer."

Fear crept into her aunt's face. She was one of many who thought Rhoda used unholy methods to produce such abundance.

But she'd defended herself before on this topic. "Whatever I have in the way of bounty is from God and His wisdom."

Naomi took several steps back, her eyes wide, her hands starting to tremble. "You...you read my mind."

Daed put his arm around Rhoda's shoulders. "We all knew what you were thinking, Naomi. You've expressed those same thoughts many times. My daughter's done nothing wrong."

Rueben removed his straw hat. "Why don't you tell your Daed about your contact with Mrs. Culpepper and Mr. Amerson?"

Daed removed his arm from her, and she knew he too wanted an answer to Rueben's question.

Rhoda's mouth went dry, and she found it hard to respond. "Have you been spying on me?"

"He's watching out for you," Naomi said. "He's taken it upon himself to be sure you don't cause any more problems among our Englisch neighbors or your own people."

That wasn't the least bit true, but if her aunt Naomi believed that and dared to come here and say so, she had to have the backing of at least two church leaders.

Rueben jumped in, explaining who Mrs. Culpepper and Mr. Amerson were and what Rhoda's contact with them had been. Her Daed looked disappointed.

"You need to stop dabbling in magic," Rueben said. "If you could find it in yourself to yield to a higher wisdom—"

"Higher?" She moved in closer. "As in your wisdom, Rueben? Be honest. Isn't that what you mean?"

"At least my good judgment would not give in to premonitions and the use of herbs with incantations."

"That's not what I do at all! I've told you that again and again. I've never used incantations."

He pulled a notebook out of his pants pocket. "There are more and more witnesses who say you do."

"Then they're lying."

Rueben passed the notebook to her Daed.

He flipped through it and handed it back. "That's full of nothing more than rumors."

"Rumors come from somewhere, Karl." Naomi turned her focus to Rhoda. "Why don't you tell us what you're doing to cause constant gossip about you and witchcraft?"

"I follow gut feelings. Gut feelings that turn out to be right once in a while, and I'm able to help someone. How can helping a person or saving a life be counted as wrong?"

"Rhoda," Naomi said, "giving and taking life does not belong in your hands. That is God's choice. Only His."

"But if He puts something in a person's hand, then it came from Him," she said.

"Karl." Naomi looked at her Daed. "The church leaders are on the brink of

getting involved. They've waited this long only because of their sympathy for your loss. If you don't show some attempt to control the problem and stop the rumors, the entire Byler family will be disgraced, even those of us who are in-laws." Naomi motioned toward the raised beds beyond the gate behind Rhoda. "The herbs are the real problem. Every story of scandal goes back to her using them in some mystical, ungodly way. I think they give her a false sense of power."

Rhoda tightened her fists. "Nobody in all of Pennsylvania feels less powerful than I do. I can't breathe without causing a scandal."

"Seems to me you deserve to have people watching over you," Rueben said.

Rhoda wanted to cram a handful of *Dryopteris* down Rueben's throat. The herb was good for killing tapeworm, but in the dose she imagined giving him, he'd land in the hospital too sick to stir up trouble for her.

"Rhodes." Her Daed's tone indicated his sympathy for what Rueben and Naomi were saying.

She bit back tears. "You too?"

Her father took her by the hand. "Perhaps it's time to uproot the herbs."

It's time? First Emma's voice in her mind, and now her Daed's words?

"I can't do it." Tears filled her eyes as she gazed over her shoulder at her herb garden. She couldn't rip it up. That'd give Rueben his way, and she'd be laughed at for being disciplined by the church.

She faced her Daed. "I've gone to a handful of people's houses over the last two years. I know I wasn't supposed to, but if you talk to them, they'll tell you that I helped them feel better. That isn't the trouble. The gossip Rueben is stirring up is the real problem."

"What?" Rueben exploded. "I'm not the problem."

"You spy like a fox waiting to raid the henhouse," she spat.

"Enough," Naomi snapped. "Karl, the church leaders have been very patient. It's been two years since Rhoda showed her true colors. You need to give the community and our church leaders a sure sign that you want to put an end to the ungodly image of Rhoda casting spells. Our Englisch neighbors need that from us too."

Daed stared into Rhoda's eyes. "If getting rid of the herbs will stop the lies among our people, it's the right thing to do. In time maybe it'll help ease the tension between us and our English neighbors. And you'll still have your berry bushes and your canning business."

"No!" She turned away and looked over the four-foot fence, watching her herbs sway in the spring breeze. Even the drab ones, with their brownish green and soft gray tints, held a special kind of beauty.

A noise caused her to turn back in time to see Rueben and Naomi entering the shed where she housed her gardening tools. Her father stood at the doorway of the building, still talking to them. Rueben came out carrying a shovel, and her aunt followed behind him, pushing a wheelbarrow.

"No." She positioned herself in front of the gate.

"The herbs have to go," Naomi said. "It's best for the whole community." She took the shovel from Rueben and held it out to Rhoda. "You should do it your yourself."

"Please, no." Tears blurred her vision as she shook her head. She could already envision Rueben destroying her herbs. It wouldn't take him any effort to scoop the herbs out of the raised beds with a shovel.

Daed's supportive hand cupped her elbow. "Kumm." He took several steps back, and she moved away from the gate.

She wanted to grab the shovel and uproot the plants herself just to keep Rueben out of her garden. But sorrow filled her like lead as she watched, unmoving, while he destroyed her plants. And she knew this was only the first victory he hoped to win against her.