

BLOOD PRICE

CHARITY VALE

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pRESS

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First paperback edition May 2026

Book design by A.C. Williams
Cover design by L1 Graphics (via 99 Designs)

ISBN (paperback): 9798258802965

Published by Kintsugi Press / A.C. Williams LLC
www.amycwilliams.com

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For the square pegs
in a world of round holes:
*What you think is your weakness
might be your greatest strength.*

CHAPTER ONE

Working at an Amish bulk food store wasn't all it was cracked up to be, even for Amish people.

The five-pound bag of powdered sugar belched a cloud of dust as Haddie set it on the shelf, painting the front of her burgundy dress white. She brushed the spray of sugar off her bodice and scowled as it smeared.

Wonderful.

She glanced at the shelf and then the floor to ensure sugar hadn't spilled anywhere else other than on her. Fortunately, her dress seemed to be the only casualty.

With a sigh, she pulled the bag of sugar off the shelf and carried it back to the stockroom. It coughed plumes of white dust with every step.

She bumped the stockroom door with her back to open it and spun to face the large aluminum table at the center of the room.

Caleb's head popped up over the edge of the table, his blond cowlicks sticking in every direction. "That goes on the shelves out front, Haddie. Why are you bringing it back here?"

"The bag has a hole." Haddie set the bag on the table. As if to underscore the point, another puff of white dust shot into the air and snowed down on the tabletop.

"Didn't you check it before you loaded it?" Caleb rolled his eyes.

Haddie swallowed the sarcasm she wanted to use against him.

"I didn't load it. Laura filled the bags yesterday." Haddie pointed to the stack of more five-pound bags of powdered sugar waiting to be put on the shelves.

"Well then why didn't you check it before you put it out?" Caleb's head disappeared under the table edge.

Haddie bit her tongue until it hurt. Caleb was cranky. He had a right to be, especially after everything that had happened in the last week. "I'm going to check the rest of them now."

"How much of a mess did it make on the floor?"

She turned away from Caleb and started moving the bags of sugar from the corner to the table. "It didn't make a mess on the floor or the shelf."

"So, it just made a mess of you?" Caleb asked pointedly.

Irritation surged through her, heating her face as she brushed at the sugar streaked across the front facing of her bodice.

Yes, he had a right to be upset, but he didn't have a right to be upset at her. None of what had happened last week was her fault. Taking out his frustrations on her wasn't fair.

She calmed her breathing and prayed her face hadn't turned as red as a tomato, as it often did when she got angry.

"It just got on me, Caleb. Nowhere else."

Caleb stood and set the box he'd been taping shut on the table. "I'll check the bags. You go sweep the floor."

Haddie looked back at him. "It didn't make a mess on the floor, Caleb."

"I don't think you looked." He reached into the deep plastic sink in the corner of the room and pulled out a wet rag, which he rung out. "Clean yourself up and then go clean up the mess you made." He tossed the rag at her, and she caught it.

Slowly, Haddie faced him. "Are you going to be like this all day?"

"Like what?"

She quietly brushed the wet rag across the sugary layer on her dress. Was it worth bringing up? Would trying to explain even help? Or had Caleb made up his mind to believe the worst about her?

Haddie set the sugary rag on the table. "You're acting like it was my fault."

"The sugar is your fault."

"I'm not talking about the sugar, Caleb."

A muscle in the back of Caleb's jaw twitched, and he turned scalding blue eyes on her. "Jonas is my best friend, and you hurt him."

Haddie scoffed. "Caleb."

"You had to know something was wrong, Haddie." Caleb shrugged. "And you let Jonas think everything was fine."

"Oh, so you know what this is like?" She gestured to herself.

"The way I see it, you just wanted to get married, and you didn't actually care what it would do to Jonas." Caleb picked up the box. "You lied to him. And that tells me everything we thought was true about you was also a lie."

"We?" The irritation from earlier faded to something hollow and aching in her throat.

Caleb didn't look at her as he walked toward the door at the rear of the stockroom. "Go clean up the mess you made. I'll take care of the sugar."

"Stocking the shelves is my responsibility."

"Lots of things were your responsibility." Caleb disappeared out the back door.

She flattened her palms on the table's cool surface, taking long, slow breaths to calm herself. Of course, Caleb would feel this way. And certainly the "we" he had mentioned was his family, probably Jonas and Jonas's family too.

Hopefully he didn't mean it was the entire Community.
They can't blame me for this. Can they?

She let her breath out again and straightened, eyeing the broom and dustpan in the corner. Her fingers itched when she reached for it. She had checked the floor. She had checked the shelves.

But what if she'd missed something? What if Caleb was right? Powdered sugar was insidious, like dust during harvest. It could get anywhere.

If she made a mess, she'd clean it up. It was only right.

Haddie spun away from the table and marched back out to the front of the store.

She paused at the shelf where the powdered sugar should have been. The shelf was clean. So was the floor. Just as she had said.

Why had she let Caleb convince her otherwise?

Anger hit her in a dizzying wave, and the sense of her blood pressure rising set off alarm bells in her mind. She took her place behind the cash register and kept drawing the long, slow breaths.

Ever since she got the diagnosis, the breathing exercises had been the only thing that could keep the panic attacks from spiraling out of control. Well, that wasn't quite true. Last week, she'd been able to think of Jonas and how he'd promised to love her no matter what. That he'd promised to marry her because he loved her and always had, ever since they'd been children together. That they still had a life and a future together, that she could pursue her dream of running an inn and having a family. Last week, the thought of Jonas had been a steady anchor in a storm of anxiety.

Now? Well, at least she could still breathe.

The bell over the entry door jangled cheerfully.

She steadied herself against the counter with a plastered-on smile. "Welcome to Nisly's Bulk Foods."

From the doorway, the tall man in a suit coat and a fedora nodded at her somberly.

“Oh.” She blinked, and her fake smile warmed. “Hello, sir.”

He didn’t smile back. He never did. But the corners of his gray eyes crinkled, which Haddie had learned over the last month or so meant he was pleased to see her.

The unnamed customer had never introduced himself. He’d never said a word. But he’d been coming into the store for the last two months as regularly as old Mrs. Ratzlaff’s egg deliveries. Every Tuesday at 11 o’clock.

Haddie glanced at the ticking clock on the wall.

Sure enough. The same time.

She’d tried asking his name a few weeks previous, but he’d only tipped his hat at her and walked away. So, either he couldn’t speak, or he was more painfully shy than she was.

It’s good to see him.

A sense of calm and peace washed over her. Odd that a stranger’s presence in the store would calm her down. Just his being there like he’d always been meant the world would keep spinning. She might be single for the rest of her life, but the sun would still rise and set. Life would go on, even if it didn’t look the way she’d hoped and prayed.

Life will go on.

She drew a deep breath again.

Yes. Life would go on.

The door jangled again, and a young girl with wavy brown hair down to her waist flew into the store. “Haddie! I have your lunch!”

The girl skidded to a stop and shoved a white plastic bag at Haddie.

“Grandma sent two pieces of pie!”

Haddie took the bag and set it on the counter with a sideways glance at her little sister. “Hannah, where is your covering?”

“It’s too hot, Haddie.” Hannah whined and pulled the

translucent white bonnet off the belt around her waist.

“Come here.” Haddie pulled the girl around the table and muttered under her breath as she gathered up the long brown waves. “Honestly, if Papa and Mama knew about you running around without it—”

“Grandma knows. She doesn’t care.”

Haddie plucked the hair pins off the front facing of her dress and stabbed them into her little sister’s thick mane.

“Grandma is Grandma.”

“Mama also wants me to wear shoes.” Hannah picked up her bare foot and waggled her toes. “But it’s too hot outside, Haddie.”

Haddie finished pinning her sister’s hair in a bun and then pinned the covering in place. “There. Keep it on. We have enough problems without you making more for us.”

“It’s not my fault Jonas called off your engagement.”

Haddie set her hands on Hannah’s shoulders and sighed. “No, Hannah, it’s not.” Her voice trembled slightly, and she swallowed the emotion that tried to escape. “It’s not my fault either.”

Hannah turned in her grip and hugged her around the waist. “I’ll be good, Haddie. I’m sorry.”

Haddie held her close. “You are good, Hannah. I’m sorry to be snappy. Thank you for bringing me lunch.”

Hannah beamed up at her and bounced out of her arms. “Grandma set two pieces of pie.”

“Yes, you said.”

“I think it’s too much for you. I think you should share.”

Haddie chuckled and glanced into the bag. “How many pieces of pie has Grandma let you have today?”

Hannah folded her toes on top of each other and looked sheepish. “That’s not a fair question.”

Haddie smiled at the hearty chicken sandwich in the bag, the carefully wrapped side salad, and the two Styrofoam containers

of the aforementioned pie. Grandma had been making pies for the Dutch Oven down the street from the store for years and years.

It was one of those spots where tourists loved to stop and enjoy the “authentic Amish experience.” Because, of course, every Amish home featured breaded steaks and mashed potatoes with fancy cream pies for every meal.

Authentic, indeed.

Hannah gasped and pulled at the cuff of Haddie’s sleeve. “Hey, isn’t that the guy?”

“Don’t point, Hannah.”

“But that’s the guy, isn’t it? The one who’s been hanging around?”

Haddie took Hannah’s hand and patted it between hers. “He comes in every week and buys the same thing, Hannah. Don’t point. And don’t stare.”

“But he’s so tall.”

“Hannah.”

“And he’s handsome. Don’t you think he’s handsome? Men who wear scarves are handsome.”

Haddie shook her head and grabbed Hannah’s shoulders again. “Thank you for lunch, Hannah. I think you should go back and help Grandma now.”

“Why do you think he keeps coming in here?” Hannah craned her neck to look up at her.

“I think we’re the only place that sells rose hips in bulk for less than an absurd amount of money.” Haddie bopped her sister on the nose.

Before she could get them out from behind the counter, the doorbells jangled again. This time, the jangling bells were drowned out by loud laughter and raucous voices.

Tourists.

“Go back to the restaurant, Hannah.” Haddie released her sister’s shoulders and turned to face the new customers. “Welcome to Nisly’s Bulk Foods.”

“Aren’t you adorable!” The loud woman with big blonde hair exclaimed and rushed to the counter. She lowered her aviator sunglasses. “You are just the cutest little thing. Joan, look at this cute little girl.”

Haddie clenched her jaw and hoped her smile didn't look as much like a grimace as it felt. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Did you have an accident?” A different woman pointed to Haddie’s dress. “Looks like you made a mess.”

Haddie held the frozen smile. “It was just some sugar I spilled. Can I help you ladies find anything?”

“Oh, we’re just here to look around.” The woman named Joan peeled away from the counter to scrutinize the dry goods in the clear plastic bags that line the shelves. “We were told this is a good place to buy spices. Like ginger and turmeric.”

“We have many spices and flavorings on the far aisle.” Haddie pointed.

The first woman, the blonde, pulled her sunglasses off. “Do you let people take photographs?”

Haddie frowned. “Of—the spices?”

“Of you!”

“Oh. Well, if you want—that’s fine.”

“I thought Amish people were afraid of cameras.” The blonde woman leaned over the counter and shook a smartphone at Haddie. “But you say that I can take a picture of you if I want?”

Haddie ignored the urge to step back. “Some within the Amish community believe that having a photograph taken of them is against God’s will.”

“But you don’t believe that?”

“No, I don’t.”

“So, you’re not Amish?” The blonde woman stared at her from the top of her covering to the tips of her sensible walking shoes. “You look Amish.”

“I am Amish.” Haddie offered another smile. “But there are many different kinds of Amish. We’re not all the same.”

“So, you wear shoes, and that little girl who just left doesn’t. Is one of you more Amish than the other?”

Haddie laughed. “No, that’s my little sister. She doesn’t like shoes.”

The blonde woman cackled. “She doesn’t like shoes? How ridiculous!”

The other woman, Joan, came back to the counter. “I can’t imagine buying any of these things. It would be such a pain to have to transfer them from these bags into some other container. Don’t you have any brand name spices?”

“I’m sorry?” Haddie folded her hands together to keep from fidgeting uncomfortably.

“You know. Real spices. Like you get in a grocery store?” Joan lifted her eyebrows. “I don’t want to buy cheap knockoff spices that I have to find containers for.”

“Oh.” Haddie nodded. “That’s understandable.” She forced a smile again. *If you don’t want to shop here, then don’t shop here.*

“Well?” Joan waved her hand again.

“Ma’am?”

“Where are the real spices?” Joan gestured around the store. “All you have here is these fake bags of goods. How do we know you haven’t put filler in there to make people think you’re selling what’s on the label?”

The blonde woman gasped. “Joan, don’t be rude. They’re Amish. They don’t lie.”

“Everybody lies, Cindy.”

“Well, don’t be rude to her face. I want a photograph of her.”

Haddie clenched her jaw but kept the smile where it was. “Many people prefer to buy spices and baking necessities in bulk. That’s why we can offer lower prices. If you need something to store your purchases in, we do have—”

“I think that’s dishonest.” Joan gestured with her clutch

purse. "People shouldn't have to buy jars or tins to store things in. You should just let people have those for free if they buy your bags of spices."

Haddie stammered.

"Now, now." Cindy stood up and adjusted her sunglasses. "I'm sure it's part of their religion to sell things like this. Don't criticize." She held out her phone. "Now, would you give me a nice smile, sweetie?"

"Excuse me."

Haddie startled and glanced to the aisles on the opposite side of the counter. The man in the fedora stood, scowling at the two loud women, his gray eyes sharp.

Oh, so he can speak.

The two women stared up at him in surprise.

"Oh, hello, sir, we didn't see you there." Cindy beamed at him. "I was just wanting to take a picture of this adorable little Amish girl. Don't you think she's just cute as a button?"

The man didn't answer. He brushed past Cindy and set two bags on the counter in front of Haddie, a bag of lemon drops and a bag of rose hips. It was what he always ordered.

"We were in line first." Joan shook her clutch purse at him. "Girl, if you serve him before us, we are leaving without buying anything."

The man turned those steel gray eyes on Joan. "I do not believe you had intended to buy anything in the first place, madam. You may as well leave."

Joan gasped. "How rude! You are rude!" She shook the clutch purse at him and stomped for the doorway. "Cindy, come on."

"But I didn't get my photograph!" The blonde woman whined and followed Joan into the blazing heat outside.

Sheer, blessed silence fell in the store as the two women stormed away. Haddie exhaled the breath she'd been holding. Then, she rang up the man's purchases.

“Thank you for that,” she said softly.

He nodded.

“I wasn’t sure you could speak.” She chewed her bottom lip. “I’m grateful for your help.”

“You didn’t need my help. You’re quite capable, Miss Hadassah.”

Haddie glanced up at him. The corners of his eyes were crinkled even if his mouth wasn’t smiling.

“Well, thank you anyway.”

He tipped his hat at her, handed her the bills needed to pay for his purchase, and gathered the rose hips and lemon drops. He turned to leave.

“May I ask your name?” she called after him.

He paused in the door. “You may ask.”

Then, he stepped outside and vanished around the corner of the store.

Strange. So strange.

“What was all that noise about?” Caleb strolled up to the counter, brushing his hands on his overalls.

“Just some noisy tourists.” Haddie closed the register drawer.

“Did they buy anything?”

Haddie smiled to herself. “The two women didn’t, but the man bought two things.”

Caleb grunted and turned around. “Well, it’s a good thing you cleaned up the mess you made. Otherwise, it might have changed his mind.”

Caleb disappeared into the back of the store again. Haddie let the comment pass. Caleb was hurt, and the only way he seemed to be able to process was by saying hurtful things.

Maybe he would come around once the shock of it all wore off, and he’d go back to the nice boy she used to call her friend.

Outside the store, the two tourist women fluttered and

fussed in the parking lot until they clambered into a car and drove away.

Not every tourist was as obnoxious as the two women had been, but it was nice to know that there were some tourists like the strange man who would intercede if they felt the need.

Haddie pulled the lunch sack closer and unwrapped the chicken sandwich her grandmother had sent.

Hopefully the Cindy woman would find a willing subject for her photography. And hopefully Joan would find a name-brand ginger and turmeric to purchase. Even more hopefully, they wouldn't try to find it at Nisly's Bulk Food store again.

CHAPTER TWO

Haddie stabbed the hay fork into the tightly packed segments of straw bound in the cubed bale. She peeled a square section of straw off the bale with the tongs and picked it up to shove it inside a cubicle in the old nesting box.

The square segments of straw didn't exactly fit in the rectangular nesting boxes, but the hens would distribute it to their liking once they were ready to lay their eggs.

She rested the hay fork against the chicken coop wall and pressed her knuckles into the small of her aching back.

"Haddie, are you done in there yet?" Hannah whined from outside the chicken coop door.

"I'm sixty seconds closer to being done than the last time you asked." Haddie rolled her eyes and peeled off another segment of straw.

She dashed a droplet of sweat from her cheek, feeling the smear of dust and dirt across her skin. Early September always had the smell of the oncoming fall, but the temperatures usually persisted with their late-summer heat.

It would be cold soon enough, and the hens always laid better when they had straw to nest in. And old Mr. Stolfus had put up more straw than he'd needed last season, so the bales had been free to anyone willing to haul them.

"Haddie, are you done yet?" Hannah wailed.

Honestly, how had the child gotten to be so dramatic? Maybe it's because she was the youngest.

She didn't answer this time. Hannah could just wait.

Haddie shoved another piece of straw into another nesting box. Once she finished with this chore, she'd take the remainder of the bale to the barn and let the goats have it. Dots and Lady loved to roll around in new straw.

After that, she'd have the afternoon to herself. Finally. Some time alone to think and pray and grieve. So much had happened in so little time, she hadn't had time to process.

The chicken coop door flung open, and a parade of squawking, growling hens charged inside the coop. Haddie gasped as three hens ran at her with wings flapping, tearing at the bale of straw with their sharp talons.

"Hannah!" Haddie shouted and pushed the hens away from the straw.

Hannah poked her head inside. "You didn't answer. I assumed you were done."

"I wasn't. Get in here and help me."

Hannah groaned. "Haddie, I have other things to do."

Haddie glared at her. "Hannah, if the freeze comes next week, and the hens stop laying, Mama will pitch a fit. I was going to let you be outside with them, but now you have to help me finish."

Hannah moaned with the unfairness of life and dragged her bare feet through the dirt floor of the coop. Her long hair draped to her waist, waving like a flag as she bent to grab a section of straw.

"Where is your covering?"

"It's too hot to wear it." Hannah shoved the straw into the nesting box.

Haddie shook her head and forked off another section of straw. Hannah was at the age where the covering felt like a burden. It hadn't been her choice to wear it; it was the family's choice. One

day, Hannah would understand why it mattered, but until she chose it for herself, trying to get her to wear it would be a struggle.

It had been easier when she was smaller.

Thirteen was a hard age for everyone.

“You know Papa and Mama have asked you to wear it,”

Haddie said quietly. “When you don’t, you’re disobeying them.”

“We’re at home. Nobody cares.” Hannah shoved the straw into another nesting box.

“God will care if you obey or not.” Haddie pushed another segment of straw toward her and warded off a hen that strutted close to their feet. “Obedience brings blessings, Hannah.”

Hannah snorted. “You’ve spent your whole life being obedient and look what it got you.”

Haddie clutched the hay fork, heart twisting at her sister’s words. Hannah kept shoving straw in the nesting boxes and didn’t look at her.

Did the girl realize how much her words hurt? Was she just expressing her own frustration, and Haddie was an easy target? Like Caleb?

She’s not wrong, though. Haddie steadied herself and stabbed the fork tongs into the straw bale.

Her whole life, she’d done what was right. With their elder brothers married and living so far away, helping run the farm had fallen to her, and she’d never complained. She’d never demanded her own way. She’d brought honor to her parents and had served the community with all her heart.

The whole community said she was a good girl. Abraham Miller’s eldest daughter. The virtuous one. The responsible one. She would make someone a wonderful wife.

How quickly that had all changed.

After all her sacrifice, after everything she had done, what had it earned her?

“Done.” Hannah shoved the last piece of straw into the nesting box. “You were just taking too long.”

Hannah whirled on her bare heel and skipped out the coop door, long brown hair flapping in the breeze.

Haddie watched the chickens peck and scratch for a moment before she propped the hay fork against the wall. She bound the rest of the straw bale with the leftover twine and lifted it with a grunt of effort.

Getting it out the coop door gracefully wasn't possible, so she hobbled and stumbled outside and out of the fenced-in yard. She had to set the bale down to latch the gate, but once that was done, she heaved the bale up again and waddled awkwardly toward the barn.

The wagon and horses were still absent as she made her way into the barn. Papa had gone to help with a barn raising for a new family that had relocated to the community from Indiana. He would likely be gone until after dark. Hopefully he'd remembered to bring the lantern with extra kerosene.

Haddie set the bale of straw down beside the wooden fence that contained the family's herd of dairy goats. Dots and Lady were the matriarchs of the herd, both similar age and size. Several of their kids had brought a good price when Papa had sold them. At the moment, only two or three kids remained, but they were still juveniles.

Mr. Grumpy, the Billy goat, had his own pen on the other side of the barn. Keeping the Billy goat separate from the females prevented their milk from developing its infamous unpleasant taste.

Haddie heaved the bale of straw over the fence, and, as she expected, Dots and Lady ran to it and started trampling it immediately.

She wiped the dirt and sweat off her face and started back toward the house. Time for a glass of water.

The old house where her family lived had been around for decades. Her grandfather had built it fifty years ago, and it had been given to her father as a wedding gift.

The wooden deck on the west side of the house was a new addition that her brothers had built several summers ago. She scaled the wooden steps and stopped next to the bucket on the bench seat, dipping out a ladle full of water.

Cool, sweet, fresh well water was one of the most gracious gifts the Lord could give on a day as warm as this one.

The screen door to the mud room squawked as Rebekah Miller opened it and stepped outside, wiping her hands on her apron. No matter how much bread Haddie's mother baked, she never looked hot or frustrated. Flour didn't even stick to her. Not her dress, not her hair, not her covering. Nothing.

"Hadassah." Her mother came to stand beside her. "I need you to go to town. I'm out of yeast."

Haddie set the ladle back in the pail. "Yeast?"

Mama nodded. "I'm making extra cinnamon rolls for the Bontragers." She lifted the corner of her apron and wiped the dirt and dust and sweat off Haddie's face. "Take the tractor."

Haddie forced a smile she didn't feel. "Yes, Mama."

Her mother nodded in thanks and walked back into the house, shutting the screen door in her wake.

So much for her afternoon plans.

Haddie took another gulp of water and returned to the barn. Gathering up her skirt, she scaled the side of the old green tractor and sat in the broad metal seat. She tucked her skirt carefully under herself so it wouldn't get caught in the steel wheels.

She put the gear shift in neutral and pressed the clutch as she turned the key. The engine coughed and stuttered for a moment before it caught and turned over, belching a cloud of smoke and exhaust that made the goats bleat in alarm.

With the clutch still in place, she shifted the tractor into gear and released it. The old machine surged forward, and she guided it out of the barn, up the driveway and out onto the blacktop that ran past their home.

The cooling breeze dried the sweat that had formed across her brow again. The rumbling of the tractor's engine and the clattering of the rubber-studded steel tires made it hard to concentrate. She kept the tractor as far to the right of the driving lane as possible.

Not many strangers ever came down this road, but it wasn't uncommon for a visitor or a tourist to come through. Most of them had no idea how to deal with a tractor on a paved road.

She'd overheard outsiders talking about it in the store one day. Avoiding people on the road who didn't know how to drive was called "defensive driving," and Haddie figured the entire Amish community needed to appropriate the term.

There was nothing more frightening than calming down a panicked horse hitched to a buggy full of people, all because some stranger in an automobile was driving recklessly.

Haddie bit her lower lip.

Hopefully Caleb wouldn't be working today. She could accept that he was hurting, and that she was an easy target, but there was only so much she could take in a day.

How different life looked today than it did the week previous. Last week, she'd been planning her wedding. She and Jonas had spoken to the elders. All the arrangements had been set.

And then it all fell apart.

Through no fault of her own. She'd done nothing wrong. But few people in the community understood, and from what Caleb had told her, Jonas wasn't helping the situation.

Papa and Mama understood. If her brothers were here, they would understand. But no one else seemed to. Everyone else seemed to think she'd done something to deserve this fate, that God was punishing her for some sin she'd committed.

I don't think that's true. She chewed her lip. *I had never believed God punished us in that way. But what if He does? What have I done to merit this heartbreak?*

A big blue truck whooshed past her, going far too fast than

was safe on the blacktop. She winced at the sharp gravel and dirt the truck's passing flung her face.

All she'd ever wanted was to be a wife and a mother. Her own mother had trained her from her earliest days to keep a home. She could sew. She could cook and bake, even though she made a mess of herself in the process. But she could also clean. She could run a farm. She could lift and haul and carry and plow and plant and harvest as well as any of the boys.

But none of that mattered now apparently. Why did none of it matter?

If she were healthy enough to operate an entire farm, why wasn't she healthy enough to be a wife to Jonas Lapp?

She knew the answer of course. She just didn't want to admit it. Taking a quiet moment for self-pity wasn't always a bad thing, was it? It's not like anyone had allowed her the courtesy of grief when Jonas broke the engagement.

The small town of Quail Creek came into view as she passed the hedgerow that lined the blacktop. Most of the town catered to tourists, and most tourists were perfectly friendly. Naive. And sometimes lacking tact. But friendly enough. And their strange romantic interest in the Amish communities funded most of the businesses in Quail Creek.

Haddie directed the tractor into the parking lot of the long strip mall that housed Nisly's Bulk Foods. She turned the tractor off and slid down to the gravel, wiping the dust and dirt off her face.

The door jangled as she stepped inside.

Laura Nisly stood behind the register and brightened when she came into view. A few years older than Haddie, Laura Nisly helped run the bulk food store with her father and mother. At least, she had for most of her life. She was engaged to someone in the nearby Yoder community, and once they married in a few months, she'd be leaving Quail Creek.

Haddie had chosen to be happy for her.

“Haddie!” Lauren laughed. “Do you love working here so much, you come on your day off?”

Haddie smiled at her. “Mama needs more yeast.” She walked to the far aisle and snatched a container of active yeast off the shelf. “She’s making extra cinnamon rolls for the Bontragers.”

“Oh, yes, the new family from Indiana.” Laura grabbed a pad of paper and made a note on it. “Papa is helping with their barn raising today.”

“My papa is too.” Haddie set the yeast on the counter.

“I’ll take it off your account.” Laura nodded to the yeast.

“Thanks.”

Laura reached across the counter and took Haddie’s hand. “How are you, Haddie?”

Haddie gripped her hand in return and smiled. “I’m fine, Laura.”

The corners of her friend’s mouth turned down. “Are you really?”

Haddie gently pulled her hand back and picked up the yeast. “How am I supposed to be?”

Laura folded her hands against the seafoam green fabric of her dress. “Jonas has been talking about it a lot.”

Haddie’s stomach clenched. “He was very hurt.”

Laura’s frown deepened. “He wasn’t the only one who was hurt, Haddie.” She leaned forward. “What happened?”

Haddie shook her head.

“Please, Haddie.” Laura took her arm with a soft touch.

“No one knows anything. They’re just guessing, and the more Jonas talks about it, the more he makes it sound like you’ve done something wrong.”

“I haven’t.” Haddie stepped back and tried to keep her voice steady, failing miserably. “I haven’t done anything, Laura.”

Laura pressed her lips together, her gaze traveling up and down Haddie’s long, slender frame. “You aren’t—are you—?”

Haddie scowled. “Am I what?”

“With child?”

Haddie gawked at her. “What?”

Laura spread her hands. “Are you pregnant?”

“How could you ask me that?” Haddie’s heart dropped from her chest, the room beginning to spin. “Is that what Jonas is saying?” Her throat squeezed shut in panic.

“He isn’t saying anything specifically.” Laura set her hands on her waist. “But why else would he break off the engagement with you? The two of you seemed to be a perfect match, and the only way he would have ended it after all the plans were already in place were if he found something unsuitable in you.”

Haddie scrambled mentally to gather up all the emotions wheeling out of control throughout her body. It wouldn’t do to lose control here. Not where she worked. Not in front of the owner’s daughter.

All my life, I’ve done what they wanted. Her pulse throbbed in her ears. All my life, I’ve been good. And this is what happens? I don’t deserve this.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” she said, her voice trembling. “Jonas made the decision himself for his own reasons.” She turned. “Thank you for the yeast.”

“Haddie.” Laura called after her.

Haddie let the door shut behind her as she fled back to the tractor. Her eyes burned with the tears she didn’t want anyone to see. If anyone from the community saw her crying, they would call her guilty. They would say she had done something to deserve what Jonas had done. Tears always meant guilt of some kind.

She reached the tractor and leaned against it, turning her gaze toward the blue skies and gasping for air until the world stopped spinning.

If Laura, who had known her as a close friend for years, was beginning to believe the rumors and gossip, what did the community at large believe? What was Jonas even telling them?

“Are you all right, Miss?”

Haddie froze and spun around, ready to chuck the hard bag of yeast at whoever had approached her. But she stopped.

The man in the fedora.

It was him again.

He hovered near the back wheel of the tractor, his expression calm but his strange gray eyes concerned. The breeze ruffled the length of the scarf around his neck.

“Yes.” Haddie gulped down the fear that had sent adrenaline spiking through her. “Yes, I’m fine. Thank you for your concern.”

His pale, slender eyebrows knotted together above the bridge of his nose. “You seem agitated.” He didn’t step closer to her, keeping a respectful distance.

Haddie scanned the parking lot for anyone who might be watching them. The gravel lot was empty.

Normally she would feel uncomfortable so close and alone with a male stranger, but the gentleman had already demonstrated that he intended no harm. Although what he was doing in the community so frequently remained something of a mystery.

“It’s been an upsetting day,” Haddie said before she could stop herself.

His brow relaxed, and his gray eyes softened. “I am sorry to hear that.”

She shook her head. “Why should you be sorry?”

“You are a kind person, Miss Hadassah.” The corner of his mouth twitched in the nearest expression to a smile she’d seen on his face. “I am sorry for anything that would cause you pain.”

In spite of herself, she smiled back at him. “Maybe I’m not as kind as you think I am.” She set the bag of yeast on the floor of the tractor. “Maybe I’m wicked.”

Apparently it was what the rest of the community was beginning to believe. Perhaps she was blind to her sinful ways. Perhaps God really was punishing her.

“You are not wicked.” The gray man’s voice rang like a steel hammer against the anvil at the blacksmith’s forge.

She stepped up on the tire of the tractor. “I am glad someone thinks so.”

His icy, wiry fingers pressed against her elbow and supported her as she climbed up on the tractor. She gazed down at him in shock. How had he crossed the distance between them so quickly? And why were his fingers so cold?

He gazed up at her, his eyes full of starlight in the middle of the afternoon. “I do think so.” He nodded. “And I am sorry, Miss Hadassah. Truly.”

She frowned thoughtfully, her heart lodged in her throat. “Thank you.”

Turning away from him before he saw the flush of embarrassment crawling up her face, she started the tractor and dropped it into gear. Its deafening noise surrounded her in a protective shell. If the strange gray man tried to speak to her again, she wouldn’t be able to hear him now.

Not that she minded his voice.

His voice was more pleasant than she imagined a voice could be. But there was something wrong about him that she couldn’t put her finger on. Something off.

Perhaps it was the suit and scarf in this oppressive late-summer heat. Or the fedora which seemed so out of place in Quail Creek. Her elbow still tingled from the touch of his cold fingers.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. He stood in the dust and the dirt kicked up from the tractor tires, holding a mobile phone to his ear. His lips moved as he spoke into it, but Hadassah couldn’t hear him.

But he was kind. Somehow. He was just—sad.

Perhaps that was it.

Perhaps he simply reminded her of herself.

CHAPTER THREE

Papa's coarse gray beard felt scratchy against her face as he kissed the top of her head. He squeezed her arms for a moment longer than he normally did, and then he backed away to help Mama into the wagon.

"I know this is difficult," he said to her softly as soon as Mama was seated in the wagon. "But the truth will win. It always does."

"I know, Papa." Haddie folded her hands. "It will pass."

Papa's blue eyes sparkled at her. "I do have to say, Hadassah, that perhaps this was God's protection."

Haddie raised her eyebrows at him.

"Imagine if you'd had to marry that fool Lapp boy." He grinned, the corners of his eyes wrinkling.

Haddie shook her head and smiled in spite of how the hurt gnawed at her heart. "Have a safe journey, Papa."

Mama smiled down at her with a soft expression. "There is beef stew for lunch that we canned last winter. Make sure Hannah drinks enough water today."

"I will, Mama."

Papa clicked to the horses and jiggled the reins, and the wagon surged forward down the driveway and onto the pavement.

Haddie stared after them and then stayed in place long after they'd disappeared from view. The Bontrager's barn was

nearly finished. Papa and many of the other men from the community would finish it that day, so Mama was joining several other women to bring goods and groceries to the new family.

It was only right that neighbors help each other. That was how community worked in Quail Creek.

Finally, Haddie gathered herself and walked slowly to the deck, climbing the stairs and entering the house. The milk pail was sitting out on the counter. She set an empty canning jar in the pail and, taking it by the handle, she headed toward the barn.

She stopped at the icehouse on the way. The little insulated shed was packed to its rafters with large chunks of ice. In the winter, they harvested ice from the lakes and rivers, but this late in the summer, they had to buy it.

She grabbed a clean glass jar out of the pail and filled it with broken ice chunks. Haddie screwed the lid shut and returned it to the pail. She closed the icehouse door and walked quickly toward the barn.

Now that the ice was in the pail, time was short.

They'd learned long ago that one of the best ways to cut down on the potent taste of goat milk was to cool it immediately. Milking the goat in a pail with an icy jar in it seemed to work exceptionally well.

Dots and Lady greeted her with irritated bleating, their udders swollen and swaying.

"Yes, yes, I know." Haddie made her way to the wooden milking stand.

Dots jumped up on the stand first and stomped her hooved feet impatiently. Haddie took a seat on the stool and set the pail in place.

"Life is easy for you two, isn't it?" Haddie said as she milked the goat. "Simple and straightforward. No conflicts. You just eat your grain, make baby goats, and give milk. I don't suppose a life that simple is bad."

A simple life was all Haddie wanted. Nothing fancy.

Nothing special. A husband, children, maybe an inn where she could cook meals for people. After all, living a simple, plain life was part of what their faith was about. It was who they were. So how did getting married become complicated? How did a relationship fall apart so quickly?

What if no one would marry her now?

The anxiety resonated in her mind like the wind chimes she'd heard at the feed store.

Now that everyone knew Jonas Lapp found her unsuitable, what if no one in the community would have her? What if she remained single and alone for the rest of her life? What if she never had children?

What good would she be? What purpose would she serve? If marriage wasn't what God meant for her, how would she live?

A loud squawking interrupted her despairing thoughts, and she looked over her shoulder to where Hannah was climbing the wooden fence, carrying a chicken close to her chest. It was an ancient, cranky brown hen. Papa had expected the bird to die five years earlier, and the chicken had surprised them all.

The young teenager's hair flapped free and loose, and her covering rested on top of the fence post.

Haddie shook her head. It wasn't a hill she had the strength to die on that day.

"What are you doing with that hen, Hannah?" Haddie focused on her milking.

"She hurt her foot." Hannah sat astride the fence, hugging the chicken. The bird growled threateningly but didn't struggle.

"That hen has hurt everything, Hannah. Her foot doesn't matter."

"Don't listen to her, Henrietta." Hannah cooed. "She doesn't know what she's talking about."

Haddie glanced at her sister again. "Have you drunk any water today?"

"I don't like water." Hannah sniffed.

“It’s going to be very hot again, and if you don’t drink water, you’ll make yourself sick.”

“You didn’t used to be so bossy, Haddie. Why are you so bossy?” Hannah stuck out her lower lip.

Haddie sighed and sat back on the stool. She slapped Dots on the flank, and the goat jumped down from the milking stand. Lady was right behind her and jumped into place.

“I’m not bossy,” Haddie said as she started milking Lady. “I’m just asking you to do what’s good for you. If you get dehydrated, you’re going to feel terrible.”

“You haven’t told me to put my covering on.”

Haddie rolled her eyes. “Would it make any difference if I did?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the point of continuing to tell you when you won’t do it?” Haddie pulled too hard, and Lady bleated in indignation. “Sorry, old girl.”

Hannah jumped off the fence with a thud, leaving her covering on the post. “I’m going to go put a bandage on Spot’s leg.”

“Drink some water!” Haddie called after her.

Hannah didn’t answer.

Were all thirteen-year-old girls this difficult? Haddie frowned to herself, thinking back on her thirteenth year. She didn’t remember being difficult. And she’d been the baby at the time. But their brothers wouldn’t have let her get away with much.

Samuel, Daniel, and Jonah kept her in line when Mama and Papa didn’t, and if she’d tried to complain, they would have made fun of her until she straightened up. So, she’d learned not to complain.

But her youngest brother Jonah had left before Hannah turned six. Hannah knew she had brothers, but she’d never really known them. All Hannah really knew was Papa, Mama, and her overly cautious, overly strict, overly bossy big sister.

Haddie eyed the covering on the fence post.

There would come a day when Hannah would have to choose for herself which life she was going to live. Papa had insisted that all his children had the choice. As long as they lived under his roof, they would obey his rules. That was the agreement. But if they chose to leave, if they chose another lifestyle than the plain life, he had promised not to hold it against them.

Papa had a different view on the plain life than many others in the community. Mama had grown up in it and didn't know any different. Papa had chosen it when he'd been a young man, but that hadn't stopped him from being sent to war.

A *conscientious objector*, they had called him. And then they made him a medic and sent him away regardless.

That far-away land called Vietnam had taught her father many things about people, both Amish and not. It had taught him much about faith too.

It mattered to Papa that his children had the choice of what life they would live and where they would live it. All that mattered to him was that God was part of their life, wherever they were. If they chose not to dress plain, Papa believed they could serve God just as well as if they did.

Papa was a bit of a maverick in the community. Perhaps it was fitting then that his eldest daughter would be considered unweddable?

The wind caught in the ribbons on Hannah's covering. Of course, Papa's maverick views may have influenced his youngest child more strongly than he realized. Hannah wasn't willing to wait until she was old enough to leave the house. She wanted to ditch the covering now.

Time would tell if Papa would allow it.

Haddie finished milking Lady and stood up. The ice-filled jar in the pail had kept the milk cold. Now she just had to take it to the icehouse and let it rest so they could skim the cream off to make butter.

She'd made it halfway to the icehouse when a scream tore across the yard.

"Hannah?"

That wasn't a normal Hannah scream.

Hannah was a loud girl. She loved noise and chaos and anything bright and vibrant and alive.

But this scream was full of fear and dread.

Haddie dropped the pail. It didn't matter that the milk splattered across the grass, across her skirt. Hannah never screamed like that.

Something was wrong.

Haddie bolted across the lawn and up the stairs of the deck. She flung the screen door open and ran into the kitchen.

"Hannah?"

Something heavy and hard smashed into her face, snapping her head back hard enough to send her vision whirling. The kitchen spun, and her body tumbled sideways, landing in a heap on the cold tile floor.

"Haddie! Haddie!" Hannah shrieked from somewhere in the living room.

Hot, salty blood dripped from Haddie's nose and mouth, and heavy black boots with thick, chunky tread marched into view before her face.

A man?

There was a man in their house!

Another pair of boots followed the first.

Not a man. Men. There were men—strange men—in their home. How had they gotten there? What were they doing there? What did they want?

Haddie scrambled backward.

It felt like she scrambled.

She wasn't. She was barely moving. She had barely gotten rolled over on her back before the black figure above her kicked her in the side.

Everything moved in slow motion. Her head pounded. Her vision swam, headache throbbing behind her eyes and nose throbbing as it hemorrhaged blood on the kitchen floor.

The figure rolled her to her stomach and wrenched her arms behind her back, binding them with stiff cords that cut into her skin. The man jabbed rough fabric into her mouth in a thick wad that nearly gagged her and tied a strip of cloth in place over her mouth to keep it there.

She choked on her breath and wrestled with the panic rising in her mind.

The men spoke to each other in a language she didn't know. The words flowed in the room, smooth and lilting and soft, in stark contrast to the hard hands that bruised her and the vicious knee in her lower back that pinned her to the floor.

What do we do? What can we do?

Haddie scanned the floor for anything she could use, but the kitchen floor was clean. One of her shoes had come off in the scuffle, but the other one was still in place. Maybe that was something she could use.

Hannah wasn't screaming anymore. Hannah wasn't saying anything that Haddie could hear. What had they done to her? What were they doing to her?

The man with his knee in her back stood.

Haddie took her chance.

She rolled sideways and kicked the man in the side of his knee with all the strength in her leg. The man shouted in alarm and clutched at his knee as he fell over.

Haddie jumped to her knees and scuttled awkwardly to her feet, but the room was still spinning. And another one of the men seized the back of her dress and yanked her off her feet, throwing her into the kitchen counter.

She kicked at the man as he ran at her and buried her shoe in the man's stomach.

His black clothing covered his arms and his legs and most

of his face. She couldn't see any details about him. A black helmet shielded his hair and his eyes from view.

She ducked out of his hold and limped for the door, but as she shouldered the door open another man stood before her. Taller than the others. Broader in shoulder. Wearing the same combat fatigues but not the helmet, which left his face bare for her to see.

She didn't know him. She'd never seen him before. His steel gray irises were rimmed with a color between gold and red, and the pupils of his eyes narrowed to slits like a cat's eyes would.

"*Où vas-tu, petit oiseau?*" His voice was as smooth as satin, deep and dangerous and warm.

He flashed a smirk at her, and her heart dropped to her belly.

His teeth.

His teeth weren't teeth at all. They were fangs. The two upper canines sharp as razors and long as needles.

Haddie gawked in fear and took a step backward.

Rough arms crashed around her from behind and clamped a damp rag over her mouth and nose. She gasped and struggled and kicked, but the world was dimming around her.

The man with the fangs kept smirking at her, the light from the morning sun shining on his horrible teeth.

"Clean up the mess," the man said in a foreign accent, his words English this time. "Leave no trace that we were here. Leave no trace that they were here."

The floor felt cool through the torn fabric of her dress when they laid Haddie down on the tile.

Where was Hannah?

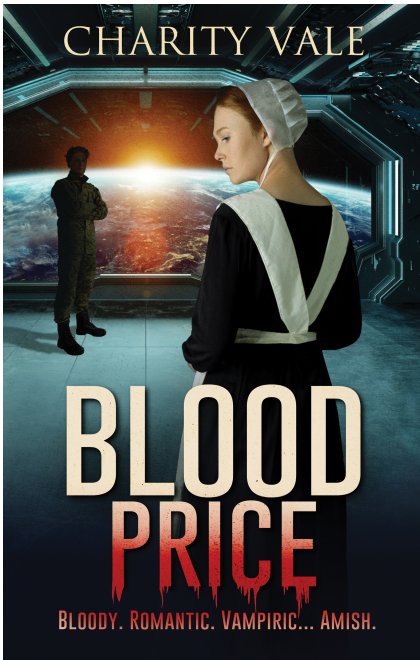
Who were these people? What were these people? What did they want?

Cold fingers gripped her aching jaw and tilted her face up toward the ceiling. The man with the needle teeth gazed down at her.

"You are a fighter, little bird." He smiled. "That is very

good for us. Hold on to your fighting spirit, and perhaps we will all find what we are looking for.”

Another wet rag pressed against her face, and the dim edges of the world collapsed in darkness.



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