

Chapter One

Annie Shirack wanted to count her blessings, but she didn't have time. Customers had been lined up three deep at the bakery counter when she returned from a quick sack lunch with her friend Miriam. Annie pushed the cash register drawer shut with a quick snap of her wrists. Inhaling the sweet scent of baking cinnamon rolls, she turned to face the last customer of the early afternoon rush.

“At this rate, you'll have to give me the day-old price. Four dozen snickerdoodles and that carrot cake.” Mrs. Johnson pointed, then glanced at the gold watch on her skinny wrist. She wrinkled her long nose and tilted her shiny, hair-sprayed head. “That should be it for today.”

Ignoring the pique in her customer's voice, Annie grabbed a sheet of wax paper and began depositing the cookies in a white paper bag. She threw a quick glance at Miriam, who grinned, shrugged, and bit into a brownie—a treat after the cold sandwiches they'd just shared on the bench at the park across the street. Annie grinned back, enjoying the look of bliss on her friend's face. One of the joys of being a baker. Besides, Miriam was right. Nothing to do but grin and bear difficult customers.

“I'd better get back to the tack shop.” Miriam brushed crumbs from her oval face. “*Daed* will need my help.”

“Wait a minute or two and I'll get that recipe I told you about for the double fudge cookies.” Miriam had a special soft spot for chocolate. Annie loved that about her friend. “Your daed won't mind if you're a few minutes longer.”

“I’ll take him one of your brownies.” Smoothing wisps of brown hair that had escaped her prayer *kapp*, Miriam settled onto a bench along the wall. “That’ll soften him up.”

The bell hanging over the double glass-plated doors tinkled as one of them swung open and closed with a bang. A young man Annie had never seen before slipped into the store. He looked around, saw Annie, ducked his head, and began to peer into the display case that contained a dozen kinds of pie.

Curiosity got the better of Annie. He didn’t look like the typical tourist visiting Bliss Creek for a glimpse of prayer *kapps* and buggies. She sneaked another glance. His jeans sagged on narrow hips. He had both hands stuck in the pockets of a denim jacket that had to be plenty warm for this late spring day in Kansas.

Definitely not from around here. Not that it mattered. Her boss, Sadie Plank, owner of Plank’s Pastry and Pie Shop, delighted in the brisk business. Many of the local *Englisch* ladies did their grocery shopping on Fridays in preparation for their husbands being home all weekend. That usually included a stop at the bakery.

If only every day could be like this. Otherwise...No, she wouldn’t go down that road. Things would get better. Business would improve. David would get better. To think otherwise would be a lack of faith. Annie had plenty of faith. She’d just like to have some control over her life too.

Stop it. “That will be forty-seven dollars, Mrs. Johnson.”

Mrs. Johnson scribbled a check with a fancy silver pen and handed it to Annie. “I’ll be in Monday to pick up the cake I ordered for my parents’ anniversary,” she called

over her shoulder as she walked to the door in heels that clicked on the wooden floor.

“Remember, chocolate buttercream frosting on white cake.”

How could Annie forget? Mrs. Johnson had given her instructions five times. She glanced again toward the young man. He sidled closer to the display case, seeming intent on the selection of cookies. The *schtinkich* of cigarette smoke he brought with him threatened to drown out the scent of cinnamon wafting in the air.

“Are you ready to order, sir?”

He didn't answer. He didn't even look up. All right, not ready yet. After a quick tug to straighten her kapp, Annie washed her hands. Wiping them on her clean apron, she went to the kerosene-powered refrigerator and pulled out the butter and a carton of eggs. Time to make gingersnaps. She'd let the ingredients come to room temperature while she looked for that recipe for Miriam.

“Annie, did you get Mrs. Rankin's order for the birthday cake?” Sadie trudged from the backroom, carrying a twenty-five pound bag of flour over her shoulder. “It should be next on the list.”

“Let me do that.” Annie rushed to help her. “The doctor said no heavy lifting for you.”

“You're so skinny; the bag weighs more than you do.” Sadie dropped it to the floor with a grunt and straightened, one hand on her back and a grimace on her wrinkle-lined face. “Mrs. Rankin wants it by five o'clock. David will be here by then—he can deliver it.”

David had a treatment today. He tried to act like it was nothing so his mother wouldn't worry so much, but Annie knew differently. She saw how hard he tried to hide

his discomfort. “He doesn’t have to do that. Josiah and I can deliver it on the way home.

The cake is ready—”

“Ma’am.” The man’s hoarse voice had a soft Southern twang to it.

Annie turned to face him and smiled. “How can I help you today?”

The young man didn’t smile back. He didn’t even make eye contact. He shoved his black hair from his eyes with a hand that had grease under its fingernails. He had the bluest eyes Annie had ever seen. She tried again. “I have cinnamon rolls in the oven. They’ll be ready in about two seconds—”

“I’m really sorry about this.”

His voice cracked. He stopped, the corners of his mouth twitching. A pulse pounded in his temple.

Annie tried to catch his gaze. “Sorry about what?”

“My kid’s gotta eat.”

He drew his hand out from the pocket of his denim jacket. A silver gun appeared.

Sadie’s gasp told Annie she’d seen it too. Out of the corner of her eye, Annie saw Miriam stand. Annie wanted to scream for her friend to run, but she knew better. *Stay there. Stay there.* Annie backed toward Sadie without taking her gaze from the gun. She’d seen plenty of hunting rifles, but this was a handgun. A gun made for shooting people. She clasped both hands in front of her to quiet their trembling.

“You can have whatever you want.” Annie crowded Sadie, who grabbed her arm and held on tight. The woman’s touch steadied her. She swallowed her fear and lifted her chin. “You don’t need a gun. We’ll share what we have with you.”

The man waved the gun toward Miriam. “Get over there with them.”

Panting as if she had run a race, Miriam scurried toward Annie and Sadie. They grabbed hands, holding on tight. Whatever happened, they were together. “It’s all right,” Annie whispered. *No it’s not. God, please.*

“Put the money in a paper bag.” The man pointed the gun at the cash register. “Then lay it on the counter.”

Annie moved toward it. Sadie and Miriam didn’t let go. They stayed together. *One step, two steps, three steps.*

The sounds of ragged breathing and the dragging of their shoes on the wooden floor filled the bakery. No one spoke. Annie forced herself to let go of the two women so she could open the drawer. Miriam nodded in encouragement. “It’s all right.”

It was strange to have her own words of encouragement repeated back to her. They sounded just as silly coming from Miriam’s mouth. Annie’s hands shook so hard she dropped the bag and had to retrieve it from the floor. Sadie grabbed her arm and helped her straighten.

“Hurry up!”

The note of hysteria in the man’s voice frightened her more than gun. Tugging free of Sadie’s grip, Annie stuffed the bills into the bag. The smell of singed bread wafted through the air. The rolls were burning. She almost laughed. Burned cinnamon rolls—surely the least of her problems right now.

Biting the inside of her lip until she tasted salty blood, Annie tried to hand the bag to the man.

He waved the gun at her. She fought the urge to shriek and plunge to the floor.

“The coins too.” His gaze met hers finally. He looked as scared as she felt. The realization startled her. “Everything. I need everything you’ve got.”

He had the gun, but he was scared. More than scared. He looked terrified. The thought steadied Annie, and her shaking stilled.

“You can have it all.” She slapped the rolls of coins they used to make change into the bag and turned to him. “What about food? You said you needed to feed your child. Let me give you some bread. Some cookies too. Do you have a son or a daughter?”

The man snatched the bag from the counter. He started to back away and then seemed to waver. “I...a girl...she’s three. She’d really like a cookie. I’d like to be able to give her a cookie. She ain’t eaten nothing but bread and cheese today.”

“Does she like peanut butter? I have peanut butter cookies. And I’m sure she’d like this banana bread. I just made it this morning.” Surprised that her voice hardly shook at all, Annie picked up another bag and started packing it with the cookies, a loaf of whole wheat bread, and a loaf of banana bread. She breathed. *God, help me. God, help him. He needs your help. Show him a better way. Open a door for him. God, take care of his little girl.* “What’s her name?”

He shook his head. “Forget the food. There’s no time.”

“We have some raisins, bananas, and apples,” Sadie spoke up for the first time. Her voice sounded high and tight, but she looked determined. “Take them too. Fruit is good for her. For you too.”

“I have to go. Count to fifty before you call anyone.” He started backing toward the door. “Count to fifty. If you don’t, I might have to come back.”

His half-sob took the sting from the threat. Annie breathed in and out. In and out. “We won’t call anyone.”

“Sure you will.” The gun dipped and came back up. “The second I’m out the door, you’ll call the cops.”

Suddenly light-headed, Annie gripped the edge of the counter to steady herself. Purple spots danced at the periphery of her vision. Miriam’s hand touched her shoulder, rubbing in a comforting circular pattern. Annie swallowed bile that made her throat burn.

“No, we won’t. We don’t have a telephone.”

He snorted and backed toward the door. “Right.”

The vision of a little girl with dark hair and eyes the color of heaven pierced Annie’s heart. He had a little girl who needed to eat. “Take the food.” She rushed around the counter, the bag in her hand. “Please.”

“What are you?” His mouth open, face puzzled, he accepted her offering. “Nuns or something?”

Annie’s heart was banging hard against her rib cage. Surely he could hear it. “No. We’re...we’re Amish.”

“I’m sorry I had to scare you like this. Thank—”

The door opened. The bell dinged.

The man whirled, and a deafening blast filled the air all around Annie. She clapped her hands over her ears and sank to the floor. Someone screamed as more shots filled the air. The *bam-bam* made Annie jump each time as if it were a new, unexpected sound. Shattered glass rained down on her. Shards pricked the skin on the back of her fingers and pinged against her kapp. *God, ach, God. God.*

Time slowed until the seconds lingered like syrup poured from a bottle held high over the plate. Unable to draw a breath, she gasped, the sound hollow and muffled by her fingers over her ears. An acrid smell that reminded her of her brothers' hunting rifles filled the air. She didn't dare look up.

Miriam? Sadie? Were they hurt? Look, just look.

Annie managed to raise her head a fraction of an inch. They were huddled behind a chair by the storage room door. Miriam had both arms around Sadie, covering her with her own body. Were they hit? Annie couldn't tell. She fought to make frozen muscles move. She dragged her hands from her ears and slapped them on the floor. The rough wood felt solid and dependable under her fingers.

Move. She wanted to crawl toward her friends, but her leaden legs and arms refused to cooperate. *God, help me.*

Footsteps pounded. The sound cracked the ice that immobilized Annie's entire body. She looked back. The man shoved Gwendolyn Haag to the ground and fled through the shattered glass door.

Bliss Creek's mayor scooted on her hands and knees until she reached the bench along the wall. She cowered there, her face contorted with terror. "I just came for my brother's birthday cake," she whimpered. "I can come back later."