

The RIVERHAVEN YEARS

RIVER OF MERCY

BJ HOFF



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover by Koechel Peterson & Associates, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota

BJ Hoff is published in association with Books & Such Literary Agency, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370. www.booksandsuch.biz

RIVER OF MERCY

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hoff, B. J.

River of mercy / BJ Hoff.

p. cm.—(The Riverhaven years ; bk. 3)

ISBN 978-0-7369-2420-7 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-4052-8 (eBook)

I. Amish—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3558.O34395R58 2012

813'.54—dc22

2012012455

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Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 / LB-CD / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'm thankful to so many people who helped bring this book to fulfillment, and especially to...

My husband, Jim, who knows all the important stuff I can never figure out and doesn't make *too* much fun of my helplessness. (He can actually read maps and calculate how long a buggy would have taken to get from point A to point B.) He also puts up with my Irishness and smiles through it all.

My daughters, Dana and Jessie, who pray for me, cheer for me, and put up with me during deadlines and disasters. They also make me smile—a lot.

My grandsons, Noah, Gunnar, and Caleb, who enrich my life and crack me up on a regular basis.

Special friends—Cheryl, the bravest and most resilient woman I know; Sara, a true Steel Magnolia who never ceases to surprise me; Charlotte, who saves me from frumpdom, prays for me, and on occasion, feeds me; Wennie, who storms heaven with a velvet hammer and is known well by the Father; and Edith, who simply does too much for me to list. Bless you all!

My long-suffering editor, Nick Harrison, who wears a mantle of patience and shows the grace of a saint and rolls his eyes only when I'm unaware.

Shane White, indefatigable encourager and optimist supreme.

As always, my agent and friend, Janet Kobobel Grant, who never gives up on me.

Kelli Standish, friend and wizard who teaches me something new at least once a week and holds my hand through the nightmarish maze of cyberspace, Facebook, and The Media.

Harvest House—a publisher of the highest integrity that treats its authors like family and friends. Every one of you is such a blessing!

And my readers. I am blessed to have patient and kindhearted readers who continually encourage me with their messages and ongoing prayers. "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all."

Thanks be to my God, who always brings me through in spite of myself.

→ PROLOGUE ←

TOO MANY LONG NIGHTS

*I feel like one who treads alone
Some banquet hall, deserted.*

THOMAS MOORE

*Amish settlement near Riverhaven, Ohio
November 1856*

Rachel Brenneman had always liked to walk by the river at twilight. There had been a time during the People's early years at Riverhaven when she gave no thought to walking alone, day or night. After she and Eli were married, the two of them liked to stroll along the bank of the Ohio in the evening, discussing their day, planning the workweek, dreaming of the future. After Eli's death, however, Rachel no longer went out alone after dark, although sometimes she and her ten-year-old sister, Fannie, took a picnic lunch in the early afternoon and sat watching the fine big boats and smaller vessels that traveled the great Ohio to unknown places.

Now though, venturing away from the community no longer felt safe, even in the middle of the day. In truth, there was nowhere that felt safe, not after the deadly attack on Phoebe Esch and the other troubles recently visited upon the People. At night, especially, Rachel stayed inside, sitting alone in her bedroom with the window scarcely open in deference to the weather, which had recently turned cold.

November was a lonely month. Rachel still loved to listen to the river from inside her home, but the nighttime sounds—the distant lapping of the water, the blast from a boat's horn, the night creatures in communion

with one another—never failed to set off a stirring of remembrance and an ache in her heart. Yet she couldn't resist sitting there night after night, watching and listening, trying not to let her memories struggle to the surface of her thoughts, trying not to let new hope ignite the ashes of her dreams...

Trying not to think of Jeremiah.

But how could she *not* think of him? How did a woman love a man, even if their love was forbidden, and not see his face in her mind or hear his voice in her ear or remember the imprint of his smile upon her thoughts?

Common sense seemed to tell her it should be easy to put the man out of her head. They couldn't be alone with each other. They couldn't even pass the time of day unless they were in the company of others. If they happened to meet by accident, they were expected to separate as quickly as possible.

Yet even with all the rules and restrictions that kept them apart, Jeremiah Gant was still a part of her life. He flowed through her heart and traced the current of her days as surely and completely as the Ohio flowed through the valley, winding its way through the land, coursing through the days and lives of Rachel and the other Plain people.

Lately, there had been talk of leaving. Two years and more of unrest and harassment and threats—even death—had begun to wear on the Riverhaven Amish. It was rumored that talks were taking place among the church leaders, discussions of whether to remain in this once peaceful valley that had become home to the entire community or to consider moving on.

There was no thought of fighting back, of seeking out the unknown adversaries and taking a stand against them. Even if the People could identify their tormenters, they would not confront them. The Amish were a people of nonresistance. They would not fight, not even to protect their own lives. It wasn't their way. To strike out at another individual under any circumstances was strictly against the *Ordnung*, the unwritten but strict code that guided how they were to live.

The only person Rachel had ever known to defy the rule against fighting, even in self-defense, was Eli, her deceased husband. He'd gone against the Amish way when he defended Rachel against those who ambushed them on another November night, now four years gone. He had fought

with desperation and all his strength, only to die at the hands of their attackers while allowing Rachel to escape.

She knew it was a grievous sin to have such a thought, but many had been the time she wished she could have died alongside Eli that terrible night rather than live through the grief-hollowed, barren days that followed his death. She had been totally devoted to Eli. Their marriage had been good, for they had been close friends as well as husband and wife. Rachel had thought she could never love another man after losing Eli.

And then Jeremiah Gant had come to Riverhaven, turning her life around, enabling her to love again—only to have that love forbidden. Even though Jeremiah had made it known he would willingly convert to the Amish faith, Bishop Graber refused to grant permission, once again leaving Rachel with a lost love and a broken heart.

Perhaps it would be better if they *were* to leave Riverhaven...leave the fear and the dread and the pain-filled memories behind.

Leave Jeremiah...

The thought stabbed her heart. Could she really face never seeing him again? Never again hear him say her name in that soft and special way he had of making it as tender as a touch? Never again see the smile that was meant for her alone?

In truth, it wasn't only Jeremiah she would miss if they were to leave this fertile Ohio valley. She loved the land, the gentle hills, the singing river. She had come here when she was still a child, come from another place that had never truly been home to her. Here in Riverhaven though, she had felt welcome and accepted. At peace. At home.

At least for a time. It was almost as if she had become a part of the land itself. Even the thought of leaving made her sad beyond telling.

She sighed, knowing she should stir and make ready for bed, even though she felt far too restless for sleep. Would this be another of too many nights when her thoughts tormented her, circling like birds of prey, evoking an uneasiness and anxiety that would give her no peace?

Finally she stood, securing the window to ward off the cold, even though she sensed that the chill snaking through her had little to do with the night air. All too familiar with this icy wind of loneliness, she knew there was no warmth that could ease its punishing sting.



A VISIT TO RIVERHAVEN

*I used to think that love made people happy,
but now I know it can also make them sad.*

FROM THE PERSONAL DIARY OF FANNIE KANAGY

Even though a heavy sadness lay behind this visit to Riverhaven, Rachel couldn't help but take pleasure in the music streaming from one of the two churches on the main street.

It was unusually mild for a late morning in November. Someone must have cracked open the church door or a window, for the hymn singing was clear enough to make out most of the words. Even though it was church music, Rachel knew she probably shouldn't give it too much of her attention. Music tended to take her mind off everything else, and today she didn't want to be distracted.

The Amish held worship services on alternating Sundays, and the other Sundays were usually spent calling on family and friends. Rachel didn't know Ellie Sawyer very well, but on this particular day she felt the need to pay her a visit. It was early to call on someone who wasn't family, and the newly widowed Mrs. Sawyer was probably in church, so Rachel had agreed to Fannie's suggestion to go sightseeing first at the Riverhaven Park with its nice picnic grounds. There was a beautiful view of the Ohio River and the sloping hills that bordered its grounds and pier.

Rachel and Fannie's widowed mother had recently married Dr. David Sebastian, and the couple had traveled by train to Baltimore to meet the doctor's son and family, so only the two sisters were visiting Ellie Sawyer

today. The poor young wife and mother had only recently learned of her husband's tragic death from a farm accident in Indiana, so no doubt she would be grieving deeply.

To make matters worse, Mr. Sawyer had been buried for nearly two weeks in another state before Ellie learned by post that he was gone. The awful news had come too late for her to travel and attend her husband's funeral.

Rachel couldn't begin to imagine how difficult that must have been. At least when she lost Eli, she had been there to prepare his body for burial and had known the comfort of her entire family and community of friends. The People gathered close around one of their own during such a time to help and console in any way they could. Death was always a hard thing, but having loved ones close by to share one's sorrow helped ease the pain, at least a little.

The church and its music now behind them, Fannie nudged Rachel. "The *Englisch* hymn singing is real pretty, isn't it, Rachel? I like music, don't you?"

Rachel nodded. "*Ja*. But we mustn't let it distract us today or any other day for that matter. And let's be sure to give Ellie Sawyer all our attention while we're there."

"Does Mrs. Sawyer know about Eli? That you're a widow too?"

The road to the park was in sight now, so Rachel slowed the buggy before replying. "I doubt that she does. And I wouldn't want to mention it to her, especially now. She doesn't need to be thinking about anyone's loss but her own these days."

"I just thought it might help her to know someone else understands what she's going through."

Rachel glanced at her sister. For such a young girl, Fannie sometimes showed surprising insights. Was she right? Would Ellie Sawyer feel better knowing that someone nearby could understand and even share her grief?

"Well," Rachel said before stepping out of the buggy, "if the time ever comes when I feel I should mention it, I will."

Even as she said the words though, Rachel hoped the time wouldn't come. Despite the years that had passed since Eli's death, it was all she

could do to speak of it. The memory of that awful night still seared her heart.



Rachel and Fannie stayed considerably longer at the park than they had planned. The mild weather encouraged walking along the riverbank, and the view was worth the time they spent admiring it. By the time they drove back into Riverhaven to visit Ellie Sawyer, it was almost two o'clock.

"I wonder if it's too late to stop at the boardinghouse," Rachel said. "I wouldn't want to wake the baby if she's napping."

"Oh, Rachel, I really want to see the baby! Please, let's stop for a few minutes at least."

Rachel looked at her. "All right, but we won't stay long." She slowed the horses, intending to park across the road from the boardinghouse.

"Captain Gant!" Fannie cried, standing up in the buggy. "Look, Rachel, there's Captain Gant!"

Rachel reined in the horses a little too sharply, easing up as she saw Jeremiah step down from the porch of the boardinghouse. At Fannie's cry, he stopped by the side of the road and returned her wave, waiting while Rachel parked the buggy before walking toward them.

Irrked by the way her heart raced at the sight of him, Rachel sat still as a stone, still grasping the reins as he approached. His first words were for Fannie, who was practically squirming with excitement. As always, he charmed the girl by sweeping a bow and breaking into a huge smile.

"Well, now, if it isn't Miss Fannie Kanagy. This is a nice surprise."

When he turned to Rachel, his smile softened. "Rachel," he said quietly. The look he gave her was as warm and intimate as if he'd laid his hand along her cheek. "How are you keeping?"

It was all Rachel could do to choke out a greeting. He unnerved her at the best of times, but coming upon him unexpectedly made it almost impossible to keep her composure.

Tall and casual in his shirtsleeves—although the weather wasn't quite that mild—while a faint November breeze ruffled his dark hair, he was handsome enough to make any woman go weak-kneed and take a second look.

Only the awareness that she didn't dare look at him too closely made it possible for Rachel to drag her gaze away. Even so, she allowed a quick, forbidden thought that the roads of Riverhaven would be far safer if men like Jeremiah Gant were confined indoors.

She finally faced him to find him studying her with one raised eyebrow and a hint of a smile. She cleared her throat, saying, "I'm doing well, thank you."

"It's a little unusual to see you in town on a Sunday," he said. "Are you looking for Gideon?"

"We came to visit Mrs. Sawyer and her baby," Fannie put in.

"We did see Gideon though. He was out at the farm to help me feed the animals while Mamma and Dr. David are gone," Rachel added.

"Have you heard from them?"

"No, but they should be home by the end of the week."

"Well, I'm sure Ellie will be glad to see you," he said, darting a glance behind him toward the boardinghouse. "I just came from there. You'll find her and Naomi Fay downstairs. She's back at work, helping Marabeth in the kitchen."

"Oh—so soon?" Rachel said.

He nodded, his expression turning solemn. "I expect she needs the money. It's going to be hard for her with a baby and no husband. Besides, it's probably best if she can keep busy."

"She surely won't stay here, will she? Doesn't she have family she could go to?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets, frowning. "She says not—she grew up in an orphanage. And apparently she and her husband weren't close with his family, so she seems to be on her own."

The sting of an unidentifiable emotion caught Rachel off guard. She couldn't help but wonder how it was that Jeremiah knew so much about Ellie Sawyer. And he seemed so...concerned about her.

But of course he'd know something of her background. After all, her husband had worked in Jeremiah's carpentry shop before moving on to Indiana. And it was only natural that he'd be concerned about her situation. Jeremiah was a kind man. He'd care about anyone in such difficult straits.

"How awful for her," she said, meaning it.

“We’ll help her,” Fannie said. “Lots of people will, won’t they, Rachel?”

“I’m sure they will,” Rachel said, smiling at her sister. “Well. . .we’d best be going in now before it gets any later. Get the pie, Fannie.”

Fannie hopped down from the buggy and retrieved the basket that held the apple pie they’d baked the evening before. “Will you be out to visit us soon too, Captain Gant? I know Thunder would like to see you. And so would we,” she quickly added.

“I’d like that too,” he said quietly. “I expect he’s grown quite a bit since I saw him last.”

“*Ja*, he’s getting real big. Mamma says he’s going to be big enough to haul the hay wagon if he doesn’t stop growing soon.”

He laughed. “Let’s hope he doesn’t get *that* big!”

As Rachel started to step out of the buggy, Jeremiah quickly took her arm to help. In that instant their eyes met and held. Heat rose to her face. Unnerved by his closeness and intense scrutiny, she clenched her teeth until her jaw hurt in an effort not to react. He tightened his grasp on her arm, holding on to her for what seemed an excessive length of time. Only when Rachel made a small tugging motion to free herself did he drop his hand away.

She mumbled a hurried goodbye and started across the road toward the boardinghouse. With every step Rachel imagined him watching her. It was all she could do not to turn and look.

“Fannie,” she said just before they went inside, “you can’t be inviting Captain Gant to visit us anymore.”

Her sister gave her a quizzical look. “But he’s our friend.”

Rachel drew a long breath. “But he’s also an *auslander*.”

The word tasted bitter on her lips. Calling Jeremiah an outsider seemed so wrong.

Fannie stood staring down at the porch. “He doesn’t seem like one.” She lifted her face to look at Rachel. “Captain Gant’s been good to us. He cares about us. It doesn’t seem fair that we can’t be friends with him.”

“We *are* friends, Fannie, but we can’t be. . .too friendly.”

“Maybe you can’t, but Mamma and Dr. David don’t feel that way.”

“What?”

“They treat Captain Gant just like they do anybody else. They have

him for dinner sometimes, and he and Dr. David play checkers at least every other week.”

“Well, that’s different.”

“How is it different? Dr. David is Amish now too, but he and Captain Gant are still friends.”

Even as Rachel struggled to reply, she saw her sister’s expression change, clearing as though she already had her answer. “It’s because he likes you too much, isn’t it? But you can’t get married because he’s not Amish, so you’re not supposed to be friends, just the two of you.”

Caught off guard by Fannie’s perception, Rachel swallowed against the dryness in her throat. “Something like that, *ja*.”

Her little sister—who, Rachel suddenly realized, had nearly caught up with her in height—reached to take her hand. “I’m sorry, Rachel. I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“Oh, no, Fannie, it’s all right. I’m not sad.”

Fannie watched her. “Your eyes are.”

Rachel knew she shouldn’t be discussing this with her sister—or with anyone else. Even so, she felt compelled to ask. “Who told you...about Captain Gant and me?”

“I heard Mamma and Dr. David talking.” Fannie dipped her head a little. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, Rachel. Honest, I wasn’t. I was just picking some burrs off Thunder right outside the kitchen, and I heard them. I went the rest of the way into the room so they’d know where I was. I didn’t hear all that much. Besides, I knew before then that Captain Gant liked you an awful lot. And I knew that lately it made him unhappy.”

Rachel waited, sensing there was more to come.

“Used to be,” Fannie said, “that the only time the hurt ever left his eyes was when he looked at you.” She paused. “But now when he looks at you, it’s as if that’s when he hurts the most.”

Rachel stood there, stunned and speechless, her eyes burning. Finally, she managed a ragged breath, opened the door, and waited for Fannie to step in first before following her inside.