

## CHAPTER I

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The debris of winter lay in a messy mat over the ground as the earth beneath groaned to life. Caked mud and the mire of old leaves, dried-up twigs, and downed branches, all tangled together in the chaos left over from the coldest season in recent memory.

Indoors, where embers in the woodstove warmed the kitchen, Nellie Mae scrubbed the green-and-white checked oilcloth. A smudge of cherry cobbler had stained it red near where the edge of Dat's dessert plate had been. She worked on the blemish while Nan washed Mamma's best dishes in the deep sink. Meanwhile, Mamma made quick work of the few leftovers at the counter, commenting again about the "delicious dessert," as if the simple baked dish was extra special.

They'd had an especially fine feast on this Easter Monday noon, even if it was only the four of them seated around the table. They'd sent a written invitation to Dat's parents over in Bird-in-Hand but, not surprisingly, *Dawdi* and *Mammi* had quickly declined. Things had been that way since her parents, Nan, and Nellie, too, had chosen to embrace the teachings of the New Order church.

*Resurrection Day*, their father now referred to Easter, with a broad smile. Both he and Mamma seemed keen on celebrating

the day in a different way than before, though they and the rest of Preacher Manny's New Order group had observed prayer and fasting on Good Friday, just as in the old church. But Nellie had noticed from the very start of the weekend that a certain radiance permeated the observance. Easter was more meaningful than it had ever been in all of Nellie's eighteen years.

*Oh, the wonder of it,* she thought, wiping down the entire oilcloth even though they sat just at one end of the table now that Rhoda had moved out.

Missing Rhoda and Suzy—one sister gone to the world and the other to heaven—was becoming more bearable. "Life is all about change," Mamma often reminded her, but it didn't make things any easier . . . especially where Nellie's heart was concerned. Even so, Nellie knew that the sooner she got over missing her former beau, the better.

Nan tossed her a tea towel as Mamma left the kitchen. "*Kumm* dry."

Nellie reached to catch it. "Ach, I ate too much. Didn't you?"

"Will you have room for some supper later on?" Nan glanced her way with a curious look.

"Only a smidgen, maybe. We'll have plenty of leftovers, *jah?*"

Nan shook her head. "I was hopin' you'd go with me to the Honey Brook Restaurant, maybe."

"To see Rhoda?"

"Jah . . . I can't help but think our sister must be homesick for us."

Yet Rhoda hadn't bothered to contact them, not even Mamma, for all this time. A sore point, to be sure, and Nellie could have been miffed about it if she let herself. For the most part, she found herself whispering a prayer for Rhoda nearly as often as she did for Caleb.

Hesitating, Nellie asked, "Have you ever been there?"

"Only once." Nan frowned. "With my old beau . . ."

The last time Nellie Mae had talked with Rhoda, she'd taken Suzy's diary to her. Since Rhoda seemed to love jewelry, she'd also given her Suzy's gold bracelet, engraved with that sister's favorite verse. "Sure would be nice to see Rhoda again," said Nellie.

Nan brightened. "Well, I know she's working tonight, since it's Monday. She's there till closing on Tuesdays and some on weekends, too." Nan seemed quite certain of their sister's schedule. "Mamma doesn't mind. I already asked."

"Well, I wish you'd told me before I took my second helping of mashed potatoes and gravy, then." Nellie smiled. "Sure, I'll go with you."

Nan nodded, her hands deep in the suds. "*Denki*, sister." If Nellie wasn't mistaken, tears glistened in Nan's eyes. "Seems odd that she'd be satisfied with her life," said Nan, "out there in the world. . . ."

"Well, she does have James and Martha . . . and the children," Nellie said. "Plenty of family round her."

"Just ain't the same, though."

Nellie agreed. How *could* it be, as close as Rhoda and Nan had always been? For so many years, this house, their father's home, had sheltered them from every possible storm, except those brewing under their own roof. Everything they loved was here—the grand old farmhouse itself; Dat's barn and the horses he raised and trained; the surrounding acreage of fertile land. And the bakery shop. Nellie's Simple Sweets was a haven of sorts in the hollow, between two treed knolls that rose on either side of Beaver Dam Road like protective barriers against the outside world. For now, at least. Nellie sometimes sensed how temporary her own stay here was—she longed to marry

and have her own family someday. *With a husband like Caleb. But with a passion for life . . . and the Lord.*

She thought again of Rhoda and wondered how she could be truly happy being courted by a worldly man. Someone foreign to the Plain community. Surely she would tire quickly of the enticement and long for home.

“I wonder what Rhoda did for Easter.” Nan looked at Nellie Mae. “Do you think she dyed eggs and ate chocolate bunnies, like the English do?”

Nellie had wondered, too. “You’d think she would’ve missed goin’ to Preaching yesterday, jah?”

“Would seem so.”

She wasn’t sure if Rhoda continued to attend the Beachy meetinghouse with James, Martha, and their children. Martha rarely visited since Rhoda’s leaving. Such a painful wedge now.

Nellie wished Rhoda might have come to visit for Easter, or sent a note, at least. But maybe her absence was her way of saying she was quite content as she was.

Nan continued washing the last of the dishes, staring down at the water, daydreaming. Suddenly she looked up at Nellie Mae. “I’ve been wanting to tell ya something,” she said softly, glancing toward the doorway.

“Jah?”

Nan brightened. “I’ve met someone,” she said, but her lower lip trembled.

“Ach, Nan . . . you’re sad?”

Nan shook her head. “It’s my joy I struggle with, sister. Truly, it is. I’m so happy, but . . .”

“But what?”

Nan paused. “Well, to be honest, I’m afraid to be disappointed again. Will this beau hurt me, too?”

Nellie leaned her head against her sister’s. “Oh, Nan, I’m

worried for ya, honestly.” She sighed. “But you mustn’t let the past spoil the present . . . nor should you keep mum because of what’s happened ’tween Caleb and me.”

Long into the afternoon, while Nellie wrote her circle letters and read from the New Testament, she pondered Nan’s news. She couldn’t help but wonder who the young man could be, hopeful Nan might confide in her in due time. Surely he, too, was of the New Order church.

Nellie let her mind wander, imagining what it would be like to share the same faith as a beau. *Maybe someday I’ll know.*

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The cry of a siren rang out in the distance. That, accompanied by a sudden gale, caught Caleb’s attention and he raised his head. Several cows bawled at the sound, shifting in the stalls of his maternal grandfather’s barn. Unexpected noises, especially high-pitched ones, disturbed the livestock. He’d observed this even when he’d lived at home, working for his father.

*Those days are long gone*, he thought, dismissing the far-off distress signal as he emptied the fresh milk into the pumping tank.

He had another hour or so of milking before he returned to the little *Dawdi Haus*, his home these many long weeks while he worked off his “debt of sin”—or so his father called it.

The second urgent wail assailed him as he stood near the last milking stanchion, tired and hungry, as he often was at this hour. This time, the siren sounded closer, but here in the barn, with no way to look out, he couldn’t be certain of the direction.

Eager to stay on task—not wanting to delay his grandmother’s supper—he dismissed the siren once again. *Best to keep busy.* The thought was a constant refrain since Nellie Mae Fisher had called off their engagement.

*What was she thinking?*

Lest he fall into discouragement, he refused the defeating thought. He was free now to court a girl from his own church district—someone who gladly held to the Old Ways and appreciated their strict tradition. No longer would he have to plead with Nellie to stay far away from Preacher Manny’s group, nor the more liberal Beachy Amish church.

So Caleb was back to looking for a mate while the very girl he’d proposed to was moving in a new direction—away from him. He was miserable working for his grandfather, cut off from his immediate family by his own hand. Even if he could convince someone to marry him, he would have nothing to offer a bride, now that he’d given up his claim to his father’s land.

He moved about the milking parlor, comforted by this twice-daily routine—knowing what to expect. The familiar barn smells and sounds relaxed him, just as his older sister Rebekah had often reassured him with her kind words when they were young. But now he was cut off from her, as well, since she’d moved over to Mill Road with the Ebersols. Downright peculiar. How was it they, being Old Order, could tolerate her attending the New Order meetings—even her planning to join that church come fall—but *Daed* could not? Truly, Rebekah had been as harshly ousted from *Daed*’s house as Caleb had been, but for very different reasons.

Things just didn’t make sense—not Rebekah’s arrogant declaration of “having salvation,” nor Nellie Mae’s bold claim of redemption. Yet despite the church split and all that had changed because of it, he was as determined as ever to live out his life in the old tradition. *Where I was meant to be . . . even though my loyalty’s gotten me nowhere.*

So the gray days continued, and he found no joy in this new life of hard work and loneliness. Still, Caleb had yet to completely regret the ill-fated night with Nellie Mae in the

very Dawdi Haus where he was sent to reside. The night he'd crossed a delicate line with the woman he so loved and had planned to marry, asking her to let down her hair for him. *A loving act meant only for her husband's eyes . . .*

Though that night was long gone, he clearly recalled their sweet affection. He hadn't heeded his own inner warning, nor dear Nellie's, to wait for lip-kissing till their wedding day.

The cows were lowing contentedly now, and he moved among them, talking softly, as was his grandfather's habit. He was accustomed to emulating those with more experience and wisdom, the way of doing things passed down by imitation. That's why Nellie's abandonment of their tradition kept him awake at night. It was so foreign . . . not the way of the People, especially not for a woman. Yet, if he let his mind wander back to their earliest dates, her ability to think for herself had been one of the things that drew him to her—and he missed talking to her. *Ach, I miss everything about her.*

It was during his grandmother's skillet supper of sausage, onion, green pepper, stewed tomatoes, and macaroni, that Caleb discovered the significance of the siren's wail.

His grandfather had just commented on the recent rise in feed prices when a startlingly loud rap came at the back door. His older brother Abe burst into the kitchen, red-faced. "Caleb! Kumm *schnell!*—come quick!"

Immediately he leapt from the table, dashing out to the utility room for his coat and hat . . . leaving Dawdi and Mammi to wonder what sudden calamity had befallen them.

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A light rain had begun to fall, melting the remaining snow on either side of the road as Nellie Mae and Nan made their way to the Honey Brook Restaurant.

“Do ya think Rhoda will be surprised to see us?” asked Nan, holding the reins.

“Well, she said she missed us when I visited her some weeks ago.” Nellie wondered if Rhoda had ever considered the verse inscribed on Suzy’s bracelet: *Not by works of righteousness but by His mercy He saved us.*

“I hope she won’t think we’re spyin’ on her.”

“Well, I doubt she’d admit that.” Nellie forced a smile, hoping they weren’t making the trip to town only to be rebuffed, if only for Nan’s sake.

“Might be best if we don’t seem desperate for her to come home, jah?”

Nellie sighed. This was going to be hard, no getting around it. “If she’s aloof, I hope you won’t take it to heart, Nan.”

“Oh no, I’m beyond bein’ hurt over her leaving. Honest, I am.”

Nellie heard the slight waver in her sister’s voice and knew better.



“Oh, Caleb . . . Caleb, you’re here.” His mother’s face was ashen as she greeted him and Abe at the back door. “Your father’s been hurt,” she said, wringing her hands. “I should’ve gone along in the ambulance,” she added as they moved into the kitchen.

“What happened?” Caleb asked.

His sisters Leah and Emmie hovered near *Mamm*, looking right peaked themselves, and their oldest brother, Gideon, seemed mighty grim at the head of the table.

“Ach, the chain broke on the plow hitch,” *Mamm* explained, “and while your father was down fixin’ it, one of the mules kicked him in the head.” She faltered, openly weeping. “Your poor Daed . . . so terribly wounded.”

Caleb's heart broke as she attempted to describe the accident, and he made her sit down because she seemed like she might just teeter over.

"Abe was out in the field with your father—saw it all—and ran for help to our Beachy neighbors . . . used their telephone to call an ambulance."

"Was Daed breathing?" Caleb asked, sitting at the table with Mamm and the others. A cluster of panicked souls.

Abe nodded. "I checked his breathing and his pulse . . . awful weak. And he couldn't stop shaking."

"Will he pull through?" asked Caleb.

Abe's face fell. "It . . . it's hard to know."

Gideon leaned forward, his voice all pinched. "The medics didn't say one way or the other. But Daed was struggling, that's for sure."

Leah began to cry, and Emmie, Caleb's youngest sister, put her arms around her. "Daed'll pull through . . . he will," Emmie said bravely, but she, too, shed tears.

"One of us must go to the hospital," Caleb spoke up, looking at his mother.

Abe glanced at Gideon. "I should be the one to go. Caleb can stay here with Mamm and the girls, once you head home."

Gideon got up from the table, saying he ought to get back to his own family. "I'll stop in at Jonah's on the way," he said, referring to their other brother. "Maybe he's returned from his errand by now. Sure would hate for him to hear this from anyone but us." He went to Mamm and leaned down to say good-bye, then left.

Abe prepared to leave, as well. Trembling, their mother rose and followed him to the door, pleading with him. "Bring word back as soon as ya know something . . . anything!"

"I'll see what I can find out." Clearly eaten up with worry, Abe nodded and darted out the door.

Caleb led Mamm into the kitchen once again and pulled up the rocking chair for her. "You mustn't fret. We must keep our wits about us."

Trying to be brave, no doubt, she blinked her sad eyes silently, and then with a great gasp, she buried her face in her hands. "Ach, what'll we do if—"

"Mamm . . . Mamm." Caleb stood near her chair, leaning over her now. "Try to remember how strong Daed's always been. Not much can hurt a man like that."

She nodded slowly, wiping her tears. And he wished he believed his own words.

Sobbing loudly, Emmie reached for Leah's hand and they hurried out of the kitchen, toward the stairs.

"Plenty of men have been kicked by a horse and died on the spot," Caleb reminded his mother. "But you heard Abe, Mamma. Daed's alive . . . let's cling to that."

She bowed her head. "Ach, why didn't I go with him? Oh, Caleb." She could no longer speak as she softly cried.

"Everything happened so fast," he said, his heart pounding. He tried to ignore the stranglehold sensation on his chest and throat that fought his every breath.