

PROLOGUE



Autumn 1966

For as long as I can remember, I've eagerly awaited the harvest. Oh, the tantalizing scents wafting from *Mamma's* kitchen, come autumn. But it's not my mother's baking as much as it is my own that fills the house with mouth-watering aromas. Each year I entertain myself, seeing how many ways I can use pumpkin in an array of baked goodies. Naturally there are pumpkin pies and pumpkin breads. But I also delight in making pumpkin cookies with walnut pieces and brown sugar sprinkled atop. And there is spicy pumpkin custard, too, and gooey pumpkin cinnamon rolls—sticky buns, of course—cinnamon pumpkin muffins, and the most popular item of all: pumpkin cheesecake.

As I wait for pies to bubble and cookies to turn golden brown in the old cast-iron oven in *Mamma's* kitchen, I thrill to the world beyond our tall windows, watching for the first hint of shimmering reds on the sugar maples along the west side of our lane. I catch sight, too, of the

glistening stream as it runs under Beaver Dam Road and across our wide meadow. It's here, near Honeybrook, northeast of White Horse and smack-dab in the Garden Spot of the World, where I live with *Dat* and Mamma and my two older sisters, Rhoda and Nan.

But garden spot that this may be, this year I am not able to use our own pumpkins for baking, nor am I as aware of the usually melodious brook, or the growing excitement of the fun to come—youth frolics and hayrides. All the pairing up beneath the harvest moon.

Sadly our own harvest has already occurred—stunted stalks of sweet corn, acres and acres of it all around us, cut early. *Dat* said the fact it never got taller than knee-high was an omen of bad things to come. “*Time will tell, as in all things,*” he declared. And time did tell.

Accepting our loss, we salvaged what was left of the lifeless stalks, using them for fodder. Even so, some are still standing brown in the field. Rows of short scattered stumps, a cruel reminder of what might have been.

Though I'm only seventeen, I've already made some observations about the passing of years. Some are marked by loss more than others. As for this season, never before have we lost so many of the People to jumping the fence to greener pastures—our own cousin Jonathan and his family among them. But losing a crop, or some of our own to the world, pales in comparison to the greatest loss of all.

I still remember clearly that early June Saturday. The day had begun with anticipation, as all market days do. Grief was the furthest thing from my mind the morning Caleb Yoder smiled at me for the first time ever. I was minding my own business, selling my baked goods to eager customers, when I had a tingling awareness of someone nearby watching me.

I looked up . . . and there he was. I felt a rush of energy, as if something inside me was saying: *Is he the one?*

Caleb's admiring gaze lingered after his handsome smile, and by afternoon, my next oldest sister, nineteen-year-old Nan, was telling me something Caleb's own sister Rebekah had whispered to her—that Rebekah wished Caleb might court me. Such a wonderful-good thing to hear!

Now, if I hadn't secretly liked him for several years, the smile and the whisper would have meant little and the day would have been like any other. Instead, it was the collision of the best and worst days of my life.

My sister Suzy died that evening. Younger than me by just eleven months, she drowned before she had a chance to be baptized and join church—a giant strike against our souls. Mamma and I were alone in the bakery shop when the policeman came with the wretched news, and I could not stop shaking long into the night.

Nearly a hundred days have come and gone, and at times it seems Suzy's untimely death has started a whole chain of unusual events. I'm aware of a hole in my middle, like someone reached in and pulled a big part of me out. This, mixed with a measure of anger. Surely the Lord God and heavenly Father could have done something to protect her, to keep her from dying. Yet I must learn to accept this terrible thing that has come across my path. It is our way. At all costs, we must trust in divine sovereignty, even when, secretly, doing so is just plain hard.

Am I alone in this?

My sister was daring, truth be told. Mamma sometimes said such characteristics in a pretty girl were a recipe for danger, and trouble certainly seemed to follow Suzy during her last months. Losing her was bad enough, but my own guilt tears me apart, too. I've heard tell of survivor's

guilt—when you feel responsible because someone you loved has died, and you’ve survived. But that isn’t my guilt. No, mine is ever so much worse.

Most times I’m able to push it deep down, where I can scarcely feel it, but every so often the blame rises unexpectedly. If not for me, Suzy would be alive. *Jah*, I know her death wasn’t my fault, but if I’d stopped her from going with her friends that day—and I would’ve done so if I’d known she’d a mind to take dangerous risks—I could have saved her. I can only hope someday I’ll be able to forget all of that. Forgetting Suzy will be impossible.

As for dear Mamma, it seems she can’t think on much else. All of us miss Suzy’s presence dreadfully—her constant whistling on washday, as well as her cheerful, even mischievous smile while weeding the vegetable garden. Like she knew something we didn’t.

I daresay it is Rhoda and Nan . . . and myself—all of a sudden the youngest—who must help carry poor Mamma through this sorrowful time. Nearly all her energy still seems spent on Suzy. I see her pining in the set of her jaw, the way she shies away from social gatherings, longing for the comfort of silence . . . for her cherished aloneness. No doubt she yearns to talk to Suzy again, to cup her freckled face in both her hands and hold her near.

Sometimes I want to hug Mamma and whisper, “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.” But she wouldn’t understand, and my words wouldn’t change anything.

Truth is, Suzy’s gone. The ground holds her body now. The ground holds her diary, as well. I broke my promise to burn it if anything ever happened to her, the kind of talk between sisters who never think they’ll have to honor their frivolously spoken vow. Instead, I walked to the wooded area behind the paddock and buried it deep in the ground, as

good as destroyed. Better that we remember the Suzy we all knew as sweet, innocent, laughing—the truest friend—and not who she became.

While Mamma grieves in her own way, Dat scarcely talks of Suzy. He acts almost as if nothing's changed, as if he isn't affected by her death. Yet I can't bring myself to believe he is cold toward the loss of his youngest daughter. Surely he is merely sad and simply unable to express his grief openly as his womenfolk do. I see flickers of pain and worry around his dark brown eyes. Jah, at the heart of him, he must suffer the searing, constant ache the rest of us feel when we whisper amongst ourselves of lovable Suzy and the mystery surrounding her life . . . and death. Daily, we struggle to face the future without her.

There's but a single bright spot on my horizon: Caleb Yoder. Now, I must admit to having spent time at Singings and youth frolics with plenty of fellas, but none who holds a candle to Caleb as I imagine him. Though the days continue to pass, I'm still holding out hope that he might yet invite me to go riding after a Sunday night Singing or other gathering. Such a fine driving horse he has, too. He might chuckle if he knew I thought such things!

I may be just fuzzy brained enough to think my affection for him is enough to keep me going when I feel this sad. Maybe Caleb has figured things out for himself about Suzy's final weeks and her death—who knows what he's heard, what with the rumor mill hard at work. Could be that's why he hasn't asked me to ride with him sooner, unless he is seeing someone else. If he is, I can hardly blame him.

Even so, I hold my breath, reminding myself that he might be honoring my time of grieving, a noble thing if true. Then again, maybe I'm mistaken that he ever noticed me at all, and I'm simply engaging in wishful thinking born

of a wounded heart. Either way, I realize how important it is to yearn for the best, as Mamma used to say . . . before she lost her Suzy.

To my thinking, Caleb *is* the best. He is admirable and good from the inside out. I only hope he might choose to smile at me again, for hope is all I have.



“Therefore we do not lose heart. . . . We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

—2 CORINTHIANS 4:16, 18 NIV

CHAPTER I

She sometimes wondered what her life might have been like had she been given only one first name. Instead, she had two—Nellie, after her great-grandmother on her father's side, and Mae, for Mamma's youngest sister.

Despite the near-fancy ring to them, Mamma had often said the names were a good fit, and what with the special attention Nellie Mae gave to creating her pies, cakes, and other pastries, she guessed her mother was right.

But I'm not fancy, not one bit! She hurried across the drive toward the bakery shop set back behind the house, where Dat had made an area for parking both automobiles and horses and buggies. Nellie Mae glanced at the hand-painted sign atop the bakery shop and smiled.

Nellie's Simple Sweets.

The cozy place was considered hers because of her near-constant baking as a girl. By the time she could roll out pie dough or see to it that a two-layer cake did not fall, she was baking more than her family could possibly consume. It was Dat who had suggested building a small shop right on the premises to offer Nellie's delectable treats to the rest of Honeybrook. Of course, it never hurt to bring in some

extra cash, which the shop certainly did, thanks to word of mouth from Nellie's many satisfied customers.

This nippy September morning, Nellie Mae raised the green shades on each window and quickly turned the sign on the door to Open. In less than five minutes, the regulars started to arrive, all *Englischers*, two by car, and the other on foot. The brass bell on the door jingled merrily as they each entered, all smiles.

"*Willkumm,*" Nellie greeted first Mrs. Hensley, a woman with a distinct southern accent; then Miss Bachman, who was known for her peanut butter cravings; and Rhoda's employer, Mrs. Kraybill, two of her children in tow.

Not wanting to appear overly eager, Nellie Mae stood primly behind the counter while the ladies perused the display case. Mrs. Hensley scrutinized the array of baked goods, a canary yellow dress resembling a sack beneath her sweater. Rhoda had spoken of such tent dresses, as they were called by the English, and Nellie was polite not to stare at what surely was the brightest dress she'd ever seen. With her swept-over bangs and pouffy hair, Mrs. Hensley couldn't have looked more like an *Englischer*.

Mrs. Kraybill blinked her pretty eyes over her rimless glasses and asked, "Would you mind if I purchased all four dozen of the pumpkin cookies?"

"Why no, not at all," Nellie was quick to say.

Mrs. Hensley pointed to the cinnamon-raisin cake front and center on the counter, tapping her manicured fingernails on the glass. It was nearly all Nellie could do to keep from leaning forward and telling her how wonderful-*gut* the cake tasted.

"How do you bake all this yourself?" Mrs. Hensley asked, her fingernails still resting on the glass. "It's perfectly lovely."

“Melts in your mouth, too,” added Miss Bachman, eyeing the peanut butter fudge on the left. “How you manage to bake everything without so much as a recipe amazes me, Miss Nellie Mae. You’re a walking cookbook!” Glancing at Mrs. Hensley, she smiled. “If you want the recipe, just ask. Nellie’s as generous with her know-how as she is with the sugar on her cookies.”

Nellie Mae blushed. She had always had a good memory. When it came to listing off ingredients and correct measurements, she could do so in her sleep.

Rooting in her purse, Mrs. Hensley pulled out her wallet and a small tablet. “Would you mind terribly, dear? I’d love to try my hand at that cake.” Her eyes pleaded for the recipe.

Quickly Nellie rattled off the ingredients and the measurements, feeling somewhat self-conscious, even though she didn’t mind one iota sharing such things with her regular customers.

If only Caleb Yoder would stop by sometime, she thought before catching herself. It was wrong to boast, and she would surely be doing so by showing off her baking ability for the sake of male admiration. Still, Nellie could hope.

She turned her attention to making correct change. When she’d finished with Mrs. Hensley’s purchases, she assisted the other two women, who, much to Nellie Mae’s delight, were now fussing over who would have the fudge.

Nellie Mae sat fidgeting in her elder brother Ephram’s carriage early Thursday morning, thankful Mamma had sent Nan to oversee the bakery shop so she could make this visit. She adjusted her black outer bonnet while Ephram

sat silently on the right-hand side of the carriage, his eyes focused on the road as they drove toward his house.

Snug under her heavy woolen lap robe, she tucked her hands into the gray muff and shivered, wishing it were summer again. She daydreamed of lying in a green meadow, the delicious scent of wildflowers perfuming the air.

Will Caleb ask me home from Singing by next summer, at least?

So much time had passed already. Regardless, she was tired of going with boys she didn't much care for, even though she had been guilty of stringing two young men along. While she'd enjoyed their company, most of the boys she'd gone with were ho-hum; none of them made her heart sing the way Caleb had the day he'd smiled at her. As with every boy around here, all had plans to farm. That was right fine with Nellie Mae. She wasn't hoping for someone who would do things differently. All she wanted was someone who had opinions of his own, and was not only appealing but who was smitten with her, as well.

Is that too much to ask?

Lots of girls married simply to get hitched, and she had no interest in that. She would not marry if it meant settling for someone to cook and clean for and having a whole string of babies. She wanted what Mamma had with Dat—a steady fire between them. Even after all these years, she could see it when her parents looked at each other from across a room.

Willing herself to relax, she sensed the buggy was warmer today than yesterday, when she'd gone with her mother to the general store in Honeybrook after closing her shop for the day. She always felt more secure when either her father or one of her five older brothers drove the team. Of course their driving was not nearly as much fun as the wild buggy

driving the fellows she'd dated liked to do. No doubt such recklessness was partly to blame for several fatal accidents involving buggies and cars in recent years, not all on the more congested main roads. Surely it was good that today her elder brother—responsible husband and father of four, with another on the way—steadily held the reins, just as he did for his family.

Who will hold the reins of my life?

She shifted her feet, conscious of the tremor of the wheels on the road through the high-topped black shoes her mother had insisted she wear. *"Too late in the season for bare feet,"* Mamma had said before sending her off. *"Tell your sister-in-law hullo for me, won't ya?"*

Nellie sighed, watching the trees as the horse and buggy carried her along. She dreaded the coming winter with its lash of ice and wind. She wriggled her toes in the confining shoes, longing for the freedom of bare feet.

Farmers up and down the long road—Amish and English alike—were busy baling hay . . . what little there was, due to the regional drought. Farther up the road, the neighbors' apple orchard came into view. Immediately she wondered if the orchard had been affected, too. Would there be enough fruit for cider-making frolics and apple butter, come late fall? The apple harvest always meant a large gathering of young people—perhaps Caleb would be among them. A work frolic was one of the ways the young people mingled during the daytime, but it was under the covering of night that courting took place.

She tried to shut out the surroundings and let her mind wander, imagining what it would be like to encounter Caleb at such a lively get-together. She found herself lost in the reverie, wishing something might come of it. Hoping, too,

he might not be as curious about Suzy's death as certain others seemed to be.

Her brother spoke just then, startling her. "You're awful quiet, Nellie Mae."

Ephram did not gawk at her the way he sometimes did when they traveled to and from his house. Though the visits were rather infrequent, he had been kind enough to offer to bring her back with him this morning, sparing her the two-mile walk to visit her sister-in-law Maryann. If time permitted, Nellie wanted to see her best friend, Rosanna King, too.

Her brother's blond hair stuck out beneath his black felt hat. The straw hats of summer had recently disappeared on the menfolk, something that nearly always caught Nellie Mae by surprise every autumn.

"You're brooding," he said.

"Maybe so." Absently she rubbed her forehead, wondering if her frowning into the morning light had given her away.

"Aw, Nellie, what's troubling you?"

But she couldn't say, though she hadn't been brooding; she was simply pondering things.

She glimpsed at him, averting her eyes before daring to ask, "Did ya hear anything 'bout that meeting Dat went to two weeks ago?"

Ephram turned right quick to look at her.

She smiled. "Seems you *did* hear, then."

His rounded jaw fell and he turned his attention back to the road. Even though she rarely interacted with him, Nellie could see right through this brother. His dairy cattle and growing family kept him plenty well occupied these days, but Ephram had always worn his feelings on his plump face. "What're you talkin' about?" he asked.

“I heard there was a gathering. All hushed up, too.”

He shook his head. Whether it was in disgust or out of reserve, she didn’t know. Fact was, she wanted to know, but she wouldn’t press him further. Not fitting for a woman, Mamma would say—though Nellie didn’t always embrace everything Mamma thought or suggested. Even so, today there was no sense dredging up the tittle-tattle she’d heard at the bakery shop about the menfolk and their secret meeting. Likely they’d meant it to remain just that.

Nellie wondered if this summer’s stunted crops hadn’t caused some of the recent turmoil. She’d heard there were some who were convinced the failed crops were a dreadful prophecy to the area of Honeybrook. Limited as the problem was to their area, it was as if God had issued them a warning.

She recalled the upheaval the phenomenon had caused. As farmers, their very livelihood depended upon the success of their crops. Feed for livestock and chickens had been trucked in. And the bakery shop felt the pinch, as well, from the need to purchase ingredients, tapping into the family’s profits.

Shifting her weight a bit, she stared out the other window. The heavy dew looked much like frost, with the biting cold to go with it; the harsh air must have sneaked up on them and fallen into the hollow while they slept last night. Summer’s end though it was, it felt like the middle of winter. And even though that meant ice and snow and wind and cold, Nellie Mae longed for this year to be over and a brand spanking new one to begin.

Looking at her brother now, she wished he would say what he surely knew about the meeting in the bishop’s barn.

What’s the big secret?

Ephram was turning in where the tree-lined lane led to his house. Right away Nellie spied Maryann standing in the door, clearly in the family way as she waved a hankie-welcome.

“Now, don’t be fillin’ *her* head with your s’posings and all,” Ephram warned, stepping down to tie the horse to the hitching post.

Nellie wondered why he hardly ever referred to his wife by her name. So many of their men referred to their wives as “she” or “her,” instead of by their lovely names.

I sure wouldn’t want to marry a man like that.

Nellie Mae thought again of Caleb, wondering what he would say to all the gossip. Should he ever be available to talk to, would she dare ask? Or would he treat her the same distant way Ephram seemingly treated Maryann?