

New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BEVERLY LEWIS



The
Beginning

The Beginning



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To
Donna Simmons,
devoted reader-friend
and constant encourager.



Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
for ever.

—Psalm 23:6

PROLOGUE

SPRING

It was that *wunnerbaar-gut* time of year in Hickory Hollow when the earth stirred from its wintry slumber and snow crocuses peeked through the dark soil. The snow had melted more than a week earlier, leaving behind last autumn's leaves, fallen twigs, and mud. The days warmed and stretched ever longer toward evening.

Already I had seen our neighbor Deacon Luke Peachey out with his six-mule team, plowing the land he'd purchased from *Mamma* after my father died in a barn-raising accident fifteen years ago.

It was time now to get busy with spring housecleaning and fulfilling orders for the framed counted cross-stitch family trees I made to bring in extra money. Tomorrow, however, March twelfth, I would take some time to celebrate my twenty-second birthday.

After rising at four-thirty to bake two loaves of bread, I set to work scrubbing the upstairs hallway and the spare room, determined to be a helpful daughter and to make up for the chores *Mamma* could no longer do because of her worsening health.

That done, I sorted through my drawers of clothing and noticed the small wooden box where I'd saved a few favorite items, including handmade Valentine cards from girl cousins and my sweet younger sister, Britta. Inside was a pinecone, sprayed white and with a dried holly sprig attached to it, a gift from Obie Yoder, my friend since our third-grade year. That had also been the year my brother Eli—ten months older—was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver not far from our house.

I paused to glance out my upstairs window at the thick grove of willows below, over near the large pond. The lengthy, supple branches swayed gently as a breeze blew through them. *Such a peaceful spot.* I thought back to the many times I'd sat in *Dad's* old rowboat and cried after Eli's sudden death, missing my close-in-age brother.

So long ago now . . .

Tomorrow, I would mark yet another birthday without my brother or father. Obie was coming to join my family for cake and ice cream, as he'd promised last Saturday at market.

Just like him, wanting to share the day with me.



Next morning, I baked a three-layer fudge birthday cake for myself. Baking and decorating cakes was something I enjoyed doing, as well as tending to Mamma's little shop, open every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. The small cottage where we sold goat cheese, jams, jellies, and Mamma's famed Amish peanut butter—that fluffy, sweet spread made with marshmallow—was just across the backyard from the house. I also took orders there, as well as at Saturday market in Bird-in-Hand, for my cross-stitched family trees.

For my birthday get-together, Mamma had invited my older sister, Polly, and her husband, Henry, with their three little ones to come for dessert. My brother Allen and his wife, Sarah, and their six children lived way out in Clark, Missouri, having relo-

cated there last summer. The sudden move had taken Mamma by surprise, as well as everyone else here in Hickory Hollow, but available acreage round Lancaster County was becoming as scarce as hen's teeth. Allen and Sarah, hungry for land, had joined an established church district there made up primarily of Amish families from Iowa.

Close as we were, my adopted sister, Britta, soon to be thirteen, was excited about this birthday gathering, even though fewer of us would be present this year. In truth, most of the People didn't make too much of observing birthdays in any case. Focusing attention on individuals wasn't our way. Other days on the calendar were far more significant: Christmas, Easter, Baptism Sunday, and the fasting days prior to twice-yearly communion—days linked to God.

I hurried downstairs to the front room and noticed what a nice job Britta had done polishing all the wood surfaces after school yesterday. Our sister Polly managed to keep her house over in Landisville spick-and-span, even with a babe in arms, an eighteen-month-old toddler, and a school-age son. The last few years, it had fallen to me to take on most of the household chores, since Mamma's once extraordinary get-up-and-go had been affected by asthma, which had worsened this spring with the melting of the snow. Despite being tired much of the time and having occasional shortness of breath, she refused to see a medical doctor, preferring to use folk medicine—most especially, a syrup from comfrey root, mullein, garlic, fennel seed, and apple cider vinegar—as well as other natural remedies her own *Mamm* had passed along.



After Polly and her family left for home that evening, I slipped into my coat to head down to the willows with Obie, while Britta sat on the steps of the potting shed, playing with her three former strays—Tabasco, Lucy, and Daffodil. Britta had been just a

toddler when she developed a keen attachment to barn cats. She waved and smiled at Obie and me.

"I'll be back soon," I called as we walked toward the driveway. Obie had worn his Sunday best for my birthday gathering—black broadfall trousers, vest, and coat, with his pressed white shirt. Best as I could remember, he'd never worn his for-good clothes when coming to visit, not even the years he'd spent Christmas evening with us.

What could it mean? I wondered, half hoping I guessed the answer.

"Your birthday cake was delicious," Obie said, blue eyes shining. "You outdid yourself again, Susie."

I smiled. "Glad ya liked it."

"Well, I wasn't the only one," he said as we headed toward the pond side of the willows. "Henry had seconds, I noticed."

He chuckled, and my laughter mingled with his as we strolled around the big pond, talking about whatever came to mind, like we were so good at doing. Like we had always been good at doing.

He mentioned his fourteen-year-old sister Hazel's friendship with my younger sister, and I agreed that it was a real blessing they'd recently forged such a strong relationship.

"Both of them love cats . . . and book learnin'," I commented, not mentioning that, more recently, Britta had been rather quiet and pensive at home, especially around Mamma. Britta was sometimes prone to moodiness, though, so I didn't think it was anything to fuss over.

"Hazel sure seems fond of her. When Britta comes to visit, they hurry off to the barn to visit the new kittens, talking a blue streak," Obie said, admitting to having overheard them.

"It's great to see Britta breakin' out of her shell. She still prefers her cats, I think, but I'm glad she's including people in the mix."

Obie laughed once more and then fell quiet as we circled back around toward the side of the pond where the willows grew more densely.

Then, under the delicate covering of budding leaves and greening branches, he slowed his pace. His expression softened as his eyes searched mine. “You know,” he began, “all these years, we’ve been such *gut* friends.”

I studied him, still surprised he’d dressed up like this in his church clothes today.

He shuffled his feet and glanced at the sky, and back at me. Then he said in his deep and mellow voice, one I knew as well as my own, “Here lately, I’ve been thinking ’bout something, Susie. Something important.” His expression seemed so hopeful as he paused to draw a breath.

“*Jah?*” I encouraged him along, curious.

“We’ve always been comfortable tellin’ each other most anything. . . .”

I nodded, my heart pounding now.

“So, what would ya think if we—”

“Susie!” Britta’s voice burst through the willows. “Allen’s callin’ for ya.”

Obie’s eyes registered surprise, and we turned to see Britta running toward us. Then, stopping abruptly, she said, “*Ach!* Sorry, I—”

“What’s goin’ on?” I asked, doing my best to hide my annoyance.

Britta leaned over, hands on her knees as she caught her breath. “Allen and the whole family want to wish you a happy birthday . . . on the stable phone.”

I glanced at Obie, dying to know what he was about to say. “I’ll call them back,” I told her.

Britta jerked her thumb toward the stable. “Okay, but they’re waiting.”

“Go an’ take your call,” Obie said. “It’s all right.”

“Are ya sure?”

He nodded. “We’ll talk another time.”

I apologized for the interruption, but he waved it away. “*Denki*

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for comin' over to celebrate with me," I said, watching my sister hurry back up the hill.

"Wouldn't have missed it." Obie smiled again. "Not for anything."

Like you say every birthday, I thought.

Disappointment made my throat dry as I rushed to the stable. I was happy Allen had called, yet I couldn't help wondering what was on Obie's mind. "*Something important*," he said. . . .



PART 1

CHAPTER

1



A flagstone walkway led to the long front porch of the old stone house where Susie Mast lived with her widowed mother, Aquilla, and younger sister, Britta. The path curved past a small white gazebo in the side yard near two sugar maples, then around to the back door, which opened into the outer room, where, before he moved away, Susie's brother Allen had been known to clomp indoors with dirty work boots.

Now, three days after her birthday, Susie stood in the driveway waiting to welcome her auburn-haired sister home from the one-room schoolhouse a half mile away. She recalled the times when Mamma had stood in this very spot, awaiting her return each weekday afternoon.

Silently, Susie thanked God for this pleasant afternoon and for the customers who had purchased two dozen jars of Amish peanut butter spread at Mamma's little shop earlier, as well as some fresh goat cheese. *A gut day*, she thought, thankful as well for the money Mamma said Allen pitched in each month to help make ends meet.

Squinting into the sunlight, Susie heard the sound of school-children talking and laughing just around the bend in the road.

It wasn't long before Britta and the girls who walked with her came into view. Some wore dark green and plum dresses beneath their black coats, while others wore brighter hues of maroon and blue. Each also wore a dark blue bandanna. As usual, the school-boys hung farther back, all of them in black broadfall trousers and coats, their straw hats snug on their heads.

Britta was nearly half a head taller than the other girls her age. They looked toward Susie and waved, then called their good-byes to Britta, who turned and dashed up the driveway.

"Hullo!" Susie said, happy to see her. "What did ya learn today?"

"More than my head can hold," Britta replied.

"Well, you're a *gut* scholar. You'll be fine."

Britta's dark eyes revealed momentary pride. "Just doin' my best." She shrugged, then added, "Oh, and Hazel Yoder an' I are competing in grammar lessons."

"*Des gut, jah?*"

"Keeps us both on our toes, even though she's a grade ahead."

Susie smiled as they walked into the house together. "Want a snack before chores?"

"Applesauce, maybe, but I can get it," Britta answered.

"With cinnamon, of course." Susie beat her to the gas-powered refrigerator and opened the half-full Mason jar of sauce.

"*Ach*, you spoil me, sister," Britta said as she removed her black coat and hung it on the wooden hook on the far wall of the kitchen, near the walk-in pantry. "How would I ever manage without ya?" she teased.

Susie laughed. "You'd do just fine."

Britta shook her head, her face suddenly serious. "Well, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun."

A knowing look passed between them. Susie nodded, touched by the sentiment, but Britta turned pensive and glanced out the

window. Then, walking toward the front room, she turned and asked, “Where’s Mamma?”

“Over at Ella Mae’s.”

“Prob’ly needed to get out of the house.”

“She seems to be feelin’ better, so that’s *gut*,” Susie said. “Ella Mae’s grandson Paul came and picked her up not long ago, and I took over workin’ at the shop till just now.” Susie glanced out the window, looking to see if any customers had come.

Britta sat down and leaned one elbow on the table, a thoughtful look on her oval face. “Paul’s a newlywed and a busy farmer,” she said. “Where does he find time?”

“Maybe that’s why he walks so fast,” Susie joked.

Britta nodded.

Susie spooned an ample helping of the homemade applesauce into a bowl and set it in front of Britta, whose cheeks were still rosy from the walk home. “In an hour or so, I’ll go an’ get Mamma, after she has tea and time to visit.”

Britta brightened. “Did ya know that Ella Mae once told me she was as spunky as me when she was young?”

“Some of us just are.”

Britta grinned. “Were *you*?”

“Not really, but from what Mamma’s said, Allen certainly was.”

“And still is!”

They shared a laugh as Susie went to get the cinnamon from Mamma’s spice rack.

“Wouldn’t it take *Schpank* to do what he and Sarah did, goin’ to Missouri?” Britta asked. “Or do ya think that shows more grit?”

“Definitely grit . . . and ambition. It must be awful hard to uproot and start from scratch like they did.”

“Well, I wish they’d stayed here.” Britta momentarily looked sad as she sprinkled cinnamon over her applesauce.

Susie opened the fridge to take out some milk.

“As much as Allen liked Hickory Hollow, I’m still surprised he left.” Britta sighed.

This gave Susie pause. Sometimes she worried her younger sister might decide to leave Hickory Hollow as well, or at least dip her toe into the world during her *Rumschpringe*. After all, she adored books and learning new things. Even so, Britta had never so much as inquired about her biological family and whether or not they were Plain. But there were times when she seemed to be deep in thought, which wondered Susie. Thankfully, the season of running around was still a little more than three years away. Susie comforted herself with that thought.

“Allen was practically a father to me,” Britta said quietly.

No wonder she misses him, Susie thought sadly, remembering that Britta had never had the opportunity to know Dat.

Once again, Susie tried to explain their older brother’s reasoning—his quest for land, and how he’d unsuccessfully searched all over Lancaster County and the surrounding area for a plot large enough to farm and then parcel out to his sons later in life. “Mamma says he’s been teachin’ his youngest children to fish and hunt and gather huckleberries out there, learning nature’s lessons. Sounds like a *wunnerbaar-gut* place to raise a family.”

“Do ya think he misses Hickory Hollow?” Britta stirred her applesauce, which she had yet to taste.

Does he miss us, she means. “Would ya like to write a letter, maybe?”

Britta shook her head. “What I’d like is for them to come back.”

Just then, Susie heard the gentle sound of the wind chime on the back porch. “Allen won’t be doin’ that. He believes he was led to go to Missouri, remember?”

Britta stared at her applesauce, still for a moment. “S’pose I’ll have to ask God ’bout that,” she murmured. “And about a few other things.”

Susie wondered what that meant as she poured fresh goat’s milk into a glass and carried it to the table.

“If I wasn’t adopted, I wonder where my home would’ve been,” Britta said, finally eating now. “I think a lot on this, honestly.”

“Well, if I knew, I’d tell ya.” For whatever reason, her sister seemed to be struggling today.

Britta sat quietly and asked no more questions. The silence felt ever so awkward.

After a time, Susie asked, “Would ya like to go to the farm sale over on Hershey Church Road this Saturday?”

Looking up, Britta nodded. “Hazel wants to go, too, so let’s all go together, if that’s okay.”

“*Wunnerbaar*,” Susie agreed.

“Who knows, maybe Obie will come along,” Britta added, brown eyes alight.

Susie smiled. “I’m sure he’ll attend with his father and brothers, like usual.”



Later that day, while hitching the buggy to Brambles, one of their two dark bay horses, Susie spotted the first robin of the season, hopping in the grassy area near the hitching post. The pretty red-breasted bird chirped merrily as it searched for worms, and Susie wished Mamma were there to see it. *She loves the first sighting of spring*, she thought, though she was pleased Ella Mae had invited Mamma for tea. The elderly woman had a winning way about her, listening without giving advice, unless requested, which drew folk—women especially—to unburden themselves while sipping her famed peppermint tea.

People don’t call her the Wise Woman for nothing, Susie thought as she climbed into the buggy. Picking up the driving lines, she signaled the mare to move toward the road. The horse trotted gracefully, black mane floating up and down with each stride.

Eventually, they came up on Preacher Benuel Zook’s dairy farm, where his wife, Linda, was out pinning quilts to the clothesline for their seasonal airing. As Susie turned into their lane, Linda waved and grinned, her deep dimples appearing.

Opening the carriage window, Susie said, “I brought some freshly made peanut butter spread from Mamma.”

“Well, ain’t that nice.” Linda came over to accept it. “Tell your Mamma I’ll bring her some pickled beets real soon.”

“Oh, she’ll love that.”

Farther up the road, Susie signaled the mare to turn left into David Beiler’s farm, where the district’s covered bench wagon was parked near the house. Inside the wagon, piles of *Ausbund* songbooks were neatly stacked, along with many benches for this Sunday’s Preaching service, as well as plates and utensils for the fellowship meal to follow. David and Mattie Beiler were quite adept at preparing ahead, having hosted church numerous times throughout the years, and they would have plenty of help rearranging the living areas in their home to make room for everyone in their large church district.

Susie parked the carriage close to the *Dawdi Haus* and, looking over, she saw Ella Mae and Mamma walking leisurely toward the back driveway, arm in arm, both wearing gray dresses and black aprons beneath their short black coats. Susie observed the sweet friendship.

Mamma looks fairly well today, she thought, hopping down from the buggy to go and fetch her.

“We’ve had us a real nice visit,” Ella Mae declared, her blue eyes almost shut as she peered into the bright sunshine. “And plenty-a tea.”

With a nod, Mamma glanced at Ella Mae. “She just kept servin’, and I kept drinkin’.”

“We had scones and biscuits with jam and honey, and some with apple butter, too.” Ella Mae winked at Susie. “Tis best to wash all of that down with delicious tea, ya know.”

Susie nodded, delighted to see Ella Mae again. She’d never known the dear woman to be anything but cheerful, and today was no exception. She just wanted to bask in the woman’s presence. But Mamma seemed tired.

“Looks like you’re ready to go,” Susie said to her.

They waved good-bye to Ella Mae, who planted herself at the end of the walkway and smiled sweetly.

“*Gut* visit?” Susie asked her mother as she backed the horse and buggy out of the parking spot to head toward the road.

“Ella Mae has a way of helpin’ me forget myself,” Mamma observed before sighing deeply. When she spoke again, it was soft and wistful. “’Twas just what I needed.”

Susie glanced at her mother, grateful she enjoyed such a friendship.

“By the way, Ella Mae said that Delmar Petersheim’s older sister plans to drop by the shop soon.”

Susie’s ears perked up. “Del, who sometimes worked with Allen before they moved to Missouri?”

“*Jah* . . . from over in Gordonville.”

“Must be his *married* sister Ella Mae was talking ’bout, then.”

“Might be.” Mamma leaned back against the seat. “I don’t keep up with the folk in Gordonville so much.”

Just then Susie remembered her earlier stop at Preacher Zook’s. “Before I forget, Linda Zook seemed mighty happy for the peanut butter spread. Said she’d come with pickled beets sometime for ya.”

“*Ach*, now my mouth’s watering.”

Susie chuckled a little. “Didn’t ya eat your fill at Ella Mae’s?”

“Well, there’s nothin’ quite like Linda’s beets, that’s for sure.” Mamma paused. “Kinda like how Obie talks ’bout your baking, ain’t?”

Susie smiled, hearing Mamma say that. “True, he’s never been shy ’bout compliments when it comes to food.” She hurried the horse.

“Are we in a rush?” Mamma asked.

“Well, chores are waitin’.”

“Aren’t you the Little Red Hen?” Mamma reached over and gave her hand a gentle pat.