



Yesterday's Gone

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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From Cindy:

To my longtime friend Kay, who believed in me before I dared to tell others of my desire to write, passing me novels to read and assuring me I could write one day too if I believed in me as you did. Whether my life is being overly joyous, desperately grievous, or something between, you steady me and encourage me, and I thank you from the depths of my heart.

From Erin:

To my husband, Adam: above all the unexpected and no matter what path life takes us on, I'd choose you in every timeline. And to our baby Iris, our "Penelope," who we lost before birth: our time together was but a breath, but aren't all our lives in comparison with eternity? You matter and exist, and writing this book was part of my promise to you.

A decorative graphic of several grey, teardrop-shaped leaves or petals falling from the top left towards the bottom right, scattered across the upper half of the page.

Chapter One

Sweat rolled down Eliza Bontrager's neck as she carried her youngest sibling on one hip and a plate of sliced bread in her hand. Stale bread, and the last of it. The mountain air hung thick with the familiar July aromas. But was there a hint of stench in the air from the feed mill where *Dat* worked? Surely not. Despite how foul that odor was, it stayed in downtown Calico Creek, rarely meandering this far into the rural part.

"Kumm," Eliza called. *"Es iss Zeit esse."*

The moment she said it was time to eat, excited voices filled their little nook of the Appalachian Mountains. Four children, not looking at all as if she'd hauled water and bathed them last night, scurried to the picnic table. The old wooden benches and marred table wobbled as the little ones clamored

to a spot. Despite grubby hands snatching up bread, she couldn't help but chuckle. They were just too cute.

The little one on her hip squawked, reaching for a piece of bread. She passed him a slice, and he bounced up and down.

Four-year-old John shoved a big bite into his mouth. "*Denki*," he mumbled. Even as he ate, his brown eyes were glued to the remaining three slices of bread, the ones meant for Ruth, Moses, and her, but John stayed so hungry of late, and one slice wasn't likely to fill his stomach.

Eliza did what she could to bring money into their home. Her skill was textiles, mostly weaving fabrics on a small loom from cotton and wool she purchased when she could. She also made quilts and blankets from scraps. But she hadn't been able to purchase threads for the loom in a while, and thick blankets were a hard sell during the dog days of summer. The good news was Dat would be home in a few hours, and today was payday. But without a working flue for the cookstove, they couldn't bake bread, and buying store-bought was out of the question. There was nothing quite as difficult as baking bread using a wood-burning cookstove during the hottest summer months, but it had to be done at least once a week.

She shoed flies away from the bread in the little ones' hands. Most days keeping food on the table was hard work but rarely this difficult. Between the broken flue and Dat's last paycheck being short due to missing more work than he had paid days off, the last week of feeding the family had been more challenging than most.

Cicadas buzzed loudly, a constant song during the hottest months each year. A summer breeze kicked up, and she lifted her head to enjoy it. A familiar screeching sound let her

know someone had opened the screen door. She turned to see her sister Ruth coming outside. Ruth was the smart one, and she currently held the spot of a teacher's assistant at the local Amish school. Unfortunately, it only earned about four thousand per year, which was only three hundred a month. Ruth wouldn't look for anything else because her dream was to become a full-time teacher when she turned eighteen, and her best chance of that was to faithfully stay working as a teacher's assistant. She walked to the picnic table, carrying a pitcher of water and three cups. The little ones always had to share . . . plates, cups, beds, clothes, bathwater, and the few toys they possessed.

"*Gut!*" John clapped. "*Jah?*"

He knew the water would help fill his aching belly. Eliza bent and kissed the top of his head. He was always grateful for every kindness that came his way.

Ruth poured water and passed it out before grabbing a slice of bread. "Where's Moses?"

"He's trying to fix the flue, but something broke, and he said he knew what to do, so he put a bridle on Tank and rode off bareback toward Ebersol land."

"Think he can fix it?"

Moses had a good heart, but he was only thirteen. He needed someone older to help him. Most of the menfolk in these parts were at the plant working or sleeping because they'd worked third shift. It wasn't a very Amish way to make a living—or an uplifting way—but it's what was available.

Eliza shrugged. "I'm equal parts hopeful and doubtful. *Mamm* said we should plan on cooking over a campfire again tonight."

Ruth glanced around. "Where is Mamm?"

"She's in the henhouse, prayerfully looking for enough eggs to make a decent meal with." It was always tough growing a vegetable garden on the ridge, but this summer was the worst. "She got a few ears of corn, some cucumbers, and several tomatoes for tonight's supper."

They might not have their fill, but no one would go to bed fully hungry.

The little ones, all except John, had left the table and were beneath a shade tree, scratching sticks across the soft dirt. Eliza's stomach growled as she handed him her piece of bread.

His brown eyes grew large as he threw his arms around her waist. "*Ich lieb du.*"

"I love you too." She patted his back before he released her.

Three horses with riders topped a nearby hill. One was Moses. She squinted, trying to make out the others.

Jesse.

Her heart crashed against her rib cage, threatening to leap out of her chest.

How had he slipped back into Calico Creek without her knowing? Oftentimes of late he only made it home every three to four months. It took three hours by car to get here to visit. At apprentice pay and with the cost of living elsewhere, he didn't have money to hire a driver to go that distance and back, so he had to wait until someone he knew was coming this way. Her heart raced, and it was hard to breathe.

Moses rode toward the old barn. She recognized Ben, Jesse's cousin, and he followed Moses.

Jesse. He rode tall and powerful in his saddle these days, three years since he'd moved to Hillsdale to work for Frank

Mulligan, a home builder. Jesse was full grown now, twenty-one years old, and dating women in his new Amish community who were fascinating, she was sure. Women who weren't dirt-poor.

Would he forget in a few years that they'd ever been close friends while growing up? Had he even noticed on his visits home that she'd grown up too? She trailed behind him three years, but still, she was grown now.

He rode to the picnic table before stopping. "Ruth." He nodded at her.

Ruth? Why was he addressing her little sister? Eliza's chest burned.

He got off the horse, his eyes meeting Eliza's. "Hi."

Speak, Eliza! You're friends for goodness' sake! But she couldn't find her voice.

He pulled a burlap bag off the side of the horse. "It's two pounds off a smoked ham, a bag of green beans, and half a loaf of Italian bread."

Had his dat been paid in groceries again? Unlike most of the men around here, his dad didn't work at the feed mill. He was a handyman, able to fix almost anything. But it was just as likely that Jesse brought food home to his family and was sharing it with Eliza's family. She wouldn't ask.

He turned to Ruth again and held out the sack. "You need to take it to your mamm to put up."

"Denki." Ruth took the sack and clutched it tight. "I got to say it twice: denki." She smiled at him. "When did you get back?"

That was what Eliza wanted to know. Staying quiet wasn't like her. What was going on?

Jesse's eyes moved back to Eliza. "About twenty minutes ago." He patted his horse. "Levi," he called.

Eliza's eleven-year-old brother hurried to them. Jesse held out the reins. "You know what to do, right?"

Levi frowned, looking as if he'd rather go play. Ruth held up the food. "A tasty, filling dinner. Jesse brought it."

Levi's face lit up. "Uh, jah, I knew about tending to a horse before I's born." Chuckling, Levi took the reins and walked off with the horse.

Jesse had nine younger siblings, including a set of four-year-old twin brothers, and he was comfortable putting any of the older ones to work helping.

"You here for the whole weekend?" Ruth asked.

"I am. Until Monday morning when my boss will pick me up, and I'll return to Hillsdale."

Ruth sent a knowing but wary look Eliza's way. Her sister understood how Eliza felt about Jesse. But Mamm and Dat forbade any romantic notions with the likes of Jesse Ebersol. "Well, gut," Ruth said.

But it seemed to Eliza that when Jesse did come home and they got time to talk, he was most interested in telling Eliza what she needed to do about attending singings and dating. He insisted she do both, and then he'd leave again.

Moses and Ben strode out of the barn.

Moses was carrying a slightly rusty piece of an old flue. "Jesse had this in his smokehouse. Said we could have it."

Eliza nodded, finally finding her tongue. "That's very kind, Jesse. Denki."

"*Nee.*" Jesse shook his head. "It's nothing."

He probably felt that way because he was a giver, but it

wasn't nothing. Every piece of scrap mattered in these parts, whether it was metal, rope, boards, or food. All the Amish around here struggled. No wonder Jesse stayed away. How much more time would pass before he stopped coming to visit like this? The only things the Amish of Calico Creek weren't in short supply of were love and respect for each other, work ethics, and children.

When their Amish ancestors settled in these parts hundreds of years ago, they'd thought the mountains would be good farmland. They were wrong. The valley was some of the best farmland, but the ridges were mostly crop-resistant shale and sandstone.

Hard living aside, Eliza was sure God felt like she did about all the children—that nothing was more important than the joy and hope each child brought to this fallen planet.

“Whew.” Ben made a face as he sniffed the air. “Country fresh air, but you would not believe what it smells like in downtown Calico Creek. Today's a particularly stale one.”

“I thought I smelled the plant a bit ago.”

“I guess it's possible,” Ben said. “Maybe Andrew is right that someone should investigate if this stench is safe to breathe.”

Ruth held the burlap bag against her as if concerned she might lose it. “Since Andrew is the first person I've heard of who seems to think it's a problem, he should be the one to check into it. Who's Andrew?”

Ben removed his straw hat. “You have to know Andrew. He's my best friend. Surely you two have met.”

“Maybe. I don't recall it,” Ruth said.

“He lives in the next district over, like me. I guess maybe

it makes sense that you Calico Creek Ridge Amish don't know all the Calico Creek Glen Amish. Same bishop, but different Amish school, different preachers. Still, how do you not know him? He's our age."

"Ah." Ruth grinned. "So at sixteen years old, he's got lofty, suspicious ideas and nothing he can do with them. It most likely stinks because feed for pigs, poultry, goats, and numerous other animals is being processed and cooked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week at the mill."

Ben shrugged. "Probably so."

Moses held up the old flue segment. "Kumm, let's get this done for Mamm."

Ruth, Moses, and Ben headed for the run-down house. Eliza paused, hoping for a moment with Jesse, hoping he'd tell her something interesting or funny that happened in his world recently. But when she looked into his beautiful greenish-blue eyes, she saw that something was troubling him.

"You're home for a reason," she offered.

He nodded. "Jah." He cleared his throat. "We need to talk, Eliza. Can you find time later today or tonight?"

Her excitement at his being home fled and nausea churned. He'd found someone. She was sure of it, and she didn't want to hear about it. "Just say it, Jesse."

He pulled a flat, round rock from his pant pocket. "Maybe we could walk to the creek after we get the cookstove fixed."

She didn't want to skip rocks as if time with her mattered. Then again . . . why would she refuse them having some fun? Why not make the most of their time? If he'd found someone, this was likely their last romp in the woods. Could

she change his mind? Would she dare even try when he was a fine catch and she was . . . well, nobody?

Besides all of that, they were forbidden. “Tonight, at our old spot by the creek, after my chores are done.”

Jesse shifted, lowering his hand a bit. “Sounds gut.”

Eliza’s heart pounded. She snatched the stone from his palm. “I’ll win.” She tossed it slightly into the air, ready for it to land in her hand.

Jesse reached in and grabbed it before it hit her palm. “Jah?” Smiling, he slid the rock into his pocket.

“Definitely.” Could she win what really mattered? Would she even be able to make herself try?