

BALM *of*
GILEAD

A HEALING GRACE NOVEL

ADINA SENFT



New York Boston Nashville

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CHAPTER 1

An Amish woman's year, Sarah Yoder always thought, was governed not so much by the twelve-month paper calendar on the kitchen wall than by the hand of God. Instead of crossing off squares, a woman lived by the rhythm of the preaching on every other Sunday, and by the cycle of the blossoms and fruit in garden and orchard.

Because of the wet spring and hot summer they'd had this year in Whinburg Township, the gardens had gone crazy—and still were, here at the tail end of September with its chilly nights and crisp blue days. A branch on one of the old Spartans in Jacob and Corinne Yoder's apple orchard had actually broken from the weight of its apples, so the word had gone out and sisters' day had been moved up to deal with the emergency.

Autumn was Sarah's favorite season. Every one held its blessings, it was true—winter for the rest the plants took under their blanket of snow and for the lamplit evenings spent with family and friends when there was no work to be done in the fields, spring for the tender greens and shy flowers and the seeds going into the soil, summer for the long days of growing and canning and putting by. But there was something about autumn that Sarah loved more than any of these.

Maybe it was the sense of the earth giving back all that the work of her hands had put into it. Maybe it was the pantry with its rows and rows of jewel-toned jars full of canned fruit, pickles, and vegetables. Or maybe it was just the quiet in the air now that the fieldwork was coming to a close—air that was still enough that she could smell burning leaves and hear the shouts of the little scholars going into the one-room schoolhouse for their afternoon lessons on the other side of the county road.

Her younger son, Caleb, had had a brief—very brief—moment of nostalgia for those innocent days he'd left behind, earlier at breakfast. As he tucked away ham and eggs and biscuits and strawberry jam, he'd said, "It's hard to believe my scholar days are gone for good, Mamm. I don't even have to keep my work journal anymore. Can I have another piece of ham?"

She'd forked a piece onto his plate and tried not to smile. An eighty-year-old man couldn't have reminisced any better about the days of yore. "Are you looking forward to your first day of work with Jon Hostetler?"

His mouth full, Caleb nodded vigorously. With a mighty swallow, he said, "Daadi Jacob says I'm to keep humble and do as I'm told, and before I know it, I'll be running a work crew and maybe even my own outfit."

Sarah stifled a pang at the thought of how quickly those words came out of a man's mouth. The years would run by just as quickly and her boy, almost fifteen now, would be working and marrying and going to his own home, one he would probably build with his own hands.

Which was just as it should be, if God willed it.

But for now, she would value every moment with him, even the ones where she swore she would wad up the dish-

cloth and stuff it in his mouth to keep him from talking her ear off. There would come a day, she knew, when she would give anything to hear him talking, even if it was about something mystifying, like how he helped Henry Byler over on the next place fire his pieces of pottery in the kiln.

But then, the whole subject of Henry Byler was mystifying, and one best avoided if a woman were to keep peace in her heart.

Her walk across the fields on the path that she, Caleb, and her older son, Simon, had worn into the soil brought her to her in-laws' place for sisters' day. Already she could hear the voices of women raised in encouragement, exclamation, and laughter. Picking up her pace, Sarah cut through the backyard and walked around the laurel hedge into the orchard.

Half a dozen women and a few young men stood on ladders, their dresses and shirts in purple, brick, and green making them look like brightly colored birds in the trees.

"Sarah!" Corinne, her late husband's mother, was filling a basket next to the poor abused Spartan, which thankfully was old enough and low enough that she didn't need to climb up on a ladder. In her early sixties, Corinne still had the sunny smile of a girl as she waved, the breeze catching at her purple dress. "Choose any tree you like. We're determined to lighten the load on the branches by at least half, and make as much applesauce as we possibly can by dinner-time."

"And pie," called Corinne's youngest daughter, Amanda, who at twenty-one was the only child still at home. "Not to mention tarts, strudel, and *Schnitz*."

Yes, Amanda was still at home...but not for lack of

matchmaking attempts by her whole family. Sarah, Corinne, and her other sisters-in-law, Miriam and Barbara, were going to have to put their heads together and see if they couldn't improve their results in that department.

Ja, it was true that God had His plan for Amanda, and He would reveal the special someone He had in mind for her in His own good time. But plans could be helped along, couldn't they? Didn't the Scripture say that all things worked together for good to them that loved God, and were called according to His purpose?

If the Bible said it, then it was so.

"What did you bring?" Corinne called. "Whatever it is, I hope there's lots—this is hungry work."

Sarah lifted the plastic container. "Pumpkin cupcakes with cream cheese frosting."

Amanda whooped. "My favorite!"

"I'll just put them in the house and be right back." It only took a minute to drop the container on the counter with those of the other women, and hurry back out. She chose a tree, and Jake Byler tilted one of the ladders against a thick branch. Sarah picked up a basket and balanced it on one hip as she climbed, then settled to the work of picking.

"This one's full, Jake—take it, please, and hand me up another." With one hand, he passed a basket up to his mother, Barbara Byler, in the next tree while she let down her full one to his shoulder. As her boy loaded it on the children's wagon that was usually hitched to a pony, Barbara smiled through the leaves at Sarah. "I got a letter from Joe this morning—did you get one from Simon?"

"No—what did he say? Are they coming home?" Oh, she hoped so. Her elder boy had left unexpectedly in the spring

to go and work at a dude ranch in Colorado—spreading his wings, as the *Youngie* did during *Rumsprunge*, their season of running around. But no one in Willow Creek had expected him to fly all the way to Colorado, much less take his best friend, Joe Byler, with him. Both of them were steady boys, thoughtful, hardworking. Not the kind who would try something so outlandish, and most especially not against their parents' wishes.

There had been a time or two when Sarah had wondered if she would ever see her boy again. He might be another woman's child, but when she'd married his father, Michael, he had become her own son in every way, so that it hadn't mattered that she hadn't borne him herself. His absence left a void in her heart that only his return would fill.

"They are," Barbara said, a note in her voice telling Sarah that she was *this close* to jumping up and down on her ladder and cheering. "When they went to town to mail the letter, he said they were going to see about the bus schedule, and that would tell them what train to get." She lowered her voice. "I don't mind telling you that I won't feel easy until Joe is back in his own bed and I can see him with my own eyes."

"Do you think they'll stay home now?" Sarah voiced her own thoughts on the matter for the first time. "Do you think this travel bug is out of their systems for good?"

Barbara was about the only person she could ask such a question of, because no one else in Willow Creek had had their sons go much farther than Whinburg or Strasburg. Well, unless you counted Timothy Yost a generation ago, but his father had thrown him out of the house in the middle of such an ugly situation that it had taken both men more than twenty years to be reconciled.

Sarah could safely say that that would never happen between herself and Simon, even though he was a passionate young man who thought and felt much more than he ever said.

“I think Joe is about done with *Rumspringe*,” Barbara told her. “He didn’t come out and say it in a letter, but from a question or two he asked about some of the other young folks, I got the feeling he wants to settle down and start baptism classes.”

“Ah.” Sarah let out a long sigh. “That does sound *gut*. I’m glad to hear it.”

“What about Simon? What does he say?”

“Oh, you know him. If nothing else, at least this summer I’ve found out what kind of a correspondent he is. By which I mean—not a very good one.”

Barbara laughed and let a couple of apples roll into her basket, making a hollow sound on the laths. “That’s a boy for you. Come on. First one to fill her basket gets one of those cupcakes.”

Later that afternoon, in the kitchen, Sarah made sure Barbara got one, because it was a simple fact that her large, square hands were better at coaxing the fruit off their branches than Sarah’s own were. When she came back, she found Miriam, her sister-in-law, leaning against the counter breathing in the scent of the coffee in her cup as though it were the finest perfume.

“*Ischt gut*,” Miriam said, seeing that Sarah had caught her. She offered her the cup. When Sarah looked surprised, she shook her head. “I love the smell of it, but that’s it for me. The doctor says no more than two cups a day. That’s going to mean some big changes.”

“I’d say so. Is it your heart?”

Miriam nodded sadly, watching Sarah pour a little cream into the cup and taste it. “Cut down the coffee and sugar, and eat more vegetables, and this rapid heartbeat problem will look after itself.”

“Would you like me to make you a tea to drink? I have a recipe that calms the body and the mind. I would love it if you’d let me.”

“I can’t put you to that trouble, Sarah.”

But Sarah knew that Miriam would be the first person to put herself to the trouble of helping just about anyone else. “It’s no trouble. You’ve done so much for me and the boys—please let me do this little thing for you.”

After a second’s hesitation, Miriam finally nodded. “I have to be smart about this, don’t I? Mamm’s father and Dat’s mother both died of heart disease, so it’s in the family. But if *der Herr* wills it, then—”

“We wait on His will,” Sarah said softly, “but in the meantime, we’re good stewards of the temples He gave us for His spirit to dwell in. And if the doctor tells you to take care of your heart, then you do that and no fussing.”

Miriam’s smile was real this time. “So bossy.”

“I know.”

They both laughed, and across the room, their mother-in-law, Corinne, looked up, love for the two of them softening her face. Not for the first time, Sarah thanked the *gut Gott* in Heaven for the family to which He’d brought her. Though she’d lost Michael nearly six years ago, his family was her family, as loving and close as if she’d been born to it.

Once again, her mind flew across the creek and over the hill that divided her five acres from the place that now belonged to Henry Byler. Henry, alone on his late aunt’s shabby farm, bravely trying to make a living with his hands and re-

sisting with every cell of his being the call of God to return to the church and community where he belonged.

But she must not think of him. That was Ginny Hochstetler's place now. He had chosen his future when he'd asked Ginny to be his wife, and all the wishing in the world wouldn't unmake that choice.