

✧ AN AMISH BEGINNINGS NOVEL ✧

*The
Return*

SUZANNE
WOODS
FISHER


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Suzanne Woods Fisher, *The Return*
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Most Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To the Benedicts,
my German Baptist family,
who first came to the New World at the invitation
of William Penn and settled in a corner of Penn's Woods.
Benedict means "good word." You're all that and more.



I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement before God.

—Wendell Berry

Cast of Characters

Note to readers: Many of these characters were first introduced in *Anna's Crossing*, and their stories were further explored in *The Newcomer*. Twenty-five years have passed since the little church of Ixheim stepped off the *Charming Nancy* ship in Port Philadelphia and settled into the New World. In *The Return*, you'll meet some new faces and get reacquainted with some familiar ones, though time might have weathered and grayed them a bit.

Tessa Bauer—fifteen-year-old daughter of Anna and Bairn Bauer, their only child.

Anna König Bauer—midforties, wife of Bairn, mother of Tessa. To quote Bairn, “She’s the true minister in the family.”

Bairn Bauer—midforties, minister to the Stoney Ridge Amish church. Husband to Anna, father to Tessa, brother to Felix. Highly skilled carpenter. Considered by many to be too lenient a minister, which suits him just fine.

Felix Bauer—midthirties, Bairn’s younger brother, a

widowed father of twin boys, breeder of horses, a deacon in the Stoney Ridge Amish church. Convinced that Bairn gives him all the worst of the ministry jobs.

Hans Johann Bauer—early twenties, foster brother to Felix and Bairn, raised by their mother, Dorothea. Regarded as a talented blacksmith, one of the most important jobs in colonial America.

Dorothea Bauer—elderly and frail, widowed, mother to Bairn and Felix, foster mother to Hans.

Catrina Müller—midthirties, twice widowed, tutor to Felix's sons.

Maria Müller—elderly, widowed, mother to Catrina. The self-appointed busybody of the church.

Betsy Zook—seventeen years old, a fairly recent immigrant from Germany, lived on the frontier with her family.

Willie and Johnny Zook—Betsy's younger brothers, ages seven and nine, respectively.

Caleb—half-Mennonite, half Indian; his mother had been taken captive by the Indians; he became a slave to a Shawnee tribe.

John Elder—a Scots-Irish Presbyterian minister known as “the fighting parson.” Lives in nearby Paxton.

Faxon Gingerich—German Mennonite neighbor to Bairn and Anna Bauer. Ordered the building of the Conestoga wagon. Tessa calls him Faxon the Saxon.

Martin Gingerich—Faxon's son, seventeen years old, sweet on Tessa. She calls him rumped Martin.

Prologue

Up the Schuylkill River

November 16, 1762

As Betsy climbed up from the creek carrying two buckets of water, she heard the sound of her brothers' laughter, and then a man's deeper laugh. She stopped abruptly to listen, and cold water sloshed out of the buckets, spilling over her feet. She cocked her head, straining to listen; sound traveled downhill. Surely, the voice didn't belong to her father. He'd gone to Germantown early this morning to buy a new horse and wasn't expected until long after dark. And, of course, her father believed laughter and gaiety were the devil's handiwork. She heard the deep laugh again. Then she smiled.

Hans. He had come.

She quickened her step, moving as fast as the two heavy buckets allowed. Hans or no Hans, she had no desire to return to the soggy creek bank because her mother would need more water for the day's chores.

As she climbed the hill, her heart started to race and only partially because of exertion. Hans had *come!* He'd been to

the Zook farm just a fortnight ago. He'd sent a letter to Betsy in the meantime, full of tender words and loving promises.

Six months ago, as her family had boarded that awful ship to sail to the New World, she never imagined that a man like Hans Bauer would be on the other side of the ocean, just waiting to meet her, waiting to fall in love with her. She had dreaded the journey—and it was every bit as horrific as she had heard about and feared and even worse—yet what she hadn't considered was that God's goodness would prevail.

Betsy stopped at the top of the hill to catch her breath. From where she stood on the crest, she could see Hans and her two brothers, Johnny and Willie, toss a pinecone back and forth to each other. Her mother leaned on the doorjamb of the open door to their crudely built log home, watertight for the coming winter but still so raw and unfinished. She was smiling, her mother, and Betsy was touched by the sight. There'd been little to smile over since little Marie had died on the ship. Hans had brought much to Betsy's family—joy, love, hope for the future.

She heard the jingle of a harness and turned to find a peddler and a donkey-pulled cart slowly making their way along the narrow Indian trail. She'd seen this man before. Her mother had bought an iron kettle from him a few weeks back. He waved to her and she set her buckets down. They didn't speak each other's languages, but a smile always worked. She pointed to the bucket of water and cupped her hands, mimicking that he should help himself to a drink.

The peddler eased himself off the cart. "Thank y', lassie. I'm a wee bit parched." He drank and drank, then let his donkey drink from the bucket. *Oh dear. Another trip to the creek.* She glanced down at the farmhouse. Mayhap Hans

would go with her, and they could have time alone, without Johnny and Willie and their silly teasing.

The peddler wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. He peered at Betsy's prayer cap, barely covering her thick blonde hair, then took a few steps to the back of his cart. In it were two old battered trunks, tied with rope. He undid one knot and lifted the lid, rummaged through the trunk, all the while mumbling to himself. With an "Aha!" he found what he was looking for. He spun around and reached an open palm out to Betsy. In his hand was a hair clip. "A bonny lass deserves somethin' pretty."

She shouldn't accept such a fancy thing. Her father would be furious if he knew she took a gift from a peddler—even Hans would frown. But the clip was lovely, and it would be a sweet surprise for her mother on this beautiful autumn day while her father was away in Germantown. A secret between them to remind each other that it was always darkest just before dawn.

She reached out and took the clip from the peddler. "Denki," she said, and gave him a smile. "Viel denki." *Many thanks.*

He smiled, pleased, and re-tied the rope on the old trunk before climbing back on his cart. Clucking to his donkey, he went along his way. Betsy tucked the hair clip in her prayer cap, a hidden touch of fancy, and saw something off in the distance. Her skin prickled. A man, an Indian, was watching her from the far edges of the forest. She froze, held her breath. When she looked again, he had disappeared. Here and then gone.

Were the tree shadows playing tricks on her? Her brothers claimed they were always seeing Indians. Pure foolishness, their father insisted. She heard the fading jingles from

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the donkey's harness. Surely a peddler wouldn't be casually making his rounds if he'd heard word of restless warriors, and he'd be the first to hear. She shook off her dread. There was nothing to fear! She picked up the buckets and hurried down the hill to greet Hans.

1



Beacon Hollow
Lancaster County, Pennsylvania
April 20, 1763

Tessa Bauer stopped in her tracks when she heard the horse's huffing sound. Moving slowly, she hid behind a large tree and watched the stallion slide gracefully through the forest. It was the fifth time she'd seen the legendary horse. The phantom stallion, he was called. No one believed she'd actually ever seen him, no one except Felix, who believed everything she told him. He was sweet like that, her uncle Felix.

She'd grown up hearing all kinds of tales and rumors about this magnificent horse. The story had spun that he was a spirited Flemish stallion brought to Pennsylvania shortly after William Penn's arrival. The horse was meant for the Penn stables, but as the stallion was brought ashore, he managed to break loose and vanish into the deep wilderness. Over the years, rumors of sightings floated from Philadelphia to Lancaster Town, and greedy men would rally together to attempt a capture. All efforts proved futile, of course, because this was no ordinary horse and they were quite ordinary men.

And then five years ago, in late spring, a wild horse broke down Felix's pasture fence to mate with his broodmares just as they came into season. Felix was outraged at the intrusion and rebuilt the pasture into a near-fortress. Alas! Too late. The broodmares had been compromised.

Eleven months later, Felix was grinning ear to ear. There was no doubt in his mind, nor in Tessa's, that the newborn foals had been sired by the mighty and mysterious stallion. Even at birth, the foals were enormous. As quickly as Felix could, before his mares went into season, he lowered the pasture railing and prayed the stallion would return.

And so he did. For the last five springs, in the cover of night, the stallion returned to Felix's broodmare pasture. Felix had never seen him, not once, not like Tessa. He had tried—once he had accompanied Tessa into the woods to look for him. To wait and watch, but he wasn't patient, her uncle Felix, and stallion hunting required patience. The first time Felix's stomach rumbled for dinner, he gave up and set out for home. But he was grateful to the Flemish stallion, or more likely its son or grandson—whichever one it was that paid calls on his beguiling broodmares. He prayed it would continue. He dubbed this new breed of horses the Conestoga horse, named for the valley the wild stallion roamed.

Tessa stilled. She heard crunching. Slowly, so slowly, she peeked her head around the tree and saw the stallion had discovered the carrots she had left him, dug out of a storage barrel from her family's root cellar.

Oh my. He was a stunning animal, truly breathtaking.

If she reached out a hand, she could touch him, stroke his glossy black coat. He must know she was close by. His ability to smell her, to sense her nearness . . . he must know.

Dare she try? She leaned forward, reaching a hand out, when suddenly an eagle let out a shriek overhead and the wild horse startled, then bolted. He stopped, turned, and looked at Tessa—right at her, as if he recognized her!—before he trotted away and disappeared into the dense woods.

Wait, just wait, until Tessa told Uncle Felix the news. Spring had come, the wild stallion had returned. And she had made some headway in drawing close to him, at least enough headway that he looked less as if he was preparing to bolt. That was an improvement from last year's brief and unsuccessful encounters.

She hurried through the woods to get home. In one large jump, her long legs crested the rushing creek that ribboned her family's farm. As she climbed up the creek bank, she felt a rare, fleeting moment of gratefulness to have inherited her father's height. Bairn Bauer stood six foot six inches, and Tessa, at age fifteen, was five foot ten inches tall and still growing. But the moment of gratitude faded as suddenly as it had come, just as it always did. She hated towering over others, especially men and boys.

As she passed the sheep's pond, she slowed to a stop and bent over to study her reflection in the still water. The face she saw there was disappointing. A high forehead, short nose, cheeks sprinkled with freckles, deep-set eyes, a too-wide mouth. So plain, so very plain. Too plain to attract a man's notice, especially a man like Hans, who had won her heart over, for he was her hero.

Hans Bauer was a foster brother to Tessa's father, Bairn, and to her uncle Felix. He had been raised from birth by Tessa's grandmother, Dorothea, and shared her interest in horses. He was the blacksmith for the church, as well as many

farming neighbors, as his skills at the forge were unsurpassed. Best of all, he was slightly taller than Tessa and handsome—more handsome than any man in Pennsylvania bar none—with a chiseled face, snapping brown eyes, a splendid chin, and wavy auburn hair that fell to his shoulders. Handsome Hans. She knew that giving such significance to a person’s physical beauty was the way of the world and not *their* way, not the way of the straight and narrow, but she couldn’t help herself. Tessa could never remember a time when her heart wasn’t utterly devoted to Hans.

Sadly, he hardly noticed her.

She looked again at her reflection in the sheep pond. So grave, so serious. Perhaps if she smiled more. Her mother often said that a woman’s beauty rested in her smile. She practiced a few smiles and thought she looked rather ridiculous. She could hear her mother’s voice as clearly as if she were seated beside her: “Tessa, beauty is of very small consequence compared with good principles, good feelings, and good understanding.”

Tommyrot. Beauty was beauty.

She jumped to her feet and ran toward Beacon Hollow, her home. As soon as she reached the lane that led to the large stone house, she slowed. There was Faxon Gingerich, their Mennonite neighbor across the way, bearing down on her atop his plow horse. Faxon the Saxon, she called him, though not in shot of his hearing. Beside him was his son, Martin, whom Tessa considered to be a boy of low character. She hadn’t seen Martin in months and months, which suited her nicely. They were nearly the same age; he was a year or two older, though she was always head and shoulders taller than him. Tessa’s father, who disliked farming but

loved carpentry, had hired Martin for the past few autumns to harvest the corn. The first year Martin was hired on, he started a vicious rumor that giants ran in Tessa's family, and given that she was a tiny bit sensitive about her height, she still hadn't forgiven him.

They halted their horses when they met up with her; she stood before them with her hands linked behind her back. Faxon the Saxon barely acknowledged her, but she expected as much. She was young, she was female, and she was not Mennonite. Three strikes, to his way of thinking. His gaze swept over the large yard, from the carpentry shop over to the sawmill down by the creek, seeking out evidence of her father's presence.

Martin sat awkwardly on his horse, his ill-fitting clothes dangling on him as if he hung on a hook. His pants were too short and his coatsleeves were too long. He wore no hat and his hair was unruly and wind-tossed, flying off in all directions. He was a rumpled mess. Rumpled Martin.

"Is he in the shop?" Faxon Gingerich said, not bothering to look at Tessa as he spoke.

"No. My father hasn't returned from the frontier yet," Tessa said. "My mother's expecting him back any day."

After bishop Jacob Hertzler had been injured in a fall two years ago—the only Amish bishop in all the New World—her father had traveled by horseback to the frontier twice a year to act on his behalf: marrying, burying, baptizing. The trip usually took him two weeks, but he'd been gone for three.

Faxon's glance shifted to the stone house before resting on Tessa, the wind tugging at his beard. "Do you know which direction your father headed?"

"Up the Schuylkill River."

Faxon stared at her, his face settling into deep lines.

Tessa felt the first ominous tickle start up her spine. “Have you news? Has something happened?”

Faxon’s bushy eyebrows promptly descended in a frown, no doubt thinking she didn’t know her place. It was a common complaint fired at Tessa. Who did she think she was, asking bold questions of an elder?

Worried about her father, that’s what she was. Tessa stared back at him, her head held high, erect. “Is my father in danger?” Tessa looked from Faxon the Saxon to rumpled Martin and caught their concern. Something *had* happened.

Faxon ignored her question. “Where’s your mother?”

“She’s gone to a neighbor’s to take a meal. They had a new baby. You know how she loves babies.” Everybody knew that, everybody except for Faxon the Saxon. He wouldn’t know that about Anna Bauer because he wouldn’t care. He did not hold much regard for any Amish person apart from Bairn Bauer, for whom he had a grudging admiration.

Faxon swung a leg over his horse to dismount. “Has he made progress on the wagon?”

“Some. It’s not finished though.”

He stood, feet planted, and she knew exactly what he wanted. To see the wagon. Faxon Gingerich had come to her father last summer with a request for him to build a better hauling wagon. Faxon made frequent trips to Philadelphia to sell and trade products and was fed up with wagon wheels stuck in mud. The provincial government was abysmally slow to cobble roads, so he had decided there must be a better design for a wagon. He just couldn’t figure one out.

Tessa wasn’t sure her father would want her to show the unfinished project, but she was proud of his ingenuity, and

she could tell Faxon would not be dissuaded from seeing it. “I’ll show it to you if you like. I’ll try to explain the design.”

Rumpled Martin jumped off his horse, and she was startled to see that they were now about the same height. He noticed that she had noticed and gave her a big goofy grin. Appalling.

She led the way to her father’s carpentry shop in silence. Hand tools hung neatly along the walls, but most of the shop was taken up with the enormous wooden wagon, eighteen feet from stern to bow. She opened the door and held it for Faxon, enjoying the sight of seeing his bearded jaw drop so low it hit his chest. It was not a common sight to see Faxon the Saxon look nonplussed, and Tessa relished the moment. Savored it.

She inhaled the scent of wood shavings, linseed oil, and wax. Smells associated with her father. Worry circled her mind like bees around flowers. Where *was* he?

Faxon’s gaze roamed slowly over the wagon; he peered into it, then below it. Its base sat on wooden blocks, as her father hadn’t made wheels yet. “A rounded base? What could he be thinking?”

He had immediately honed in on the most noteworthy improvement that Tessa’s father had made—the one that set it apart from all other wagons. “It’s like the keel of a ship. My father used to be a sailor. He said that the curved bottom would keep barrels and goods from shifting and tipping and rolling around.”

“If he can pull that off, it will be a miracle,” Faxon muttered. He and his awful son walked around the wagon, crawled under it, bent low to examine each part of it, murmuring to each other in maddeningly low voices.

“My father said this wagon will be able to haul as much as six tons of freight.”

Faxon Gingerich shot up from a bent position so fast that his long, wiry beard bounced against his round belly. “*How much?*”

“Six tons. Assuming, of course, that you’ve plenty of horsepower to pull that kind of weight.”

With that piece of information, everything changed. Faxon’s countenance lightened, he continued inspecting the wagon but without the constant frown.

“It’s not meant for people to ride in it,” Tessa said. “Strictly a freight wagon. The teamster walks along the left side.”

The frown was back. “No place for a teamster to sit?”

“There’s a board for him to sit if he grows weary.” Tessa bent down and slid out a wooden board.

“How many oxen would be needed to pull six tons of freight?”

“Quite a few. At least six.”

Faxon’s forehead puckered.

“Or horses could be used too.”

“Not possible,” Faxon said. “They’re not strong enough. Has to be oxen.”

“My uncle Felix has bred a type of horse that can pull the kind of heavy freight that the Conestoga wagon can carry.”

Now Faxon’s bushy eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “The Conestoga wagon?”

“That’s what my father calls it. To honor your valley. He said you gave him the idea for it. Credit goes to you.”

Faxon the Saxon’s chest puffed out and he very nearly smiled. It often puzzled Tessa how personal significance was needed for men to see things clearly. Their secret pride.

“Looks nearly finished to me. Just missing wheels.”

“Wheels, yes, but there’s still quite a bit of hardware to be made,” Tessa said. “Plus pitch will be needed make the seams watertight. And my mother and Maria Müller will sew canvas cloth to cover the wagon bows, front to back.”

Rumpled Martin regarded her thoughtfully. “You seem to know a lot about it.”

Sarcasm. He may be taller now but he was just as rude. She ignored him and spoke only to his father. “You can find out more about it after my father returns.”

Faxon’s pleased look instantly faded. He exchanged a look with rumpled Martin, whose misgiving showed plain on his face. A dark cloud descended in the carpentry shop. Something *had* happened along the frontier. “Tell me what’s happened.”

Faxon’s face flattened and he went stone still for a full minute. “Trouble has come to our brethren in the north. There’s been another Indian attack on families who settled along the Schuylkill River.”

Tessa felt an unsettling weakness in the base of her stomach. These stories had become too common. “Did you recognize any names?”

“Just one. Zook. William and Martha Zook. The parents were found dead, the children were taken captive.”

Tessa’s heart started to pound. “Betsy Zook?”

“A girl said to be about your age. Smaller than you, though.” His eyes skimmed her from head to toe. “Much, much shorter. Blonde hair.”

Tessa gave a slight jerk of her chin. *That’s her, that’s Betsy.* The Zooks had immigrated to Berks County from Germany just about a year and a half ago. Tessa had met Betsy when the Amish churches gathered for spring and fall communion.

Betsy was a beautiful girl, beloved by all, kind to the core. Tessa disliked her.

Betsy was everything Tessa wasn't. She was petite while Tessa was tall. She was curvy while Tessa was a table—flat with long thin arms and legs. She was perpetually kind while Tessa had touchy feelings.

But Tessa's dislike had nothing to do with Betsy. It had to do with Hans Bauer. From the moment they met, Hans fancied Betsy Zook.

A sick feeling roiled in Tessa's middle. So often, she had wished Betsy's family would just move away, go west. Go east. Go somewhere. She had even prayed for it! Especially so, after she learned that Hans had gone to visit Betsy, numerous times.

But she had never wished for Betsy to be a victim of an Indian attack, to be taken captive.

Faxon Gingerich swept a glance over the large stone house her father had built, strong and sturdy. "Your father did well to bring you all down here, so many years ago, although your grandfather wanted to stay north. The frontier has become a devil's playground."

Faxon and Martin walked back to the horses and mounted them.

"I will pray your father returns safely and soundly," Faxon said, before turning his horse around and starting down the lane.

"Don't worry, Tessa," rumbled Martin said. "I'm sure he'll be home soon." He gave her a reassuring smile before cantering off to join his father.

Until that moment, it had never occurred to Tessa that her father might not return at all.



Lancaster Town, Pennsylvania

The news of the Indian attacks had spread all over Lancaster Town. Felix Bauer had finished his business at the trading post, pleased that he had been able to trade his brother Hans's newly forged iron tools for a winter's pile of skins from Will Sock, a Conestoga Indian. He could use those skins to make harnesses for this new breed of horses. The size of that young colt in his pasture—sixteen hands? Seventeen? And still growing. It was a freak of nature.

And that put it right up Felix's alley. He was fascinated by anything and everything that jolted a person's staid expectations. Just last month, he'd found a three-legged bear hiding in a cave. Most folks would have turned tail and run, but not Felix Bauer. He set a trap, caught the three-legged bear, brought it to a frolic to show everyone because there was often doubt and speculation about his weird sightings, rumors to squelch that he was prone to exaggeration. Then he carried it, caged, in a wagon up into the mountains and let it go. Hans said he was crazy. He should've shot the three-legged bear for its pelt, but Felix saw it differently. He'd thought the bear'd had a hard enough life, and if it could survive on three legs, it deserved a chance to live.

Anyway, there Felix was, pleased as could be over his last trade of the day, ready to head home with a wagon full of deerskins, but he couldn't find Hans, which meant he couldn't find his nine-year-old twin boys, either. They followed Hans like two puppies, but Felix wasn't confident of his ability to mind children. A few weeks ago, after the last visit to Lancaster Town, he found the three of them in the front of a

crowd, examining the heads of two renegade Indians stuck on a pole. It was not uncommon to display gruesome sights in the center of town to warn others of misdeeds, but Felix couldn't believe that Hans would allow his boys to gawk at two human heads, so recently killed.

Felix heard the boys before he saw them. Rifle shots, then a loud cheer. He shook his head. Hans must be involved in a shooting match.

Shooting matches were often held for a prize: a fat turkey, a jug of whisky, or a rifle. The target was usually the fairly large head of a handmade nail, and the range was about sixty yards. There were tales of men who could hit the nail head squarely with two bullets out of three. It dawned on him that was probably where the expression came from: to hit the nail on the head.

Well, Felix sighed, at least he knew where they were.

He stopped at the town well to fill a water bucket for his horse and listened to the excited talk about a recent Indian attack coming from a clump of men.

Felix drew water up from the well and filled his bucket. Half listening, half preoccupied with how hungry he was—the scent of baking bread floated over from a nearby oven—and then he wondered if he should buy the boys something to eat now or wait until they reached home. These Indian attacks were usually half rumor, half truth, and he didn't want to bother ferreting out the difference.

All eyes were fixed on one man who seemed to be the source of information, a stout fellow with a head too small for his round middle. "On Monday," this news bearer said, "an unsuspecting farmer was tomahawked right in his cornfield. It was a warning sign, so the neighbors all forted to-

gether. They figured they'd be safer that way, but it must have acted like a honey pot for the Indians. Back they came in the dead of night. They surrounded the farmhouse, howling their eerie death halloos."

The gathered men exchanged anxious looks. The death halloo was a horrifying shriek, a sound that filled the air and lingered. It was the sound made by a warrior, a scalp yell, after killing his victim.

"Where'd you hear this?" one fellow asked.

"I just come from there. One boy escaped the raid by hiding in a hollow tree. He waited in the tree until daybreak until he was sure no Indian was left. Then he ran for help." The news bearer shook his head. "Poor little bugger. Only six or seven years old and he saw his parents killed. He said his brother and sister were taken away."

Felix winced at the news. It was a troubling time for the frontier settlers, stirred up by seven years of war between the French and the British. Indian attacks came unexpectedly and created great fear among the vulnerable farming families. The raids were increasing as squatters moved onto Indian hunting grounds—land reserved for their use by William Penn himself—yet the squatters refused to leave. In retaliation, the Indians burned houses, brutally killed men, women, and children, scalping them, leaving their bodies for wild animals to feast on.

Felix pushed himself into the circle of men. "Where did this happen?"

"Up the Schuylkill River."

A chill danced up his spine. That's where his brother Bairn had been traveling. Felix was suddenly aware that his two boys had eased up beside him. From the corner of his eye, he saw Hans slip next to him, a questioning look on his face.

“What’s happened, Felix?” Hans said.

Felix glanced at his sons. Switching from their dialect to English so his sons would not understand, he said, “There was another Indian attack up north.”

“Anywhere close to where Bairn went?” Hans asked.

Felix looked into Hans’s face and saw that he was as shocked as he was by the gravity of the situation. He gave a brief nod and turned to the news bearer. “Do you know any names of the families? Or what church they were part of?”

“No. All I know is it was their own fault. They were pacifists. Pathetic.” The news bearer appraised Felix’s garb curiously, his large-brimmed felt hat, his handwoven brown overcoat, his moustacheless beard, and realized he must be one of those pathetic pacifists. “They wouldn’t fight back. Just stayed frightened to death in their house until the savages put them to death and stole their children. It’s their own fault.”

Felix reached for his sons’ hands and gripped them tightly, as if he could protect them from all the troubles of the world.

Hans jabbed him in the ribs with his elbow. “This is just what John Elder warns us about, Felix.”

Felix didn’t raise his head to look at Hans. John Elder, a neighbor in nearby Paxton, was a Scots-Irish preacher known as the Fighting Parson because he kept a rifle in his pulpit and encouraged his parishioners to bring their rifles to church. John Elder was an avowed Indian hater and stirred up trouble even when there was none. Felix considered John Elder to be a fool; Hans considered him a prophet.

The news bearer opened his saddlebag and pulled out a large family Bible, a Froschauer Bible. He held it out to Felix. “You’re one of ’em, ain’t you? I found it in the cellar.”

“You were looting?” Hans said, bitterness in his voice. “Plundering the homes of those poor beleaguered people?”

The man scowled. “I was burying the dead.”

And afterward, Felix thought, helped himself to what was left from the raid.

“Take it. I don’t want it. It’s giving me nothin’ but bad luck.”

“You stole a Bible,” Hans said. “The most cherished possession a family had in their keeping. They brought it all the way over from Europe. And you stole it.”

“You’d rather it be left for the Indians to desecrate?” The stout man jammed it in Hans’s hands. “I don’t want it. I can’t understand a word in it. Take it.”

Still gripping his boys’ hands, Felix started toward the horse and wagon. After the boys scrambled in the back and found a spot to settle on top of the skins, he untied the reins, expecting Hans to have already climbed on the wagon seat. But Hans hadn’t budged from the water well.

Felix retied the reins to the hitching post and walked over to him. “We’d best get home.”

Hans looked as if he’d been struck by lightning. “I know this Bible. I’ve held this Bible in my hands. I’ve heard Betsy’s father read from it.”

“It can’t be, Hans. Bibles look alike.” Felix took it out of Hans’s hands and opened it to the center. There was the family history, recorded in a spidery handwriting. He ran a finger down the page until he came to Betsy Zook’s name, entered on the day of her birth: *Elizabeth Ann Zook, b. July 28, 1746.*

Hans saw it, bent over, and wretched, right on the well.