

Chapter One

“Thank you very much.”

Alice was standing beside the bed when her aunt Polly reached a trembling hand out from underneath the leopard-print bedspread (Polly *loved* leopard print) and pulled the girl close to whisper in her ear.

“Thank you very much.”

They would be the last words Polly Portman, the Pie Queen of Ipswitch, ever spoke.

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Polly Portman was a natural born pie maker. When she was little, even her mud pies were a cut above what anyone else in the sandbox was doing. Recognizing her talent, Polly’s mother, Hester Portman, bought her daughter a little wooden rolling pin, set her on a tall red kitchen stool, and taught her how to roll out her first piecrust.

As Polly grew, so did her pie-making skills. She learned that scalding milk before adding eggs would ensure a custard as smooth as silk and that whipped cream should be whisked just shy of the point where it would turn to butter. She became an expert at cutting narrow strips of pie dough and weaving them into lattice crusts and discovered that if she raised the oven rack a notch when baking a meringue, the peaks would turn the color of toasted marshmallow. When Polly grew tired of the recipes in her mother's cookbooks, she began to make up recipes of her own, learning to trust her instincts and *listen* to the ingredients. She could pinch a blueberry, sniff a peach, or take a bite of an apple and know exactly how much sugar to use and whether a grating of fresh nutmeg, a squirt of lemon juice, or a dash of salt would enhance the flavor of the fruit. Polly had a gift for baking pies, and she poured her heart and soul into every one she made.

Anyone who tasted one of her pies always said the same thing—"You ought to open up your own shop, Polly!" So when her parents passed away, leaving everything they had to Polly and her younger sister, Ruth, Polly set aside half of her inheritance to live on, and the other half she invested in a dilapidated old storefront on the corner of Windham and Main in downtown Ipswitch, Pennsylvania.

Almost as handy with a hammer as she was with a rolling pin, Polly converted the upstairs into a cozy little apartment. Downstairs she built the pie shop she had always dreamed of