

THE  
LAST BRIDE



BEVERLY  
LEWIS



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To Debra,  
delightful friend  
and former marketing manager.  
New blessings ahead!

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## Prologue

I did everything right. *Everything.*

I faithfully attended baptismal classes and listened carefully to Preacher Yoder's instruction last summer. I bowed my knee to God this past Sunday morning and received holy baptism at the Hickory Hollow church. Then and there, I vowed to follow the rules of the *Ordnung* all the days of my life.

All of that, and yet I suddenly found myself in this terrible pickle and hurrying to meet up with Marcus King tonight . . . with such *miseraawel* news. I recalled my father's response to discovering my long-standing courtship with Marcus. "*He just ain't the man for ya!*" he'd said decisively, his expression ever so stern. "*You need to trust me on this, Tessie Ann.*"

My bare feet fairly flew across *Dat's* grazing land, since I didn't dare be seen, 'specially this late on a weeknight. It would reflect poorly on my honorable beau. Even so, I knew from his letter he was impatient to see me, to tell *me* something,

too—unwilling to wait till the weekend, like most Amish courting couples.

Oh, such urgency. What was on *his* mind?

In the midst of my sadness, I couldn't help noticing the orange-red harvest moon, its delicate light a balm for my troubled soul. *Dearest Marcus, if I didn't love you so, this wouldn't be so awful hard!*

Determined, I ran silently, darting in and out of the birch grove at the far end of the meadow, where I sometimes went to pray. Yet never a prayer like this one: *Lord God in heaven, are You there? Do You see my breaking heart?*



When I arrived at the spot just off the road, near the one-room schoolhouse, Marcus opened his strong arms and I ran straight into them. He held me near, then lifted me into his courting carriage, getting me settled beneath his lap robe. His long blond bangs ruffled beneath his straw hat as he darted around to the driver's side and leaped into the seat. "Tessie Ann, wait'll ya hear what I have to tell ya."

"Jah?"

"I've found us a place to live once we're married—gonna sign the lease this coming Monday."

I sighed. He sounded so pleased; I couldn't bear to put a damper on his plans.

"And . . . I've had lots more hours workin' in the vineyard out yonder, so I'll have plenty to support a bride." He smiled wistfully. "Won't be long now till wedding season, love."

I held my breath. He sounded so confident, and before I

could say more, Marcus clicked his tongue to signal Prince, his beautiful black road horse, to move forward. That quick, Marcus slipped his arm around me, drawing me closer. “I’ve been prayin’ about this step for us, and with late November little more than two months away, I have plenty to do to get ready.”

I listened, heart pounding in my ears.

“I want to make a nice home for ya, Tessie. Can’t be too careful ’bout such important things, ya know.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. But now was the time to open my mouth. “*Ach*, but we can’t wed, Marcus.”

“Wha-at?” His handsome face was marred by a sudden frown.

“I guess I should say, *I can’t*.”

Stricken, he looked at me, straight through to my soul. “What’re ya sayin’, honey? I thought—”

“*I do* want to marry you.” I bowed my head. “Ain’t that.”

There was a dreadful pause, awkward and long, like he somehow guessed at my father’s harsh words before I could even speak them. Dat disapproved of Marcus for me. Not only him, but *Mamma* did, too. And none of it made a whit of sense, since I’d never known my parents to hold a grudge or show narrow-mindedness toward anyone. Why they didn’t welcome my hopes for Marcus was beyond me.

“My father forbids us to wed,” I said, my throat tight and hoarse.

When Marcus spoke at last, it was so soft I wasn’t sure I’d heard him right. “Your father’s still got his heart set on another fella for ya, is it?”

Honestly, I didn’t care one bit for my father’s choice. Unlike

my sister Mandy, I was determined to make my own decision about a husband.

“I really hope you’re not sayin’ we can’t make up our own minds, with God’s help.”

“I’m just tellin’ you my parents are sorely against it, even though I’ve prayed up a storm.”

He pondered that for a time. Then, “Maybe I should go an’ speak directly to your father.”

“Won’t help none, believe me.”

He slowed the horse. “We know this is the right thing for us. After all, we’ve looked ahead to this day for nigh unto three years.”

“Jah, ’tis.” My heart sank, hearing the twinge of pain in his voice, a pain that matched my own. Ach, how I’d pleaded with God to let us marry!

“I’ll win your father over in due time.” He paused, his right hand gripping the reins. “But I don’t think we need to wait to wed.”

“I don’t understand.”

He drew in a slow breath. “We’ll elope if need be.”

“Run away?”

Marcus nodded firmly. “The only way I can see. That way, your father will have no other choice but to accept our marriage.”

*The only way.* His words slammed into my heart. I yearned to be united with Marcus as his bride, and I’d been taught not to squabble with the men in my life. Even so, wouldn’t I feel cheated out of a wonderful-*gut* Amish wedding—a *real* one?

Tears sprang to my eyes. Oh, I loved him so . . . but to give up saying our sacred vows before almighty God and the People?



“You know you mean everything to me, Tessie Ann Miller. Don’t ya?” Marcus’s blue eyes played havoc with my emotions. “We can’t let anything stop us.”

We’d waited such a long time, or so it seemed. We’d first fallen for each other at sixteen, at the start of our *Rumschpringe*—the running-around years in Hickory Hollow. And we were both church members, too, baptized in anticipation of our wedding day.

“Next week we could get our marriage license at the Chester County courthouse. That way we’ll keep it secret, since it won’t appear in the Lancaster paper, ya know.”

“But we ought to honor my parents, ain’t so? According to Scripture.”

His eyes probed mine, searching . . . his gaze caressing me. “Sweetheart, the Good Lord put us together. I believe that. We’re the ones makin’ our way in life now, don’t ya see?”

I breathed in a mere half breath. It was all I could manage. “Are ya mighty sure ’tis the right thing, love? Under *Gott*?”

He pulled me even closer to him there in the open buggy. My face pressed hard against his shirt, and while we hadn’t let ourselves share a kiss just yet, it took all my determination not to let him. “*Wouldn’t ever wanna spoil things,*” Marcus often said, so I turned my head, denying our affection till it was safe. And right.

“Marcus,” I whispered, ever so torn. Such a thorny spot to be in, but we were in it together, and somehow that made it more bearable.

“I think I should at least try to get your father’s blessing.” Marcus flashed his winning smile. “I’ll go tomorrow morning.”

I bobbed my head, but my toes curled inside my shoes.

Truth was, Dat would never change his mind—I knew him. And come morning, Marcus would regrettably experience the selfsame sorrow I carried now. Still, he could try. I surely wouldn't stop him.

In the end it all boiled down to my decision, and that alone. Would I respect my father's unwavering will or yield to my beau's steadfast love?

# Chapter 1



**T**essie Miller would be the first to admit that living at home these days was not nearly as much fun as it used to be. Not since her older sisters—Miriam, Molly, Marta, and Mandy—all married and started families of their own. Their staunch and opinionated father, Ammon Miller, often commented that the evenings had grown quieter and more manageable with the nest nearly empty. All the furtive whispering had nearly vanished, as well as Tessie’s sisters’ hushed urgings to follow in their matrimonial footsteps right quick, “*before all the best fellas get hitched!*”

Her father, on the other hand, wasn’t too talkative on the subject of Tessie’s marriage, even though for the longest time he’d had his eye on the Smuckers’ only son, just down Hickory Lane. As a serious church member and an assistant chief for a volunteer fire department, Levi possessed every desirable attribute, and his family was highly regarded in the Lancaster County Plain community.

Presently, Tessie sighed as she scattered feed for the chickens Saturday morning, startling when two of the more feisty ones—Obadiah and Strawberry—flew up too close to her head. She'd insisted on naming them, though her father disapproved of assigning names to animals that were destined for the dinner table. Three other rambunctious chickens began pecking at one another, vying for the desired feed. But Tessie's mind was scarcely on the chickens. Truth be told, Tessie knew she'd break her mother's heart if she eloped with Marcus or any man. Even so, she let her beau's words filter through her mind. While she was willing to embrace his thinking, she wished they could wait to earn her father's favor.

She finished feeding the chickens and went to the barn to check on water for a handful of goats. Tessie still terribly missed the farm where she'd grown up, just two farms away. Oh, the beloved tall, redbrick farmhouse where she and her sisters had learned to follow God's commandments while cooking and helping their mother to clean, sew, and make all kinds of jam. They'd learned to recite the Lord's Prayer in German on the sweeping back porch after eating homemade ice cream on sultry summer evenings. And how could she ever forget the wonderful old two-story barn where leisurely Sunday afternoons were spent swinging on the long rope in the haymow?

But all of that had changed when her sister Mandy married Sylvan Yoder, who promptly took over Dat's steer-raising business. The newlyweds had moved into the coveted old house, kept pristine and in the family for four generations.

Oddly enough, Dat had not waited for Tessie to marry—saving the farm for the youngest son or son-in-law was more typical of Amish families. Why Dat had overlooked her, Tessie

still did not know. She had her assumptions, though, and one was that Mandy had been greatly rewarded for yielding to Dat's wishes, marrying the man he'd practically handpicked for her. "Sylvan's like a real son," Mamma qualified once when Tessie timidly inquired as they snapped sugar peas. Tessie had tried not to feel slighted that her father had pushed ahead and not waited till *her* future husband had the opportunity to accept or reject such a wonderful-good offer. But it miffed her more than she cared to admit.

Wiping her hands on her black apron, Tessie made her way back outside to the picturesque potting shed not far from the one and only *Dawdi Haus*, where her widowed grandfather lived. The little shed needed a bit of redding up before the cold weather snuck up on them here before long. As she often did, she glanced wistfully across the expansive back lawn near the well pump to survey the house's southern elevation, where verdant vines still scaled the wall. It was much smaller, this house they'd lived in for two years. And merely a house, in her humble opinion. A home was the treasured place where you made family memories retained for always.

The former family home had many more charms. One in particular was the large oak tree that shaded the back porch, with its immense low branches strong enough for a person to climb up to perch and ponder there, something Tessie had been known to do more frequently than Mamma thought necessary.

The trees here weren't nearly as ancient, nor as sturdy, so Tessie occasionally snuck over to Sylvan and Mandy's to sit in her favorite tree. Well, *theirs*.

She looked now at the pebbled walkway near the potting shed that led over to the woodshed and Mamma's tiered flower

gardens, actually kept up by Tessie more than Mamma this past summer. The same path meandered back out to the small horse stable, where they sheltered two chestnut-colored driving horses, Agnes and Bonnie. More like beloved pets, the mares were gentle in spirit and nimble as the wind. Tessie was tempted, at times, to take Agnes out riding, but she couldn't abide her father's certain rebuke, so she avoided riding bare-back altogether.

When she'd finished sweeping out the potting shed, Tessie ran back to the house, up the back steps, and through the small mud room just inside the large porch. Dat preferred to wash up there before entering Mamma's tidy kitchen, with its black-and-white squares of linoleum. They'd left the floor as is after moving in, since Dat was a frugal man and redoing the flooring made no sense.

Other aspects of the kitchen looked more modern—the off-white appliances, all gas powered, though one wouldn't know it by their outward appearance. And there was an exceptionally sturdy built-in bookcase on the far wall, near the foot of the table. Mamma had filled it with her large collection of Grace Livingston Hill and Janette Oke books. Mamma had never been warned against reading fiction, and she'd placed the books up front and center. Of course Dat had no idea they were made-up stories, and Mamma, wise as she was, hadn't clarified that one way or the other.

*I guess what Dat doesn't know won't hurt Mamma*, thought Tessie as she hurried to the large basin to wash her hands.

“Would ya run this over to Dawdi Dave's for me?” Her mother held a casserole dish, her light brown hair bun mussed a little.

“Sure, I’ll do it now, Mamma.” Carefully, Tessie took the hot dish in its quilted carrier. “Tis always a *gut* excuse to go over there an’ visit, jah?”

“And your Dawdi will be happy to see ya, dear.”

“I love makin’ him smile,” Tessie said.

“He misses *Mammi* Rosanna something awful.” Mamma stood there in the doorway to the kitchen, wiping her brow with the back of her hand.

Tessie nodded. “They were so in love.”

Tears sprang to her mother’s eyes, and she brushed them away. *Mammi*’s death had come so suddenly three months ago. “Thank almighty God for the blessed hope of seein’ our loved ones again one sweet day.”

Tessie agreed and headed outside and around the stone walkway to the cozy little Dawdi Haus attached to her parents’ larger home.

“*Kumme* on in,” her grandfather called inside the house. “Door’s open.”

Tessie smiled; of course it was. They never locked their doors. “*Wie bischt*, Dawdi?”

“*Besser*, seein’ ya here.” He raked his callused hand through his graying hair, emphasizing the cowlick on the right side. “Where’s your perty Mamma today?” He looked around, his gaze settling on the casserole dish in Tessie’s hands. “Ain’t she with ya?”

“She sent me over with this.”

“Well, ain’t that nice.” He muttered something she couldn’t hear, then smacked his lips. “*Gut* thing, too, ’cause the last batch is nearly all.”

He continued talking while Tessie placed the hot dish on

the back burner, then turned the gas to simmer. “It’ll be ready whenever you’re hungry, Dawdi.”

“*Denki* so much.” He sighed loudly, his lower lip trembling. “Sure do enjoy your mother’s cookin’. Awful hard round here sometimes.”

Tessie felt sorry for the dear man. “I miss Mammi Rosanna, too,” she whispered.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m lookin’ for my right arm—callin’ to her in the next room ’fore I realize again she’s not there.”

“Can hardly imagine it,” she said, going over and sitting near him in a chair next to his rocker.

“Nothin’ but Gott’s mercy and love lasts forever.”

She nodded.

“Say now, best be talking ’bout other things, jah?” he suggested. “Saw your beau, that tall fella, Marcus King, wander out to the barn not but a few minutes ago.” There was a glint of mischief in his gray eyes. “Made me wonder what’s on his mind.”

Tessie remained silent.

Dawdi drew in a long, deep breath. “Ya know, your father’s downright opposed—”

“Ach, Dawdi, if ya don’t mind, I’d really rather not discuss it. All right?”

He frowned. “So you must know something.”

Despite the sudden stir of emotions inside, she willed herself to be still.

“Not to step on any toes, Tessie Ann, but there’s more to your father’s resistance than you might know. Much more.



And that's all I best be sayin'." By his words and his stern look, she knew enough to believe him.

*Why hasn't my father told me?*



It was on the way back to the house that Tessie saw Marcus marching down the driveway toward Hickory Lane, shaking his head. He'd obviously just talked with her father, exactly as planned. When Marcus was determined to do something, he went right ahead and did it.

Remembering her grandfather's remarks, she scurried around the side of the house, where dazzling golden mums still flourished in the ground and the stately purple martin birdhouse stood high at attention. "Marcus," she called softly. "Marcus!"

She didn't dare arouse anyone else's notice. She made herself wait till she was nearly on his heels, running as hard as she could barefoot, before she called louder. "Marcus . . . did ya talk to Dat?"

He slowed, letting her catch up. "You were right. He's already made up his mind and won't say why." Marcus folded his arms, eyes serious. "If he weren't your *Daed*, I might have the nerve to say he's unreasonable."

"*Puh!*" She said it louder than necessary.

He reached for her hand and raised it to his lips, his eyes searching hers. "Have you thought any more 'bout what we talked about?"

"Eloping?"

He nodded solemnly, as if he were as hesitant to do so as she was—a church member in good standing, after all.

“Shouldn’t we pray ’bout it?” Her chin quivered.

“I’ve been talkin’ to the Good Lord a-plenty about our marriage. Wouldn’t be *schmaert* not to.”

She stepped closer, intent on his strikingly handsome face. She stood on tiptoes and brushed her lips against his clean-shaven cheek. “Aw . . . Marcus, don’t be glum ’bout my father. You mustn’t be.”

“Ain’t easy walking this fence ’tween pleasing a difficult man and doing what you believe is God’s will.” He removed his straw hat and pushed his hand back through his hair, from his thick bangs clear to his sun-tanned neck. He stared at the road for a moment, silent.

“I wish Dat were on our side.” Tessie struggled with a lump in her throat. “Truth be told, my father is stubborn. He did this with my sister Mandy, too, for no *gut* reason, and now he wants to do the same with me.”

It occurred to her just then that her beau’s part-time work in a nearby vineyard might pose a problem to her parents. Could that be? But many Amish church districts made their own wine for communion services. It wasn’t as though Marcus was the occasional moonshiner who kept his brew secret until found out and reprimanded.

“Come here to me, Tessie Ann.” He pulled her into his arms and held her in a fierce embrace.

She felt the pounding of his heart against her face. “Marcus, I . . .” She stopped right there, unable to say it. He must decide first what to do for their love and speak it into the air. She honestly could not make such an important decision for them.

Then, just as quickly, he released her, put on his straw hat, and gave a glance toward her father’s house. Tugging on his

black suspenders till they snapped, Marcus stood straighter just then. And without a word, he leaned down and cupped her face in his hands, kissing her lips softly. Then again, ever so tenderly. “I’m goin’ to marry ya, Tessie . . . you just wait and see.”

Her heart nearly stopped at the kiss. Oh, such joy! *Dearest Marcus* . . .

“Let’s talk again tomorrow,” he added. “Meet me behind the house I’m goin’ to rent—in faith that we’ll move in sooner rather than later.”

“You’ll sign the lease, then?” She was surprised but very pleased.

“Sure, I’ll move in an’ get things set up for us right quick.” He paused. “You’ll join me there, once your father sees the light.” With that, he turned to head up the road.

Tessie watched him go, the fingers of her right hand resting lightly on her lips.

In the near distance, she heard her father calling. She cringed, but his call was meant for Mamma. And Tessie was ever so relieved he hadn’t seen her rush out here after Marcus—or witnessed their first kiss!