

The Atonement



BEVERLY
LEWIS



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In loving memory of
Herbert Jones,
pastor, missionary, encourager . . .
and my dear daddy.

November 28, 1925—January 9, 2014

Hope is faith holding out its hand in the dark.
—George Iles

Prologue

AUTUMN 2012

FILL UP THE EMPTY PLACES in your heart. . . .

These were the words I'd written in the first of several journals back when I came up with the idea of doing charitable work. Looking at it now, my initial plan had been rather impulsive, like a New Year's resolution. But the more I sought out new places to offer assistance, the more I craved doing so. *Jah* indeed, the more I helped others, the less helpless I felt myself.

So here I was, three years later, still continuing my weekly volunteering: reading to hospice patients, serving food to the homeless, and organizing donations with other Amish workers to raise money for the Mennonite Central Committee. I also managed to squeeze in my housekeeper-nanny job for Martie, my married sister, and still keep up with daily chores at home. It could be a hectic pace, but I was determined to fill every inch of my emptiness with activity, the kind that made a difference for others.

But it wasn't easy. Sometimes, my sisters nitpicked about my

time away. Like Lettie and her fraternal twin, Faye, did just this morning in the autumn sunshine as we worked together to toss hay to the mules. As if to dare me, Lettie looked me in the eye. “Don’t forget about Aendi Edna’s canning bee tomorrow, Lucy. You promised to go.”

I groaned audibly. *The work frolic?*

Lettie looked crestfallen as she took a swipe at the hay. “So you forgot again.”

Faye gave a weak smile. “Between your chores and everything else, you don’t have much time left for us.”

“We’re together *now*,” I pointed out.

Faye looked sad. “Remember when we used to get up before dawn and go walkin’ to the meadow overlook to watch the sun come up? Now ya rush off right after breakfast for parts unknown.”

Despite the cloud of tension, we kept working silently. After a while, I tried to clear the air with a joke I’d read in *The Budget*.

Faye forced a little laugh, and Lettie looked pained.

“You don’t even have time for a beau, do ya?” Lettie said out of the blue.

Faye stopped working, as if waiting for me to respond.

Lettie pressed further. “Not even Tobe Glick?”

Tobe again . . .

It was time to go inside and help *Mamm*. “We’ll finish this later,” I said.

On our way toward the house, with Faye and Lettie trudging quietly behind me, I could feel the westerly breeze picking up, carrying the scent of newly harvested corn. Yet despite the whispering wind, I could still hear my sisters’ pleas.



Early the next morning, I hurried up Witmer Road to Ray and my sister Martie’s place, just past a large Amish farm with a sign warning *Private Drive, No Through Street* posted near the end of

its long lane. Multiple power lines scraped the pure blue sky above the familiar dairy, though of course none ran toward the house.

Ray and Martie lived on a lush rise of land not far from *Dat's* farm, their fields spreading out below the barn and house like an immense quilt. Younger than me by two years, Martie had tied the knot at just nineteen and already had two little boys: Jesse and Josh. Several times a week, I gave Martie a hand by redding up or cooking or caring for her towheaded sons, doing whatever was needed.

On this particular day, as I came upon the tree-rimmed meadow on the left, I noticed an older *Englischer* gentleman on the footbridge, where Mill Creek's banks met the golden cowslips. The well-dressed graying man looked somewhat *schwach*—feeble—as he leaned on a three-pronged cane while the creek gurgled past.

Slowing my pace, I stared . . . then let out a sigh. I'd seen this man on the footbridge on other occasions, always around this time of year. Perhaps even on the same day, September twelfth, though I wasn't certain.

Today, however, the man was alone, without his wife or lady friend who'd always accompanied him before.

The first time I'd spotted them, maybe ten years ago, they were holding hands and facing each other on the little bridge. I was struck by their affectionate gestures—the way the man sometimes slipped a strand of the woman's light brown hair behind her ear, or touched her cheek, even leaned his head against hers. Such a tender way they'd had with each other, and in public, no less.

Over the years, I'd wondered about the older couple. Perhaps the man had been widowed and found love a second time—most couples married for decades showed nary a speck of affection.

When I'd seen them last year, the woman had been weeping, yet bravely trying to smile. The man had taken a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and patted her tears.

Englischers, I remember thinking. *Their emotions on display . . .*

Even so, it had been hard not to stare, caught up in the wistful *what-ifs* of my own life.

The picturesque footbridge *was* an exceptionally tranquil spot. Maybe that brought out feelings of nostalgia for the couple. Or was it something more?

Momentarily, I thought of going to meet the man simply to offer him a smile—willing to make a fool of myself—but he was clearly deep in thought and, if I wasn't mistaken, muttering to himself. Then I noticed his white SUV parked nearby and decided to keep on walking.

Although it was none of my business, I had asked around about the mysterious couple, but no one seemed to know anything, which wasn't surprising.

Still, I couldn't help wondering, *Where is the woman? Why did he come without her?*

Up the road, I could see Tobe Glick coming this way in his two-wheeled cart, his hand shooting high in the air when he spotted me. "*Guder Mariye, Lucy Flaud. Wie bischt?*"

I smiled back and wondered if my friend had ever noticed the older couple on his trips past this area. When Tobe slowed his cart, I asked him.

He squinted into the sunshine, straw hat pushed down over his blond bangs. "*Nee, can't say I have.*"

"It seems strange." I added that I'd seen the man and a woman a number of times. "But only around this time of year."

"Might be some sort of anniversary," Tobe suggested. "Would ya like me to go an' ask? You're dyin' to know."

"Ach, Tobe."

"Well, ain't ya?"

Puh! He knew me well.

"Never mind," I said right quick. "See you at Preachin'."

"I'll be countin' the hours, Lucy." He winked mischievously.

“By the way, we all miss seein’ you at Singings. It’s been the longest time.”

I laughed a little, and he grinned. Our private joke—Tobe had been hounding me about returning for several years. “You know I’ve outgrown youth gatherings.” Truly, nearly all the fellows my age in our church district were already married and starting their families. And I was reminded of my single status each and every Sunday, when I was required to walk in with the younger teens and others who weren’t married.

“Well, I’m not exactly a *Yingling*, but I still enjoy attending.” Tobe paused a moment. “Even though it’d be more fun if you started goin’ again.”

One year younger than me, Tobe was twenty-four and still unmarried, oddly enough. Despite his attendance at Singings, he didn’t seem all that earnest about his search for a life mate. Most Amish girls in East Lampeter Township thought he was too picky, but that didn’t stop them from competing for his attention. He was handsome and very hardworking, yet there was more to his appeal. Tobe was a kind young man with a reputation for integrity—had a good sense of humor, too.

“*Gut* seein’ you, Tobe.” Tears were welling up. I had to get going.

“You too, Lucy.” He clicked his cheek and the mare obeyed, pulling the carriage forward.

I kept my face forward. *What’s the matter with me?*

Forcing my thoughts again to the older man on the footbridge, as well as to the missing woman, I knew I would never celebrate any sort of romantic anniversary—not in my best of dreams.

CHAPTER 1



CHRISTIAN FLAUD STEPPED OUT of the dark blue passenger van and paid his driver. Considering how glum he felt, he would have preferred to walk the three-mile stretch to the white clapboard meetinghouse. But his wife had urged him to call for a driver, following the strenuous day filling silo. After all, he was sixty-four now and not the young man he'd once been. In fact, Christian had almost nixed the idea of going, but for some time now, his friend Harvey Schmidt had been talking about the newly offered grief support group, unique to this community church. The small-group approach was an effective way to handle one's sorrow—or so Harvey said, having attended the launch of the Thursday-night program some months back. Christian, however, wasn't exactly mourning a typical loss, and Harvey wouldn't be there to sit with.

Sighing, Christian made his way across the parking lot toward the modest church building, taking note of the large pots of orange and gold mums on either side of the main door and regretting anew his past mistakes. Peering up at the quaint white bell tower, he recalled the last time he had been here. It was

summertime, and he had been seventeen and in the middle of the worst running-around season—“*es Schlimmscht Rumschpringe*,” his father had called it. His younger sister Emma had even scorned his given name. “*Christian, indeed!*”

At the time, he had stepped outside the Old Order church of his upbringing. But even so, it was with some degree of reluctance that he’d agreed to meet his then girlfriend, Minerva Miller, at the unassuming meetinghouse. Despite being raised with strict boundaries like Christian, Minerva had left their church for the Beachy Amish, but her path out of the Old Order was problematic. And the community meetinghouse, where a nightly revival was being held, had been their secret compromise one sultry July evening more than forty years ago.

Christian glanced at the line of gnarled oak trees at the far end of the paved lot, tempted by another memory. There, with the moon twinkling through the tree branches, he’d had the nerve to reach for her slender hand. *Minnie*, he’d affectionately nicknamed the beguiling brunette then. The recollection was dusty with the years, and he knew better than to let himself reminisce a second longer.

No need to relive that defiant chapter.

Still, it was odd the sort of memories a place could trigger. Like Christian, Minnie had long since married, and his short friendship with her had nothing to do with attending the grief group tonight.

This approach to getting help was so foreign to his way of thinking. “Help I should’ve gotten before now,” he whispered as he neared the church door.

Inside, the entryway was profuse with flourishing plants—scarlet wax begonias and purple coneflowers, and a tall weeping fig tree, similar to some he’d seen in Saint Paul, Minnesota, at the Como Park Conservatory he and Sarah had visited last year. Christian wandered over to one side of the vestibule, to

a large corkboard displaying notices and announcements and some tear-off pizza coupons for an upcoming youth outing. He was reaching to look more closely at a business card advertising a Shetland pony for sale when he heard footsteps behind him.

A clean-shaven, tall blond fellow wearing a blue-and-gold tie greeted him. “Welcome, I’m Dale Wyeth.” The young man looked Christian over, apparently curious about his Plain attire. “Are you here for the grief support group?”

Nodding, Christian removed his best straw hat and accepted the firm handshake, glad he’d worn his Sunday trousers.

Dale Wyeth blinked awkwardly. “We’ll be meeting downstairs. I’ll show you the way.”

Amused, Christian followed him to the basement room.

Downstairs, a handful of men and women were milling about, some already seated. He spied a vacant chair at the far end of the room and, amidst stares, hurried to sit down.

What have I gotten myself into?

During the preliminary remarks, the middle-aged leader, Linden Hess—a cordial man in short sleeves and blue jeans who introduced himself as one of the staff pastors—shared briefly that his eight-year-old daughter had died two years ago.

Christian inhaled deeply, shaken by the admission. *Eight years old.*

Dale volunteered to distribute the syllabus to the dozen or so folk in attendance as Linden emphasized the need to talk about one’s grief with at least one other person as an important first step toward healing.

Christian shook hands with the couple sitting beside him—they had lost their young son to leukemia a mere three weeks earlier. There was such a depth of sorrow in their eyes that Christian wondered if he, too, carried his private pain on his countenance. *For all to see.*

When the minister began to read from Ecclesiastes 3, Christian's shoulders stiffened. He forced himself to listen, even though he had read the first four verses many times in the past few years: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die . . ."

Christian looked straight ahead. Why did it feel like he was the only one sitting in the room across from the minister? The warmth from his neck crept quickly beneath his beard.

"Grief comes in like the waves of the sea, and sometimes it's deeper than expected—takes us off guard," Linden said, beginning the session titled "Shattered Dreams."

"Remember, grief is unique to each person . . . and at times it may be so distracting that you feel like you're trudging blindly through the day." He glanced about the room, asking for any comments or questions from the group.

One woman raised her hand and explained how unclear her thoughts had become since her sister's passing.

A dapper-looking gentleman in a red cardigan sweater, a three-pronged cane by his chair, admitted how hard it was to sleep through the night in recent days. "I keep reliving my wife's diagnosis." He covered his eyes with his handkerchief, and another man went to sit next to him. "I'm in the process of losing her . . . daily," the older man said.

Linden nodded sympathetically before continuing, his voice low as he glanced now and then at the man slowly regaining his composure. "Personally, I couldn't believe how unpredictable my grief was, and for the longest time. And even though we all know that death is a natural part of life, I never realized the debilitating pain it would bring."

Christian's heart went out to the older man, still wiping his eyes at the far side of the room. It was all Christian could do to stay put in his chair and not try to console him. *I can't imagine losing my precious Sarah thataway. . . .*

Later, Dale Wyeth and Christian were partnered for the sharing time that followed the session.

“Tomorrow it’ll be one month since my father passed,” Dale began. “I looked after him for a full year before the end came.”

“Did he live with ya, then?” asked Christian, feeling uncomfortable engaging in such personal talk.

“My place was too small to accommodate my parents, so Mom and I took turns caring for Dad in their home.” Dale’s chin twitched. “They had no long-term care insurance. I did everything I could to help . . . and to give my mother a break.”

The People had always assisted their ailing and elderly, even building *Dawdi Hauses* onto the main house to provide for aging relatives. But while Christian didn’t put all fancy folk in the same box, he hadn’t expected such a revelation from a Yankee. Dale’s compassionate attitude struck him as atypical. “That’s quite admirable.”

“Well, I loved my dad—thought the world of him.” Dale bowed his head briefly. “I still do.”

Christian fell silent, remembering his own father, no longer living.

“Dad worked long hours at his hardware store to take care of Mom, and my sister and me, growing up.” Dale glanced away for a moment. “It was the least I could do.”

“*Nee*, ’twas the *best*.”

Dale studied him, light brown eyes intent.

“I understand . . . lost my own father three years ago.” Christian was taken aback by the connection he felt with Dale. He’d rarely talked of *Daed’s* death to anyone.

“I’m very sorry,” Dale offered.

“My Daed lived a long and fruitful life. But losin’ him . . . well, it’s a grief that’s been mighty hard to shake.”

More plainspoken sharing came from the young man. “I’ll

never forget the prayer Dad offered for our family before he closed his eyes for the final time.” Dale’s voice was thick with emotion. “It made me want to step up my prayer life; he valued it so.”

Christian listened as Dale spoke freely of his family and the fact that he’d inherited his father’s hardware store. “A fair number of Amish frequent it.”

After the benediction, Dale stayed around, seemingly interested in continuing their conversation. “I realize this has nothing to do with the meeting here,” he said, pushing his hands into his trouser pockets. “Frankly, I’ve been curious for a few years now about how I might live more simply, less dependent on the grid. The current solar storm activity and other natural events make me realize just how easily disrupted modern life can be.”

Christian frowned. “Really, now?”

“I’d like to be more self-sufficient.”

“Well, ain’t something most *Englischers* would consider doin’?”

Dale laughed. “If you knew me, you’d know I’m not like most ‘*Englischers*,’ as you call them.”

“I’m just sayin’ you might find it harder than you think.”

Dale nodded thoughtfully. “No doubt.” He hunched forward as if to share a deep confidence. “I’ve always had a do-it-yourself streak and have been doing a lot of reading about this. Besides, it’s not too hard to imagine that we English could wake up one morning with no way to sustain the life we’ve become accustomed to . . . at least temporarily.”

Christian ran his fingers through his long beard, suddenly leery. Dale sounded like some of those survivalists who spent decades preparing for the end of the world. “Not even your cell phone would work, if it came to that,” Christian told him. “But I daresay all of that rests in God’s hands.”

“Definitely,” Dale replied. “I believe that wholeheartedly, but I don’t think it’s wrong to prepare a backup plan. I think of it

as getting closer to the way the Lord may have intended for us to live.”

Christian noted the sincerity in the young man’s reply, but he’d known a few folk who’d dabbled in the Old Ways and fell short, quickly becoming disillusioned and finding their way back to their familiar modern environment. Even so, Christian enjoyed his conversation with Dale and appreciated his respectful manner.

They said good-bye and parted ways. *An unusual fellow*, Christian thought as he waited for his ride. He certainly hadn’t expected to meet anyone like Dale tonight.



Lucy leaned on the kitchen table to read her Bible in *Deitsch*, the room lit by the gas lamp overhead. She was pressing onward through yet another chapter when she saw her father enter through the back entrance. He bent low to straighten the large rag rug in the mud room, talking to himself as he removed his straw hat and shoes. Recently, she’d noticed the dark circles under his gray-blue eyes.

“Is your Mamm around?” Dat asked as Lucy rose to offer him something to drink or nibble on. After all, he’d left right after supper, where he’d merely picked at the roast beef and potatoes on his plate.

“She’s upstairs early.” Lucy motioned toward the stairs. “But I made a snack for ya.”

He looked surprised, his eyes softening, and she felt obliged to explain. “Mamm asked me to.”

“Oh, of course.”

She opened the fridge and removed the tuna and Swiss cheese sandwich with sliced dill pickles, made the way her mother had instructed. She put it on a small plate.

“Lucy, listen.” He made his way to the counter and rested

against it, his hands on his anguished face. “I did a peculiar thing tonight.”

“Dat, you look tired.” She moved the plate nearer to him.

He nodded. “*Jah*, but I can’t go up just yet. But you go on if ya want.”

Heading for the stairs, she paused and glanced back to see him still standing there, his expression unsettling. “You all right, Dat?”

He looked at her, opened his mouth. “I, uh, went to a class for grieving folk,” he said.

She looked at him, stunned.

With a frown, he fixed his gaze on her, then bowed his head for a time. “You’re long past it, ain’t ya, Lucy?”

Her heart constricted, the old defenses kicking in. Without a word, she moved back to the kitchen, opened the cupboard, and took out a tumbler. “I’ll make ya some chocolate milk. It’s your favorite.”

“No need to.” He started toward the fridge, waving his hand nonchalantly. “I can mix it up myself.”

She stepped ahead of him. “Go an’ sit at the table, Dat. I’ll bring it over to ya.”

He lingered for a moment, tugging on his chest-length graying beard. Then he made his way across the kitchen, and the wooden chair made a sharp scraping sound as he pulled it out to sit with a moan. “*Denki*, Lucy . . . a *gut* and kind daughter you are.”

She observed her father, obviously wanting her company. Yet she couldn’t bring herself to join him.

“If you don’t need anything more, I’m feelin’ tired,” she said softly. And with that, Lucy made her way up the stairs.