

The 
FIRST LOVE



BEVERLY
LEWIS



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lewis, Beverly, author.

Title: The first love / Beverly Lewis.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018020577 | ISBN 9780764219689 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780764219948 (cloth) | ISBN 9780764219955 (large print) | ISBN 9781493416011 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Amish—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | LCGFT: Religious fiction. | Domestic fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3562.E9383 F57 2018 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018020577>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Art direction by Paul Higdon

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Beverly Lewis, *The First Love*

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To
John and Cynthia Bachman,
my delightfully
encouraging cousins



A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For
all serious daring starts from within.

—Eudora Welty

Prologue

SUMMER 1998

Sometime in the wee hours, I was awakened by laughter against a background of trotting horses and clattering carriages—certainly Amish courting couples. The air was so still that the merriment seemed to waft in through the open upstairs window . . . straight into my foggy head.

Slowly, I raised myself in bed, and in my drowsiness, the room seemed to turn. I listened carefully, and except for the squeak of the bedsprings and a lone cricket outside, all was quiet now.

Just a dream, I thought. Yet it seemed so real.

I lay awake for a while, pondering the meaning as my thoughts sailed back to my own courting-age years, when life should have been filled with zest . . . and hope. Instead, I had been consumed with disappointment, grieving the loss of one I'd held so dear, and secretly fond of a young man who deserved someone who was whole.

The strength of my emotions caught me by surprise, and

the rush of feelings was so unsettling, it was a long time before I could calm down enough to sleep.

My mind was still fixed on the past when the morning sunlight prodded me from the bed. Honestly, I couldn't say just what had gotten into me. Could it be that my coming birthday had prompted a dream . . . and the memories?

It wasn't that I was dreading this birthday, but it was nevertheless a milestone, one that firmly clinched my status as a senior citizen. Growing older wasn't for cowards. Yet without God's grace and goodness, where would any of us be?

I brushed aside thoughts of my frail and agonizing youth and sat down at the kitchen table near an open window. There, in the golden light of early summer, with a chorus of mockingbirds sounding like angelic flutes, I pushed the latch on my well-worn recipe box and thumbed through the handwritten recipes passed down by dearest *Mamm* so long ago.

Which favorite shall I cook today?

Birthdays were a gift from God above, my mother used to say, taking care to point out to my younger siblings and me the importance of gratitude in all things. "*Gratitude for sickness?*" I had once whispered to her when the others left to do barn chores and *Dat* headed off to work at the nearby gristmill. *Mamm* had looked at me so sweetly, my heart nearly broke in two.

"*Ach, Maggie-bird,*" she said as she opened her arms, and I limped into her embrace, letting her hold me while I cried.

"*Will I ever be well again?*" I whimpered.

Beginning when I was eleven, I struggled with what one doctor had called severe growing pains. In my teens, another doctor diagnosed the pain as something far worse—juvenile

rheumatoid arthritis. Whatever the cause, I wanted the pain to stop. I wanted to walk without a cane. I wanted to scrub floors and weed gardens, and I wanted to be the kind of bride any Amishman would have been pleased to marry.

Dad often talked about God's sovereignty, insisting that we not question His will. I tried to pay attention, I truly did. And although his words were intended for our entire family, my father emphasized this so frequently, I sensed it was particularly meant for me.

Being the eldest, I wished I might contribute more to my family . . . and to the community of the People. It was one of the deepest longings of my heart.

Presently, my eyes fell on a recipe for my favorite childhood meal, Amish meatloaf, made with cracker crumbs, onions, and catsup. It was one Mamm had first concocted back before I was born. *Dear Mamm . . .* I missed her clear to this day.

Sighing, I glanced up at the wooden wall plaque I'd helped make in the midst of the most trying time of my young life. A summer of questioning, to be sure.

I stared at the words my father had etched into the wood, words taken from First Timothy, chapter six, verse six: *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*

A devout and compassionate man, Dad had been mighty concerned over my seeking nature and how it might alter my plan to be baptized into the Amish church.

Jah, that was undeniably a difficult time, one that opened my eyes in countless ways. And my heart, most of all. It was a season of sorrow and searching, of questions and answers.

It was the summer of my first love.

CHAPTER

1

A decorative flourish consisting of stylized leaves and a central number '1'.

JUNE 1951

The morning was warm and oppressive that seventh day of June. Occasional breezes rippled over Joseph Esh's field and up the gentle rise through a narrow swath of woodland to the sprawling house, which stood like a beacon over the farm on Olde Mill Road in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

In the past decade, a *Dawdi Haus* had been built onto the home's east side, and in that smaller residence lived Joseph's widowed aunt Nellie. Beyond the main house, below the rise, stood a modest white barn, as well as a woodshed and a rather run-down six-stall stable. Across the road and up a ways stood the gristmill where Joseph had worked all of his adult life.

His daughters, seventeen-year-old Maggie and her sister Grace, sixteen, sat on the wraparound porch, both hulling strawberries. Right after breakfast, Grace had gone to pick the day's ripe yield, and since then, she and Maggie had been working together there in the sunshine. But as was often the

case, Maggie's fingers were beginning to feel cramped, and they already ached terribly.

Peering at Maggie just now, Grace asked, "Need a little break?" Grace's light brown hair was pulled back into a tight bun pinned low at the back of her slender neck, a dark blue bandanna tied beneath her chin.

"Maybe so." Maggie felt not just achy but weary. And to think the day was only getting started.

"I'll help ya into the house." Grace offered a smile. "*Kumme.*" Ever kind and understanding, Grace's usual caring nature had become nearly motherly the past year since Mamm had suffered heart failure.

"No need waitin' till your hands are numb, *Schweschder.*" Grace reached to remove the stainless-steel bowl from Maggie's lap. "I daresay you'd work your fingers to the bone if I didn't speak up . . . sufferin' in silence."

Maggie realized that her sister was only trying to remind her to go easy when the pain became too great. It had been so hard to bear after Mamm's funeral, and things had only worsened when Dat had decided to marry a young woman just seven short months later.

"*Jah*, I'd best be stoppin' for a while." Maggie rose slowly. She struggled to live with the near-constant discomfort, despite the aspirin she sometimes took when it felt nearly intolerable.

"It'd make *gut* sense for Rachel to offer to finish up for ya, if you ask me." Grace glanced toward the window. Then, offering a hand to Maggie, she added in a softer voice, "Ain't like she's busy with any little ones."

Maggie almost said it was a good thing their siblings were all old enough to look after themselves, at least for the most

part. “Well, she’s keepin’ the house tidy and making the noon meal,” she said, going around to the side door with Grace.

“That’s her responsibility, *jah!*” Grace was grinning now.

“Not just hers,” Maggie said, gently correcting her sister. It wasn’t right to put all of that on their stepmother. Even when Mamm was alive, they had always worked together—cooking, cleaning, canning, sewing, and mending. They made at least two quilts every winter, too. *Mamm had Grace and me sit on a bench near her to practice piecing together quilt squares*, she recalled.

But Rachel was part of their family now, having caught their widower father’s eye. There wasn’t anything that Maggie or Grace could have said or done to change Dat’s mind—remarriage was expected of an Amishman with children, after all. And their father liked to say that Rachel was “a peach.” The thing that baffled Maggie was that Rachel had still been single at the age of thirty-two. *Why was she passed over for so long, pretty as she is?*

Grace had voiced this question a few weeks after their father and Rachel’s wedding, when the two sisters were alone for a walk. And Grace had admitted wanting to ask Rachel this very thing, but Maggie had intervened, insisting it was not at all proper. Who knew what had kept an attractive woman like Rachel Glick from marriage till now?

Maggie followed Grace into the kitchen, with its tan-and-white linoleum and green shades rolled up high at the window tops. “We did fairly well this mornin’,” Grace announced to Rachel as they entered, not saying they’d quit working because of Maggie’s pain.

Something delicious was baking in the black cookstove, and the aroma invited Maggie’s attention. For a moment, she

felt overcome by the sight of Rachel at the counter, a reminder that someone else had taken over their Mamm's kitchen, along with all the cooking utensils and pots and pans and nearly everything else in the house. Maggie was conscious of a sudden lump in her throat. It was hard to ignore the memory of spending so much time alongside her mother here in this room. How she missed Mamm's cooking know-how and sympathetic ways! *Mamm understood me like no other*, Maggie thought, missing her terribly for that reason alone.

Rachel, dressed in a brown choring dress and long black apron, turned from opening a quart jar of chow chow and glanced at the two of them. "Yous worked a full hour on the berries," she said. "*Des gut, jah?*"

Maggie slumped onto the wooden bench at the table. *Just an hour?*

Rachel's frown came quickly, and she walked over to touch Maggie's shoulder. "Too much sun, maybe?" She looked out toward the porch where they'd sat earlier.

"*Nee*, not that," Grace was quick to say, barely concealing her annoyance. "Sun has nothin' to do with it." Grace looked at Maggie and tilted her head, a tender expression on her face.

Maggie's eyes met Grace's. *Be kind.*

Grace raised her eyebrows and nodded.

"*Ach*, you seemed all right yesterday, Maggie." Rachel stepped back and looked a bit flustered. "Least for a while, weren't ya?" she added, blinking her bright blue eyes.

Maggie didn't remind Rachel that she never knew how she'd feel each morning when her bare feet touched the floor. "Yesterday was a better day" was all she felt like saying.

"I see," Rachel said, returning to the counter and dumping the jar of chow chow into a large bowl.

She's put out with me. Maggie felt worse.

"Maggie runs a temperature when her pain's real bad," Grace spoke up, still wearing the concerned expression Maggie had come to notice so frequently these days.

Wishing to change the subject, Maggie leaned against the table covered with Mamm's faded red-and-white-checked oil-cloth. "I need to rest here a while longer."

Meanwhile, Grace hurried to the sink and washed her hands, then offered to help Rachel set the table. Maggie realized anew that if Rachel had grown up around here, she surely would have understood Maggie's difficulties. She would have known, too, how close and caring Mamm had been to all of her children through the years, and to Maggie especially. But Rachel had moved here from Myerstown in Lebanon County and, after being courted by Dat for just two short months, had permanently joined their family five months ago.

Pondering this for what must have been the hundredth time, Maggie wondered, *How could Dat marry someone who was practically a stranger . . . and so soon after Mamm's passing?* Maggie hadn't forgotten how her fourteen-year-old brother, Leroy, had first reacted to the surprising news. Dat had talked with all of them one evening several weeks before the planned private wedding, sitting around this very table after dessert. Twelve-year-old Andy and ten-year-old Stephen had seemed to take it more in their stride than Leroy, who had shaken his head in anger when Maggie looked his way.

Leroy's still mad about it, she thought.

Rachel felt rushed to get the noon meal on the table and asked Grace to go and sound the dinner bell. Within minutes, Joseph, her tall, fair-haired husband, came across the lawn

toward the hand pump; he always came home from the mill for dinner. Andy and Stephen poked playfully at each other, then waved to her as they quickly followed behind their father and Leroy, who kept his gaze down.

Through the window, Rachel watched them take turns washing their hands, talking in *Deitsch* while Joseph glanced toward the house. Seeing her there, he grinned, and her stomach fluttered. *How'd I end up so blessed?* She hoped Joseph would enjoy the hearty pork pie she'd made with him in mind. *Leroy might just enjoy it, too, if he'll let himself.* She was beginning to wonder if Joseph's eldest son would ever warm up to her. Joseph, bless his heart, was concerned enough that he'd mentioned the possibility of confronting him about the obvious standoff, but Rachel wanted none of that. "*Isn't it better if he comes around on his own?*" she'd suggested gently.

Yet Joseph had been adamant that he would not have any of his children rejecting his new bride, and she felt all the more cherished for it, though a bit concerned that forcing Leroy wasn't going to win him over. Even Maggie and Grace were still hesitant around her, often holding her at arm's length, though neither would likely admit it. At least they were helpful. Even so, wanting to be compliant and not make waves, Rachel would let Joseph have the last word when it came to his children. Thus far, he hadn't taken the step of confronting Leroy, but she couldn't help noticing that her husband appeared irritated when Leroy failed to respectfully address her.

Once Joseph and all six children were seated at the table, Joseph folded his hands, bowed his head, and asked the silent blessing. Rachel, still getting used to having a husband and a ready-made family, thanked the Lord God for her many

blessings, including the food on the table. She also offered her gratitude for the opportunity to be loved by such a thoughtful man as Joseph.

After a few moments, her husband cleared his throat and lifted his head, glancing at Rachel as she reached for his plate and dished up a generous portion of the baked dish of ground pork and sweet potatoes.

“Smells *wunnerbaar-gut*,” he said with a wink.

Rachel smiled, her heart full to overflowing despite her concern over Leroy. From the very start of their marriage, Joseph had complimented her on her good cooking. As for the children, the youngest, eight-year-old Miriam, was the most expressive about her appreciation for Rachel’s carefully planned meals. Cheerful Miriam would also ask to help bake bread—and cookies. The older girls, however, were not nearly as talkative, and there were times when Rachel caught Grace or Maggie studying her . . . nearly scrutinizing. Really, though, should it surprise her if any of the children were comparing her to Joseph’s deceased wife, beloved Sadie Ann?

I mustn’t expect too much, she thought, noticing Maggie struggling to get her slice of pie onto her plate. “You all right?” she asked.

Maggie blushed and nodded quickly. “*Denki*.”

Sighing, Rachel kicked herself for trying too hard, but it was difficult to know just how to respond to ailing Maggie. *Poor girl*.

Rachel served herself last, picked up her fork, and took a bite. *Delicious*, she thought, pleased that she’d added just the right amount of fresh milk and cinnamon sugar to the baked dish. She was still learning to double the recipes she’d made for herself and her grandparents back when she lived with them in their *Dawdi Haus* in Myerstown. Cooking for three

was quite different than cooking for eight, she had swiftly come to realize.

“I saw Cousin Tom Witmer’s eldest, Luke, at the mill early this mornin’,” Joseph said just then. “He had a big talk on, let me tell ya.”

“What’s Luke up to?” Leroy asked, his oily blond bangs stuck to his forehead.

Joseph finished chewing before replying. “Well, he’s been helpin’ wire floodlights at the big tent in town.”

“The revival tent?” Leroy asked, his hazel eyes suddenly wide.

Reaching for his water glass, Joseph nodded. “It’s the oddest thing, really.”

“Luke helpin’ out . . . or the tent comin’ to Lancaster?” Leroy asked.

“Both, I s’pose.” Joseph looked at Rachel and grimaced. “Luke said he’s also on the set-up crew for the public-address system.”

“That’s real neat,” Leroy said, sounding a little too enthusiastic. “He must’ve learned all that at his Mennonite college.”

Joseph gave his son an appraising look. “Now, son, remember . . . education that counts in the eyes of the Lord God is all we Amish desire. College ain’t for you.”

Leroy dipped his head immediately and resumed eating, not making eye contact with Rachel during the meal even when she passed him the apple butter. Once, however, Rachel noticed him looking Maggie’s way. He seemed to be comforted by her, even though Rachel knew it was Grace who had taken on the role of surrogate mother after Sadie Ann died.

The talk of the tent meetings ceased. According to one of the *Englischers* at market last week, the meetings were to last

for six straight weeks, wrapping up near the end of July. The young woman in cuffed blue jeans, bobby socks, and dark brown loafers had been rather bubbly about the news, saying the local paper had interviewed the evangelist, who declared he believed God had called him to bring a “strong gospel message” and that he was “hoping to convert many sinners.”

Rachel had wondered about it at the time, but she’d given it no further thought till now. And by the tone in Joseph’s voice—and the look on Leroy’s face—she knew not to show a speck of curiosity about it.