

BEVERLY
LEWIS

The
Prodigal



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Dedication

For

Carolene Robinson,

with happy memories

of our “baby days” . . .

and laugh-out-loud Mark Twain nights.

By Beverly Lewis

ABRAM'S DAUGHTERS

The Covenant • *The Betrayal*
The Sacrifice • *The Prodigal*
The Revelation



THE HERITAGE OF LANCASTER COUNTY

The Shunning • *The Confession* • *The Reckoning*



ANNIE'S PEOPLE

The Preacher's Daughter • *The Englisher* • *The Brethren*



THE COURTSHIP OF NELLIE FISHER

The Parting • *The Forbidden* • *The Longing*



The Postcard • *The Crossroad*



The Redemption of Sarah Cain
October Song • *Sanctuary** • *The Sunroom*



The Beverly Lewis Amish Heritage Cookbook

www.BeverlyLewis.com

*with David Lewis

BEVERLY LEWIS, born in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country, fondly recalls her growing-up years. A keen interest in her mother's Plain family heritage has led Beverly to set many of her popular stories in Lancaster County.

A former schoolteacher and accomplished pianist, Beverly is a member of the National League of American Pen Women (the Pikes Peak branch) and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She is the 2003 recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award at Evangel University, Springfield, Missouri, and her blockbuster novel, *The Shunning*, recently won the Gold Book Award. Her bestselling novel *October Song* won the Silver Seal in the Benjamin Franklin Awards, and *The Postcard* and *Sanctuary* (a collaboration with her husband, David) received Silver Angel Awards, as did her delightful picture book for all ages, *Annika's Secret Wish*. Beverly and her husband have three grown children and one grandchild and make their home in the Colorado foothills.

Prologue

Winter 1956

Sometimes in the midst of gray fog and drizzle, especially at this time of year, it's difficult to tell where the day ends and the night begins. Alas, mud clings to nearly everything—buggy wheels, horses' hooves, and work boots. But in a few short days, when the predicted cold snap arrives in Gobbler's Knob, all this sludge will freeze hard, and hopefully everyone's footing will be safer once again.

Yet even now the long night of separation is past. My repentant sister, Sadie, has returned to the open arms of the People, and my heart is tender with love for her. Nine-year-old Lydiann privately asks me why Sadie ever left us to live in the Midwest. 'Tis a prickly subject with little hope of being understood by a girl so young and one who scarcely knows Sadie. I can only pray that dear Lydiann will set aside her curiosity and enjoy her eldest sister for who she is now . . . for who she is becoming.

Little by little, Sadie and I have completed the task of sewing her new dresses and aprons—all black for the one-year mourning period—since the few she brought home in her

suitcase definitely reflected the style and pattern she wore while living in Nappanee, Indiana. Even the head coverings are quite different out west compared to here in Lancaster County—lots more pleats to iron than we have in our prayer veilings. We boxed up all of Sadie's former clothing and sent it back to Nappanee, hoping some of her deceased husband's family might be able to put it to good use. For sure and for certain, she intends never to need it again.

Along with tending to my youngest sister and only brother, I have been going to plenty of quilting frolics, where joyous fellowship fills the day now that I've learned to tune out the tittle-tattle and simply concentrate on making tiny quilting stitches. With Adah Peachey Ebersol, my best friend and cousin by marriage and, at times, Aunt Lizzie by my side, I am ever so content. Aunt Lizzie has an amazing ability to swiftly sew many little stitches, and straight ones at that. Sometimes she and I make a game of seeing who can sew the smallest ones, and she always wins with seven or eight per needle. Naturally she would; she's been quilting for many years longer than I. Yet it seems to me finishing well in this life is not so much about who is the best or greatest at something, but rather who embraces lowliness of heart. Laying down one's rights—meekness—is a blessed virtue, one that must surely come straight from the Throne of Grace.

In the nearly seven years since Mamma's death, Aunt Lizzie has become a mother to me, though I have yet to refer to her as Mamma. Still, in my heart she is now just that, and I know she senses the affectionate tie that binds the two of us.

On quilting days, Aunt Lizzie and Sadie take turns staying home to cook and clean and look in on *Dawdi* John, our

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elderly maternal grandfather, who still lives in the cozy Dawdi *Haus* adjoining our farmhouse. But neither Sadie nor Aunt Lizzie will ever consider letting *me* stay behind, and they're rather outspoken that I should be the one getting out of the house, even though winter is surely creeping up on us. I don't have to remind them that I do have ample opportunity to leave the Ebersol Cottage and have a change of scenery, since I work for the English doctor, Henry Schwartz, and his wife, Lorraine. Truth be told, sometimes I think Lizzie is concerned that too much of my free time is spent with fancy folk, though she brings this up only rarely. Probably in the back of her mind—and *Dat's*, too—is Mary Ruth's leaving the community of the People behind for the Mennonite church, though I believe *Dat* has begun to temper his displeasure with Mary Ruth, speaking out less strongly here lately. Dawdi John, too, says he's seen "a whole other side" to *Dat* in recent days.

Secretly I've been reading Mamma's old Bible and searching out the underlined passages, coming to understand why dear Mamma was so patient and kind—walking the way of true humility. Such qualities seemed to come second nature to her, as she had a servant's heart, just as I desire to have before the Lord. If I continue to follow diligently the path God has set before me, though sometimes as prickly as nettles when I find myself alone, I believe I will be most joyful.

Patience is yet another virtue, one that grows stronger through the practice of waiting, and I've done much of that in recent years, come to think of it. I often linger near the school yard for Lydiann and Abe, whom I happily view as my own little ones. Young Abe, surrounded as he is by a houseful of women folk, is dearly treasured by each of us. He brings such delight to our lives that it's truly painful to contemplate

how terribly close we came to losing him along with Mamma on the day of his birth.

I must also admit to waiting, with some measure of hope, for a letter from Grasshopper Level, praying that one day Mamma's cousins Peter and Fannie Mast might wake up and realize they have a whole family of folk who love them here. And it would be wonderful-good, if the Lord wills, to get word from someone—anyone at all—telling of Jonas Mast and his faraway life and family.

Most of all, I longingly wait for Sadie's six-month Proving to come to an agreeable end. Bishop Bontrager's choice of an older woman to oversee her during this time is Mamma's dearest friend, Miriam Peachey. The Proving means my sister can't be alone with a man for the time being, except male relatives. Of course this means she's not allowed to be courted until next April. Still, though she's but twenty-eight, I can't imagine her even being interested in another man—or at least not for a good long time.

So there is nothing to do but go along with the minister's stern decree and look ahead to a happier season—next spring-time—when Sadie will be reinstated as a member in good standing, if she keeps her nose clean. We can only hope and pray she will; otherwise, she will no longer be welcome in Dat's house or the community of the People. As harsh as her shunning was, what with no letters allowed all those years she was gone, I sincerely hope the severity of this second Proving has not caused further distress in my widowed sister.

Before long the shortest day will darken the hours at both ends of the clock, the celebration of the Lord's birthday will come and go . . . and soon after, our little Abe will observe his seventh birthday. Then, too, my sister Hannah will bear her

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third wee babe. All of this in the space of a few short days, Lord willing.

For now I'm content to push split logs into Mamma's old wood stove and help Sadie and Aunt Lizzie cook and bake the family recipes, though in doing so, I am ever mindful of the constant ache in me, living life without dear Mamma. Keeping busy is one way of getting by, I daresay. Although Sadie now shares our parents' former room with me, it is in the night hours, when the rest of the family is snug in their own beds, that I am most threatened by profound loneliness as a *maidel*. Nonetheless, I remember always to count my blessings, moment by moment . . . day by day.



Part One



The entrance of thy words giveth light . . .

—**Psalm 119:130**

Chapter One

Early morning winds pressed a row of saplings nearly flat to the ground, and the stark contrast between a dreary sky and the eerie whiteness of a snow-sleek earth created a peculiar balance of light.

Leah pulled her woolen shawl tightly against her as she made her way back to the house from the barn, where she'd gone to take a tall Thermos of hot coffee to her father and brother-in-law, Gid.

"'Tis terrible cold out," she told Sadie, making a beeline into the kitchen, eager to warm her chapped hands over the wood stove.

Sadie looked up from Dat's favorite rocking chair, her needlework in her lap. "'S'pose the men were glad for the coffee, *jah*?"

Leah nodded. "I like seein' the smiles on their red faces. Besides, it's the least I can do for Dat and our new preacher, ya know." She smiled. Truth was, Dat needed a bit of fussing over, still floundering at times without Mamma. So did Gid, what with Hannah so great with child she could scarcely

shuffle to the kitchen to cook a meal for their growing family. Both Lizzie and Sadie had been taking turns carrying hot dishes up to the log house on the edge of the woods, helping out some. “What do ya think Hannah will have this time—girl or boy?” asked Leah.

“I’m sure Gid’s hopin’ for a son, just as Dat did all those years back. But it wouldn’t surprise me if Hannah has another daughter. Girls seem to run in the Ebersol family,” Sadie said.

“Jah, prob’ly so.” Leah didn’t care one way or the other. So far, young Abe was the only male offspring, and a right fine boy he was.



Hours later, when the time came to call the family together for dinner, Leah headed to the front room, where Lydiann was dusting the corner cupboard. Stopping to watch, Leah was struck by how sweet the girl’s face was. Nearly heart shaped, truly, and pretty blue eyes much like Sadie’s. She sighed, thinking what a handful Lydiann could be, yet at the same time, she brought a wealth of affection to the whole family. Lydiann was especially attentive to young Abe, her only close-in-age sibling.

“Sadie says the stew’s ready,” Leah said softly, so as not to startle her.

Turning, Lydiann smiled. She laid the dust rag on the floor and fell in step with Leah, slipping her arm around her waist. “Our big sister has that certain touch, ain’t so?” Lydiann sniffed the air comically. “I daresay her cookin’ oughta bring her another fine husband someday.”

“Now, Lyddie,” Leah chided her.

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“Well, Mamma,” whispered Lydiann, “you know what I mean.”

“S’posin’ I do, and Sadie does have that special something every cook yearns for.” Leah went to the back door and rang the dinner bell while Lydiann washed her hands at the kitchen sink. Quickly Leah pulled the door shut, keenly aware of the bone-chilling cold, the bitter kind that crept up through long skirts and long johns both.

The present cold snap was expected to linger for a while, according to the weather forecast, which wasn’t always so reliable. Dat, however, took both the weatherman and *The Farmer’s Almanac* quite seriously most days, especially here lately. Leah wondered if her father simply needed something to hang his hat on, but the weather was the last thing a body could count on, as unpredictable as winter was long.

She went to help Sadie carry the food to the table. Along with stew, there were cornmeal muffins, a Waldorf salad, and a tray of carrot sticks, pickles, and olives, with plenty of hot coffee for the adults and fresh cow’s milk for Lydiann and Abe. The children much preferred the taste of the milk when the cows were barn fed instead of pasture fed, so she knew they’d be draining their glasses tonight.

By the time Dat and young Abe dashed indoors, got themselves washed up, and sat down at the table, Dawdi John and Aunt Lizzie had come over from the Dawdi Haus, commenting on the delicious aroma of Sadie’s stew. Lydiann was swinging her legs beneath the long table, clearly restless as Leah slipped in next to her on the wooden bench.

“What’s takin’ everyone so long?” Lydiann whispered to her.

“You must be awful hungry,” Leah replied. “But how ’bout

let's be willin' to wait, jah?" She bowed her head as Dat motioned for the traditional silent prayer.

After the table blessing, Leah noticed Dat's gaze lingering a bit longer than usual on Aunt Lizzie, who was smiling right back at him. *Well, now, what on earth . . . Is it possible?* For a moment she contemplated the idea Dat might be taking a shine to Mamma's younger sister. She couldn't help wondering how peculiar she'd feel if Dat were actually sweet on her own birth mother.

And what might precious Mamma think?

Sadie dished up generous portions of the stew as each person in turn held a bowl to be filled. Abe's eyes were bright, apparently pleased at the prospect of his favorite—"plenty of meat and potatoes." He smacked his lips and dug a spoon deep into his bowl.

"I'll be takin' Abe with me to the farm sale come Thursday," Dat said, glancing at Leah. "Just so ya know."

"Yippee, no school for *me!*" Abe exclaimed, his mouth a bit too full.

"Aw, Mamma . . ." Lydiann complained, looking at Leah with the most pitiful eyes. "Can't I—"

"No need askin'." Lovingly, she leaned against Lydiann.

"But *you* always went with Dat to farm auctions growin' up, Mamma," Abe said, surprising her. "Ain't so, Dat? You told me as much."

Their father had to struggle to keep a grin in check, his whiskers wriggling slightly on both sides of his mouth. Truth was, Abe was quite right, and Leah was somewhat taken aback that Dat had told about those days when she had been her father's substitute son.

"Jah, Leah was quite a tomboy for a *gut* many years." Here

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Dat turned and, for a moment, looked fondly at her. Feeling the warmth in her cheeks, she lowered her head. It had been the longest time since Dat had said such a thing in private, let alone in front of everyone.

“I daresay our Leah has herself a higher callin’ now,” Aunt Lizzie spoke up.

“She’s our sister *and* our mamma,” Abe said, grinning from ear to ear.

Lydiann muttered something, though just what, Leah cared not to guess. Best not to make an issue of it. No, let Lydiann simmer over having to attend school on the day of the farm sale. She needed not to miss any more school, having recently suffered a long bout with the flu. Even if Lydiann hadn’t missed at all this year, there was no reason for her to go traipsing off to the all-day farm sale with Dat, Abe, and Gid when her place was at school or home.

Mamma must’ve thought that of me, too . . . all those years ago.

“You go ’n’ have yourself a fine day of book learnin’ on Thursday, Lydiann,” Dat said just then. “And no lip ’bout it, ya hear?”

Dat must have sensed the rising will in his youngest daughter. He was becoming more in tune with his family’s needs as each year passed, in spite of the grief he carried over him like a shroud.

Lydiann buttered her cornmeal muffin and then asked meekly for some apricot jam. Sadie hopped right up from the table to get it, and Dawdi John smiled broadly at the preserves coming and asked for a second helping of both stew and muffins. “Won’t be a crumb of leftovers.” He patted his slight belly.

This got Abe laughing and leaning forward to look down the table at their grandfather. “Maybe Dawdi oughta be goin’ with us to the sale,” Abe said. “What do ya think of that, Dawdi John?”

Dat murmured his concern. It was anybody’s guess whether or not Dawdi, at his feeble age, could keep up with the menfolk, since a full year had passed since Dawdi had made any attempt at going. In fact, Leah recalled clearly the last time Lizzie’s elderly father had decided to push himself too hard and go down to Ninepoints, where an Amish farmer was selling everything from hayforks to harnesses to the farmhouse itself. Dat had soundly reprimanded Aunt Lizzie for suggesting that her frail father go. Leah knew this because she’d unintentionally overheard them talking in the barn that day. Turned out poor Dawdi had gotten right dizzy at the sale, sick to his stomach, and later that night, he’d suffered with a high fever and the shakes. The illness had put an awful fear in not only Dat, but all of them.

Thankfully Dawdi was now saying no to young Abe’s request, his white beard brushing against the blue of his shirt as he shook his head. “Ach, you and Abram go for the day. Leave me here at home with the women folk.”

Once again Leah felt a warm and welcome relief, and she realized anew how deep in her heart she carried each one of her family members.



Sadie and Dat hitched up the open sleigh to the horse the next morning, which took far less time than the usual half hour or so when the job was to be accomplished by only one

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person. With weather this nippy, Sadie couldn't see letting Leah start out with frozen fingers and toes from having to hitch up and then drive Lydiann and Abe to school, stopping for all the neighborhood children who attended—Amish and English alike. It had been her idea to surprise Leah, getting Dat from the barn so the two of them could prepare the sleigh.

Since returning home in October, she hadn't found the courage to open her mouth and tell the whole truth to her sister, but she *was* awful sorry about the part she'd played in keeping Jonas from marrying Leah. The letter from Leah to her beloved, the one Sadie had deliberately and angrily discarded so long ago, continued to haunt her. But she worried that it might cause another rift between herself and her dear sister if she were to confess the wicked deed. Meanwhile, she simply tried to find ways to help lift the domestic burden for Leah—anything to lessen her sense of guilt.

Leah's face shone with delight when she came out of the house, her pleasure evident at not having to face the chore single-handedly. She rushed to Sadie and hugged her but good while Dat grinned and waved and headed back to the barn. "Ach, Sadie . . . and Dat, you didn't have to do this."

Sadie rubbed her hands together. "We wanted to."

Just then Lydiann and Abe came flying out the back door, lunch buckets in hand. "One more day of school till the farm sale," Abe hollered over his shoulder, beating Lydiann to the sleigh.

Sadie saw Lydiann pull a face. Then both children laughed and hopped up into the sleigh. Turning to face her, they waved as Leah twitched the reins, pulling out and heading down the long lane to the road.

Sadie, aware of the bitter cold, stood there longer than need be, watching the horse's head rise and fall as the sleigh, soon to be filled with schoolchildren, slipped away from view.

I might've had a sleigh full of my own little ones.

Slowly she made her way toward the house, up the sidewalk shoveled clean of new snow. *'Tis nearly Christmas and I ought to be happy.*

“Oughta be a lot of things,” she muttered as she reached for the back door and hurried inside. She didn't move quickly to the wood stove to warm her ice-cold hands and feet. She went and stood at the window, looking out over the side pasture, her gaze drifting all the way to the edge of the woods. Deep in that forest, there were deer hunters probably right now resting and warming themselves in an old, run-down shanty. She wished to goodness the place had fallen down in disrepair, wished Aunt Lizzie might have discovered the flattened shelter on one of her many treks through the woods, its walls of decaying wood lying flat on the snow-glazed ground, just asking to be hauled away.

Sadie recognized anew the one reason she'd ever hesitated to write to Bishop Bontrager telling of her widowhood and of her desire to return home to her father's house: the sordid memories here of the sin she had allowed herself to get caught up in as a teenager, the wickedness she'd shared with the village doctor's younger son. Although she had safely passed the Ohio church Proving and eventually married an upstanding young man, Harvey Hochstetler, there were times when thoughts of Derek Schwartz still haunted her. Did he even know she'd given birth to a stillborn son?

Derry . . . the boy who'd stolen her virtue. No, that was not true and she knew it. She had willingly given up her

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innocence to a virtual stranger, a heathen, as Dat often said of Englishers. She had known firsthand that Derry was just that, but he had not been a thief those nights in the hunters' shack.

Now, though, having heard that Mary Ruth was seeing Derry's older brother, Robert, Sadie couldn't help but feel squeamish at the wretched possibility of having to meet him one day. This made her tremble, and she hoped such a meeting might be months, even years away. She just felt so helpless at times, missing Harvey something awful, even more so now that she was safely home again, snug in Dat's big farmhouse. Yet the knowledge of that horrid shanty, the place where she had conceived her first child, illegitimate at that, caused her to draw her black shawl around her chin as she looked out toward the dark woods.

If the bishop knew my thoughts, he'd surely be displeased. She knew she ought not to dwell on the past. She ought to think on the good years she'd spent with Harvey, the kind and loving husband the Lord God heavenly Father had granted her . . . for a time. Still, coming home had stirred everything up again. Sometimes she wondered if the almighty One had withheld His favor even though she had turned from her rebellious ways, with the help of the Ohio ministers to begin with . . . and thoughtful Jonas. She had completed her Proving time in Millersburg well before ever meeting Harvey and moving to Nappanee.

All the babies I carried, she thought. All of them lost to me . . . to Harvey, too. All the blue-faced wee ones I birthed . . .

Silently she questioned if the reckless willfulness of her early sin had made divine judgment most severe. Here she was, all this time after, stuck in a mire of doubt and hopelessness, a

woman longing for her dead children and husband. The awareness that Bishop Bontrager had set her up as an example to the young people did not make things any easier.

She had long wished for Dat to have known Harvey, for her sisters to have enjoyed her husband's hearty laugh and interesting stories told around the hearth. And yet in spite of the congenial and closely knit family she had shared with Harvey, she had often felt she was marking time clear out there in Indiana, far away from home. There had always been a feeling of waiting to undo what had been already done. She had sometimes cried herself to sleep, longing for Mamma's loving arms and nighttime talks with Leah. All of this unbeknownst to her husband.

I'm home now. Regardless of her initial reservations, she was glad to be living in a big family once again, with Dat and Leah, Aunt Lizzie and Dawdi John, and the eager-faced Lydiann and Abe—finally getting to know her youngest siblings. Most of all, it was fun watching her young sister and brother growing up underfoot, seeing their wide-eyed devotion to Leah. She wouldn't let herself envy Leah for having what she did not—a close bond with children, the memory of having held Lydiann and Abe ever so near as infants, rocking them to sleep in their tiny cotton gowns, rejoicing over their first toddler steps. Constantly, though, Sadie noticed every young one who was the age her children would have been had they lived . . . especially her dead son.

Still, it did seem a bit unfair that Leah was a mother without having given birth, while Sadie had given birth but was not a mother. Yet she wouldn't allow herself to contemplate that too much, not wishing to usurp Leah's position in Lydiann's and Abe's eyes.

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Moving away from the window, she trudged to the utility room just off the kitchen. There, she removed her shawl and hung it on the third wooden peg. The first peg belonged to Dat, of course, and she had noticed right away upon her return home last fall that Leah's shawl now hung where Mamma's always had. So, even though there was still a vacant place at the table for Mamma, Leah must have felt no need to leave the wooden peg empty.