

*The
Tinderbox*



BEVERLY
LEWIS



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Beverly Lewis, *The Tinderbox*

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To
Claudia Ferrin Muniz,
sweet friend and partner
in prayer.

That Time could turn up
his swift sandy glass,
To untell the days, and to
redeem these hours.

—Thomas Heywood

Prologue

*M*y earliest recollection of *Dat* was of going with him to Root's Country Market when I was no taller than a buggy wheel and surprised to see so many fancy folk there. It was the first time I'd asked about his other life as an *Englischer*, before he came to Hickory Hollow. He was mum for a while, then hemmed and hawed a bit, seemingly reluctant to say much.

We wandered from one produce stand to another as I finally got up the courage to ask, "Do ya ever miss bein' fancy, Dat?"

"Miss living out in the world?" He glanced down at me, grinning. "Well, one thing's for sure, I can't imagine missing out on *you*, Sylvie."

I giggled as we proceeded through the crowded marketplace. *Ach*, I couldn't have been happier to be his little girl—the firstborn and the apple of Dat's eye. Most Amish families I knew had oodles of girls, but in our family, there was only me.

Now, at eighteen, I sometimes contemplated that long-ago conversation, wondering why my father still seemed reluctant

to discuss his past. I've marveled at his ability to accept the Old Ways so readily, considering his modern upbringing. Hadn't it been hard for him to leave it behind? Mamma says it's like he was *born* to be Amish. Maybe so, but all the same, I wished I knew something more about his family.

Just now, finishing my kitchen chores, I stepped barefoot out the back door, waving to my father coming across the newly planted field of sweet corn. Walking quickly, he waved back and headed toward his clockmaker's shop, the House of Time, a structure separate from the main house. There, he made timepieces large and small, not only for our Plain folk but for *Englischers*, too. Some customers traveled from as far as Philly and Pittsburgh after word spread through the years that Dat was a fine workman and his integrity second to none.

Moving toward the porch steps, I called, "Busy day?"

"*Jah*, but never too *fleissich* for my Sylvie-girl," he said, blending his English and *Deitsch* as he sometimes did. Grinning, he removed his corn silk-colored straw hat, revealing that his dark brown bowl cut was in need of Mamma's scissors.

Following him over to what had always been his work haven, as well as a small showroom, I found myself in the area where old and new clocks lined the walls and where clock parts filled shelves; an array of tools for the exacting work he was so well-known for were on his work desk and organized in cupboards nearby. In this cozy yet cluttered room, complete with its own small fireplace, Dat had worked from early morning to suppertime, and occasionally into the evening, for as long as I remembered. Sometimes, when the work was especially intricate, he hummed unfamiliar melodies while leaning close to the clock in hand, his black-rimmed magnifying loupe

pressed to his right eye, his left eye squeezed shut. And all the while, the pendulums swung, and the clocks ticked their familiar pulse in this magical place.

Dat took his seat on the wooden swivel chair and gave me an appraising look. “Itching to tell me something, *Dochder?*”

Nodding, I said, “Susie Zook stopped by earlier while I was shaking out rugs.” I hoped that what I was about to disclose wasn’t news to him. “Preacher Zook’s taken a turn for the worse.”

My father lowered his head briefly and sighed. “I just returned from seeing Mahlon.” Raising his head, Dat gave me a thoughtful, sad look. “The poor man is suffering.”

The potential loss of Preacher Mahlon Zook seemed to trouble Dat more than I would have expected, given the minister’s seventy-seven years on earth.

Even so, one of the many things I loved about my father was his attentiveness . . . and his patience. For instance, when I was very little, he would sweep me into his lap and listen while I made up a story for him, not yet able to read the picture book in his hand—the one he was waiting to read to me. “*Tell me more,*” he would say again and again, smiling encouragingly and raising his eyebrows at my tales. Oh, I could have sat there forever while Dat listened patiently.

But I wasn’t the only one who clamored for his attention. Dat was also highly sought after amongst the People; there were many who came for his assistance. Generous beyond belief, he was always so eager to help anyone in need. Why, according to my beau, Titus Kauffman, even some of the ministers looked up to Dat. To think Dat had come as a seeker when he first set foot on fertile Amish soil more than twenty years ago, and now he was known as one of the most upstanding church members in all of Hickory Hollow! For several

years now, he had even assisted Deacon Luke Peachey with the alms fund.

Leaning against the work desk, where I'd stood so often as a little girl watching his nimble fingers at work, I glanced at the shelves above. Once, when I was just seven, I had stood barefoot on this very surface, stretching high on tiptoes to reach the old brass tinderbox on the top shelf. Like a hen warming eggs, Dat's family heirloom always nested in the same spot. And it was always locked.

While I remember asking about the beautiful tinderbox that day when I was so young, I had often wondered *why* it was kept locked. If fire-starting material was needed, shouldn't it be at the ready?

My father had once warned me never to snoop, and Mamma had cautioned my childish curiosity. "*Ain't your business, Sylvie. Besides,*"—and here she'd looked me straight in the eye—"how do ya know it's locked?"

I kept mum about my efforts to pry it open; I'd even shaken the scuffed-brass treasure that had so tempted me. *Nee*, I just scrunched up my little face at Mamma like I couldn't remember, hoping she wouldn't ask more.

And in spite of my silence, Mamma leaned down and kissed my forehead. "*You've never been a Duppmeyer, Sylvia,*" she said. "*Now's not the time to start.*"

Eleven years had come and gone since that embarrassing day. And I had been mindful to heed Dat's warning.

Presently, Dat reached for a mantel clock and studied the back of its case. "Is there something more on your mind, Sylvie?" he asked as he reached for a specific tool. "Dirk Jameson's dropping by soon, so I should prob'ly make sure his clock's keeping perfect time." Dat glanced at me.

I quickly told him that Titus Kauffman and I had been courting for nearly a year now. After all, Dat had likely put it together already, and he was often the first person I wanted to share with, even before Mamma at times.

“*Des gut* . . . Titus is a fine young man,” Dat said approvingly. I glowed inwardly, happy with his response.

“I’ll be over for supper right on the dot,” he said, still tinkering with the clock. “Be sure to tell your Mamma.”

“Okay.” Moving toward the open door, I slipped out to the side porch just in time to see Bishop John Beiler, the blacksmith, pull up in his enclosed carriage.

The man of God climbed out and immediately tied his mare to the hitching post. Waving at me, he smiled and hurried up the walkway lined with pink tulips toward Dat’s shop. “*Wie geht’s, Sylvia?*”

I replied in *Deutsch* that I was fine and glad to see him. *He’ll likely tie the knot for Titus and me come November*, I thought, my face warming at the possibility.

“How’s your hardworkin’ Dat?” Bishop Beiler inquired.

“Keepin’ real busy.” I smiled and motioned toward the shop, guessing he was here to pay Dat a visit. “By the way, there’s a fresh pitcher of root beer in the fridge. Care for some?”

“You’re as thoughtful as your father.” Bishop nodded, his blue-gray eyes twinkling. “And bring a tall glass for your Dat, too.”

Agreeing, I went over to the back door of the utility room, then through the narrow hallway leading to the kitchen. There, Mamma was wiping her face with her white work apron, smiling-happy to see me.

“Bishop’s come to see Dat,” I said, also mentioning the offered root beer.

Mamma turned back to the counter, where she was grating cabbage for slaw. “I hope he’s not bringin’ worse news ’bout Preacher Zook.”

“Well, he didn’t look glum, if that’s what ya mean.” I poured the root beer and told Mamma I’d be right back to help. “Oh, and Dat says he’ll be on time for supper.”

Mamma laughed softly. “We’ll see ’bout that.”

As I carried the two tumblers of root beer out the door, I smiled fondly, thinking how caught up in his work my father often was—able to repair any clock to perfect running order. But now I wished I’d also revealed how much Titus reminded me of him—the most wonderful man I knew.

When the time’s right, I’ll tell him.

CHAPTER

One

*I*t was the first day of May in Hickory Hollow, and the sky was so bright Rhoda Miller wished she owned a pair of sunglasses. Thanks to the warmest spring in years, farmers had already planted both their sweet corn and their field corn.

Rhoda was not only delighted with the gorgeous weather, she was also excited about celebrating the twentieth anniversary of her engagement to dearest Earnest. *Just two weeks away, on Ascension Day*, she thought, trying to imagine what her husband might have in store to surprise her, not sure how he could top what he'd gotten last year—an antique Dutch cupboard made in 1742. And then there was the year before, when he had custom made a lovely cherrywood grandfather clock. It was almost as if their engagement anniversary was somehow more important than their actual wedding date in mid-November. But she knew better. Unlike folk who were born and raised Plain, Earnest just had his own unique way of doing certain things.

Smiling at the memory of the whirlwind Earnest Miller had

caused in her life more than two decades ago, Rhoda finished her preparations for supper while Sylvia took the ice-cold root beer to Earnest's shop. Rhoda let herself daydream about their very special relationship, feeling blessed beyond her fondest hopes by her wonderful man.

From their first meeting, brown-eyed Earnest had had such a winning way, quickly gaining her trust, as well as that of every church member, including the ministerial brethren. He had even gotten approval from Preacher Zook and Bishop John to join church after only a single year of Proving, during which he'd learned the *Ordnung*, as well as such necessary skills as how to hitch a road horse to a carriage and carpentry skills to help with barn raisings and whatnot.

Who would've thought an Englischer would make such a fine Amish husband? she thought.

With Ernie Jr. and Adam over helping the neighbor bring in the cows for the late-afternoon milking, and Calvin and Tommy out in their own barn, Tommy milking Flossie, the kitchen was too quiet. *Has it ever been this still?* Oddly, Rhoda could almost *hear* the silence, and she moved toward the screen door to stand there for a moment.

Just then, she heard Earnest talking with the bishop out on the porch. Doubtless both men were concerned about Preacher Zook's fragile state. She prayed silently, asking God to carry the faithful minister safely over Jordan when the time came. And to help his wife and family cope with the great loss. *Bring comfort and peace to the People*, she thought, not adding anything for herself. After all, she had much to be thankful for in a close-knit family, five healthy children, an attentive and loving spouse, and plenty of customers for his clock-making business. Rhoda's prayers were for others' needs—body, mind,

and spirit. She believed the Lord God and heavenly Father expected nothing less of her.

While the pork chops topped with mounds of stuffing baked in the middle of the gas oven, she washed her hands at the sink and set the table, still counting her numerous blessings . . . this hand-crafted table, for one. As a teenager, she had secretly coveted the table made years before by her great-uncle. Then, lo and behold, when he passed away, the table was bestowed on Rhoda's *Mamm*, who later offered it to Rhoda after *Mamm* became a widow and pared down to move into the *Dawdi Haus* at Rhoda's eldest sister's.

It'll belong to Sylvia someday, Rhoda thought, wondering if the spring in her daughter's step meant there was a special fellow. If so, Earnest might have to surprise Rhoda with a different table. Either that or have a new one made for Sylvia's wedding present.

Who might be courting her? Rhoda mused as she poured cold water into a large pitcher, since most of the root beer had gone to her husband and the bishop just now. Goodness, she'd felt downright jumpy off and on all day, thinking of Preacher Zook so near death's door. She was glad Earnest had gone to see him, close as the two friends had been all these years. *Even longer than Earnest and I have been together. . . .*



"Mahlon wants you to come alongside his family when he passes," John Beiler told Earnest in the privacy of the clock showroom. After drinking their fill of root beer, they had moved inside from the porch for this private conversation.

Earnest pushed his hand through his dark beard, feeling awkward hearing this while his friend still drew breath.

Bishop John looked toward the only window in the room, then returned his gaze to Earnest, a solemn smile crossing his wrinkled face. “Mahlon trusts ya like a *Bruder*.”

“I’d say the same about him,” Earnest admitted. From their first encounter, his friendship with Mahlon had come about effortlessly. Mahlon had been the one to usher Earnest into the community of the People so long ago. The two men had never argued that Earnest recalled—never even spoken a cross word. Rare for any friendship, let alone for two men brought up in such vastly different cultures. And now Mahlon lay dying. *My closest friend*, Earnest thought with a great sigh.

Bishop John stayed around a few more minutes, then mentioned the batch of horseshoes he must finish making before day’s end. Without saying more about Mahlon, he turned to leave.

He’s already missing his other preacher, thought Earnest, returning his focus to Dirk Jameson’s contrary clock. Dirk would be arriving in ten short minutes, and once the transaction was complete, Earnest would head over to supper with his wife and their children.

I’ll be eating like a king when poor Mahlon hasn’t been hungry in weeks, he thought guiltily.

Earnest’s visit to see Mahlon that morning had had every mark of a deathbed visit. Recalling it, Earnest leaned back in his work chair, closing his eyes. His friend’s words were still in his ears. “*I wonder who the Lord will choose to replace me as a preacher*,” Mahlon had said, motioning Earnest near his bed.

Earnest realized the man was thinking ahead to the casting of lots that would take place if Mahlon should pass away. He had leaned closer to hear what more his friend had to say, assuring him that he was praying for his recovery.

But Mahlon shook his head. “*My dear brother in the Lord, be ready to pick up the mantle, if it should be Gott’s will.*”

Earnest had struggled to keep a poker face as he inwardly shrugged the notion away. “*The People need you,*” he had insisted. *Not a man like me . . .*



Sitting to the left of her mother at the supper table, Sylvia couldn’t help observing her father after the silent blessing. He had surprised Mamma by being on time for the meal, but there was something off in his demeanor, and Sylvia couldn’t rightly discern what. While he seemed downright blue about Preacher Zook’s failing health, something else behind his dark brown eyes hinted at a deeper misery.

Mamma passed around the baked pork chops, and Sylvia’s youngest brother, Tommy, just turned eight, soon began scraping off the browned bread crumbs mixed with onions and seasoning, muttering that he didn’t like his pork chop that way.

The other boys—eleven-year-old Calvin, thirteen-year-old Adam, and Ernie, fifteen—snickered. Dat let it go, maybe not even noticing. *His mind’s elsewhere,* Sylvia thought.

Calvin spoke up to ask when Tommy was getting a haircut. “Tis gettin’ mighty long . . . an’ curly, too,” he said, his eyes dancing while he seemed to hold back a laugh.

Dat smiled a little then and scratched his wavy brown beard. “Say, I had curls like that once,” he told them, looking at Mamma. “Course, I didn’t have a bowl cut when I was Tommy’s age.” He chuckled. “I missed out on that.”

Sylvia smiled.

“Well, you need a haircut, too, dear,” Mamma said, surprising them. By the looks of it, this took Dat off guard.

He flipped his hand through the back of his hair and laughed a little. “Been too busy, I guess.”

Right then and there, Mamma scheduled Dat and Tommy for haircuts on the porch tomorrow evening. “Can’t be puttin’ it off any longer,” she said.

Tommy pulled a face and reached up to tug one of the curls Calvin had complained about earlier, but Mamma had spoken, and that was that.

“Tell us more about what it was like growin’ up English, Dat,” Calvin said, taking his table knife and fork to his pork chop.

Instantly Sylvia was all ears, hoping to hear something about Dat’s family—especially his younger sister.

Dat glanced at Mamma, then back at the boys. “Well, it wasn’t nearly as much fun as you and your brothers are having, I can tell you that.”

Adam’s smile was nearly identical to Dat’s. “Ya mean, you never had a mouse run up one pant leg and down the other when you were little?”

Dat shook his head. “Nope. And I didn’t learn to bow hunt or help plant a big potato field, either. None of that.” He made the saddest face just then, comically shaking his head in mock dismay.

Sylvia smiled. Truth be told, Dat had acknowledged numerous times the many things he’d missed out on—churning butter, playing corner ball, building a chicken coop, or going through eight grades of school at a one-room schoolhouse. His growing-up years had been so different from everything Sylvia knew, there were times when she wondered how Dat could *not* miss the fancy life.

I’m glad he doesn’t!

“See? You kids have *all* the fun,” Dat said, using one of his favorite expressions, and Mamma nodded as she sat there eating and enjoying the silliness.

“Seems to me we get all the hard work, too,” Ernie said, rubbing his forehead.

“Hard work puts meat on your bones,” Dat said, “and builds strong character.”

“What do *curls* do?” With a grin, Calvin turned to look at Tommy’s hair. “Make ya look like a little kid?”

“Now, son,” Dat chided.

Sylvia didn’t say what she was thinking, which was that, with such a mop of hair, their baby brother somewhat resembled a girl.

“In the blink of an eye, Tommy will be a young man,” Dat told them.

Tommy beamed like he’d won a foot race.

“But looking young is a *gut* thing.” Dat grinned at Mamma. “Just take a look at your pretty Mamma here . . . still as youthful as the day I met her.”

“For goodness’ sake,” Mamma said, blushing as Dat lightly touched her cheek.

Sylvia had never heard any other person talk like Dat did. Scarcely anyone amongst the People would call another person pretty, not right out. But she couldn’t deny appreciating the way her parents treated each other, like a young couple still in love, different from most other couples their age. It seemed an awful lot like Dat was still courting Mamma. Why, there were moments he looked at Mamma the way Sylvia sometimes caught Titus looking at *her*.

She had to wonder if this was because of her father’s upbringing, raised outside of their cloistered world and only becoming

Amish in his twenties. Listening now to Dat's familiar teasing, she couldn't imagine having more fun around the table at any of their kinfolk's homes, or with any other family for that matter—Plain or fancy. And Mamma and Dat's enjoying every minute of their time together made Sylvia dismiss the notion that her father had been troubled earlier.