

BEVERLY
LEWIS
..... *The*
LOVE LETTERS



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Beverly Lewis, *The Love Letters*
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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

The poem in chapter 22 appears on page 65 of *A Selection of Sepulchral Curiosities, With a Biological Sketch on Human Longevity*, edited and published by Thomas Kinnersley in 1823 in New York. An epigraph on a tombstone in Malvern Church, Worcestershire, England, it reads in its original form:

"They were so truly one, that none could say
Which of them rul'd, or whether did obey:
He rul'd because she would obey; and she,
In so obeying, rul'd as well as he."

This story is a work of fiction. With the exception of recognized historical figures and events, all characters and events are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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To
Kathy Illum,
longtime friend and devoted reader.
Your insight and love are incomparable gifts.

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O my love's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June:
O my love's like the melody
That's sweetly play'd in tune!

—Robert Burns

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PROLOGUE

JUNE 1966

*M*y world tilted when *Dawdi* Tim passed away last winter; then it spun off its axis when my parents sent me away from my beau to be with my widowed grandmother for the summer.

“My Mamma *needs ya, with Dawdi gone,*” my mother urged.

While I dearly wanted to help my sorrowing grandmother in rural Brownstown—far from my family’s home in Mifflinburg—the timing was just awful. Being gone for the summer, I would miss out on my baptismal instruction, and without it I couldn’t marry Nathaniel Zimmerman this November. An entire year would pass before the next wedding season rolled around for my beau and me.

Nat wasn’t very happy about the arrangement, either, yet he tried to soothe my fears and took me for a ride in his black courting carriage before I left. We stopped at Dairy Queen and had ice cream garnished the way *Dawdi* had liked his—with chopped nuts and oodles of whipped cream. I still cherish that memory and Nat’s efforts to console me, especially since it was

obvious he had his own worries, what with my parents having joined the Beachy Amish-Mennonites, and *Mammi* Janice a black-bumper Mennonite. Such a combination, to be sure.

I had assured Nat I was Old Order, skin to bone, despite where my parents or grandmother attended church. Looking mighty relieved, he'd reached for me and kissed my cheek, and then, after more tender words, he took me home.

Watching his buggy rumble down the road, I promised myself: *If anything, the separation will make our love stronger.*



So here I sat, a week later, in the grand white gazebo my grandfather built years ago, surrounded by the sounds of tree frogs and crickets. I reread Nat's first letter since I'd come, a newsy account of taking his courting-age sister to Singing, and of opening several new beehives, as well as cutting the first hay of the season with his father and brothers.

Memorizing his sign-off, *With all my love*, I dismissed my loneliness to the balmy breeze and contemplated the wall telephone in *Mammi's* kitchen, dreaming of my beau's voice in my ear. But Nat was much too conservative to ever call me. The phone in his father's barn was used strictly for contacting an occasional paid driver, clear up there northwest of Harrisburg, in what had been called Buggytown, USA, back in the 1800s.

In those days, there were fifty carriage and sleigh factories, and my own father could trace his ancestry to one of those original buggy makers. So that's where my parents had put down roots as Old Order Amish when my mother left Brownstown and the Mennonite church to marry *Dat*. Then, after attending the more traditional Amish group for many years, they joined the Beachy Amish two years ago, after getting

written permission from our Old Order bishop. Out of respect, I halfheartedly followed in their footsteps, but only until I could become a member of the church of my childhood—the church where I would eventually marry Nat.

The scent of lilacs filled the air, and I spun a loose strand of hair from beneath my formal prayer cap around my slender fingers. In my memory, I could almost hear Dawdi's harmonica drifting out over the pastureland in the still of the night. So *many visits here through the years . . .*

The back door opened and Mammi, round and graying, stepped out. Her white cotton duster shimmered against the dusk. "You all right, Marlena?" Her frail voice pushed into the stillness.

"Just thinkin', is all."

"Want some company?"

I nodded in the fading light. *She's lonesome, too.*

Mammi wandered out to join me in the shelter of the gazebo and sat there, holding my hand, linking our collective grief. We took our time sharing personal memories, slow and sweet. "Remember how Dawdi would hoist me onto his big shoulders?" I said.

"And let you wear his holey brown hat, too. No one else was allowed to touch it."

I turned to look at her, interested in what she remembered. "Whatever became of that ol' thing?"

"It's round here somewhere . . . like so many reminders." Her pain mingled with her words.

After more shared recollections, Mammi said she felt chilly and headed back to the house, disappearing inside.

I remained there, moving my bare feet back and forth over the smooth wood, giving way to further daydreams. Dawdi was

always playing his mouth organ or humming church hymns such as “In the Sweet By and By” and “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” while doing his farm chores. He hummed all the time, really. And there were the clever tunes he readily created, too, with lyrics to make a point, funny and otherwise. Like a doting old dove, he’d coaxed me right under his reassuring wing when my big sister, Luella, left the Old Order, along with any form of Anabaptist faith, far as I knew. She’d caused a terrible stir when she fell for a good-looking man outside our Plain community—with the emphasis on *fell*, according to my distraught parents. Where Luella’s actions were concerned, *der Deiwel* had never been mentioned, but that dark spirit certainly came to mind when I considered Luella’s choice to leave us far behind.

Then, a year or so after their wedding, Luella’s soldier husband was sent to fight in Vietnam, in a war we did not support—like the rest of the Plain community, we were staunch pacifists. Just as worrisome, Luella had refused to return home to the farm to be looked after during the final weeks of her pregnancy, which only deepened the estrangement.

“*I miss her,*” Dawdi Tim had confided when we visited him and Mammi last Thanksgiving, before he took so ill in the depths of winter. His pale blue eyes filled with tears, and I knew our dear grandpa had not turned his back on Luella, unlike others in the church . . . including me, although Dawdi never would have pointed this out. Truth was, I loved Luella, but we’d never meshed, even though we’d made repeated attempts. We simply didn’t see eye to eye. After she broke our mother’s heart, I had even less reason to stay in touch.

I spied the spot in the backyard over by a stand of poplars where, as a child, I’d planted little rocks in the dirt, going over

them each day with Dawdi's green watering can. Luella had mocked me for my efforts and hurried off to the hen house to talk to the chickens instead. But I didn't mind. I figured if everything else grew and thrived so effortlessly with Dawdi's loving care, then maybe my pebbles might sprout and blossom, too. They never did, of course, as Luella was quick to remind me, her hand on one hip.

Mammi's vegetable garden and flower beds were only one testament to the vibrant farm she'd built with my grandfather. Canning season was forthcoming—one of the reasons Mamma had sent me here this sunny month of June. Yet, truth be told, I suspected she and Dat also hoped that either Nat or I might find a new future mate while apart . . . one that would not tie me to the Old Ways.

Nevertheless, a single summer away couldn't keep me from eventually marrying the dearest boy in all of Mifflinburg, the only fellow I'd ever dated.

Rising from my cozy spot, I looked toward the adjacent Amish farm, its green borders bumping against Dawdi's newly rented land. I actually expected to see the Bitner boy out there with his yellow-and-white barn cat turned house pet, catching lightning bugs in a Ball canning jar with holes punched in the top, a makeshift lantern. Roman and Ellie Bitner's only son suffered from a bad limp and was considered slow for his fourteen years, but what he lacked in mental abilities, he made up for in kindness. In fact, there was something real special about the young fellow whose given name was Jake, though most everyone called him Small Jay.

Nearly all of the Brownstown Plain community knew of the youth's disabilities . . . and understood. Everyone but his father. But then, that might've been because Small Jay was

Roman's only boy, and what a farmer needed most was a robust and energetic son.

It was time for me to head indoors, into the stifling house that Dawdi had built with his own callused hands nearly five decades ago. I pictured Mammi sitting near the open kitchen windows, fanning her hot, sticky face with one of the round fans the ushers at her Mennonite meetinghouse gave out during the dog days of July and August. *Jah*, even the four walls of Mammi's kitchen, with its black-and-white-checked floor, were a stark reminder of Dawdi, as well as of Luella's and my summer visits here, often for a month at a time.

I stared up at the second-story door, which opened to a small white balcony. It was Dawdi's favorite spot to sit and hum after supper. That space had given me opportunity to hear him tell of "the *alt* days" when he was a farm boy. From that high perch, we could spy on everything, including Luella, who liked to count in her uppity-sounding French as she tossed feed to the hens . . . always pushing the limits of what was expected of a devout Amish girl. Luella seemed too busy with her own thoughts, and later, her own friends, to glean much of anything from her Plain family, Dawdi included.

All this pondering the past. Something stirred in me, and I was surprised to realize that I missed my older sister—her years growing up, living at home, and seeing her every day. After her marriage to Gordon Munroe, she'd basically disappeared from our lives.

On nights like tonight, I wished Nat were within walking distance. I longed for his firm and loving hand wrapped around mine, but I tried to encourage myself, knowing that in just three months, I would be home again.

As if I'd never left . . .



CHAPTER 1



Marlena Wenger was a knot of nerves as she pushed the iron over her grandmother's white pillowcase. She'd dampened it earlier, using a bottle with small holes drilled into its metal lid to sprinkle the water, and then rolled up the blouse to evenly distribute the moisture. Once it was ironed to her satisfaction, Marlena hung it up and reached for the next rolled item, a floral-print cotton dress.

Even though she dreaded the chore of ironing on this humid Tuesday, she'd gotten up earlier than usual, prior to the intense heat of the day. Already, her back ached and her legs had locked—something her mother warned her against. “*You can stand much longer if ya keep both knees bent,*” she could hear Mamma saying. But it took effort to remember, and there she stood, stiff-legged, her back arched.

Wishing for a breeze from the nearby open windows, she wondered why Dawdi Tim had never purchased a freestanding fan for the kitchen, considering the amount of electricity swirling through the walls of this house. *Makes no sense for Mammi to suffer in such heat.*

She let her mind drift back to her hometown of Mifflinburg. There, some of the older farmhouses had second-floor doors that opened outside to nothing but air. Nat Zimmerman's father once told her that such an exit could be the quick end of a sleepwalker. Her Dat, however, had explained that the doors, if propped open, circulated stale air when the upstairs was too oppressively hot for sleeping. But a doorway with no place to land? That was nothing short of peculiar.

Marlena thought now of her wonderful beau, as she often did during wakeful hours. Even her grandmother had mentioned Nat a few days ago, though not in such a positive light. "*He might be worried you'll grow accustomed to electricity and other conveniences.*" But Marlena was quick to quell her seeming concern, though she doubted Mammi Janice would truly mind if things went awry with her conventional Amish beau.

Nevertheless, Marlena had assured Nat in her most recent letter: *I'm eager to return to the simplicity of the Old Ways. I miss the gas lamps and traveling by horse and buggy. And I am always glad to have the chance to chat with Mammi's Old Order neighbor Ellie Bitner.*

Presently she glanced at her grandmother, who was sitting hunched over her sewing beneath the table light, needle and thread poised in her fleshy hand. *More and more Beachy folk back home are yielding to the temptation of electric*, Marlena thought, pressing the facing flat on her grandmother's modest dress. How long before Dat and Mamma also gave in to the temptation of electricity and gas ranges and ovens? Of course, they were still considered new converts to the more progressive Amish fellowship, but Marlena was fairly sure her father had privately considered the notion of owning a car someday. The stringent dos and don'ts of the church ordinances had

begun to ease up some since many of the formerly Old Order Amish church members had first split away.

“Will ya run next door for some fresh eggs this morning?” Mammi looked up from her sewing. “There’s a-plenty of egg money under the cookie jar.” She offered a small smile. “If ya don’t mind.”

“Once I’m finished here, *jah*.” Marlena was glad for an excuse to pay Ellie Bitner a visit. The kind and outgoing Amish-woman had always been someone Marlena yearned to spend more time with.

“Why not take some of your warm raisin bread along, too, dear? Surprise Ellie.”

Marlena agreed, happy to ease her grandmother’s load. Just how long before her grandmother could manage without help was unknown. For now, there were quarts of sweet strawberries to be picked and washed for this Saturday’s market, and for the table. Soon, the juicy black cherries would be coming on, as well as the bulk of the garden produce. Weeding alone filled up Marlena’s morning hours several times a week. Summer had always been a paradise of abundance at Dawdi Tim’s beautiful, sprawling farm.

Mammi rose to get herself some meadow tea from the icebox, a newfangled convenience she’d splurged on after Dawdi Tim’s insurance paid out. According to the circle letters, Mammi had ordered hers the same week as her Mennonite cousin out in Indiana. “I noticed young Jake Bitner out walking his cat earlier,” she said.

“Sassafras?”

“Mm-hmm,” Mammi said. “Sometimes he practically wears that cat around his shoulders when he sits near the pond in the willow grove down yonder.”

“That cat obviously loves Small Jay.”

“Well, but he keeps the poor creature on a leash, of all things. Restraining a cat is downright odd, if ya ask me.”

Marlena couldn't conceal her smile. “Does Sassy also heel and sit on command?”

“*Ach* now, for Small Jay that cat might just do anything.”

They laughed.

Mammi had relayed that from the time Sassafras was just a kitten, she'd sought out Small Jay in the most peculiar way, following him around and meowing and carrying on when he left her outside. And this was even before Small Jay had miraculously nursed the kitten back to life, after Sassy was stepped on by one of the mules. Ellie had called her son an angel of mercy at the time. The end result was that the cat eventually moved into the Bitners' house, where she enjoyed store-bought cat food and occasional crumbs from the table.

Finished with her task at last, Marlena unplugged the iron and set it on the counter to cool, then returned to fold up the wooden ironing board covered with a thick terry cloth towel secured beneath by thumbtacks. She carried it into the large pantry off the kitchen. “I'll run over to Ellie's now, Mammi.”

“Don't forget the egg money, *jah*?”

Marlena retrieved the money and waved. “I'll be back right quick.”

Her grandmother let loose a chuckle. “I've heard that before, so just take your time.” She paused and looked wistfully at the ceiling, smile lines gracing her face, then looked back at her. “I daresay something 'bout that big farm calls to ya. Ain't so?”

Marlena shrugged. She couldn't deny feeling drawn to other Amish folk there in Brownstown, like Ellie and her young girls, and Small Jay, too. But this particular summer—right this minute, in fact—she'd much rather be hurrying off to see her darling beau.