

A
WIDOW'S
HOPE

MARY ELLIS



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Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

B*aa. Baa. Baaaaa.* Hannah Brown nearly dropped the clean dress she was hanging on the line into the dewy grass. But she couldn't help herself. Every time she heard a sheep bleat, her heart jumped like a new human mom when her infant cried. Hannah pinned the garment to the clothesline and hurried to the pasture fence. Seeing nothing amiss, she breathed a sigh of relief. It was only a couple lambs energetically vying for their mother's attention. One never could completely relax with a flock of sheep. A lamb might escape the pasture and get lost, drown in the swiftly flowing creek, become entangled in the blackberry briars, or wander into the road. Then there was the possibility of a hungry predator selecting one of her beloved creatures for his evening meal.

Hannah lifted her long Plain dress and stepped up on the bottom rail so she might survey the orderly farm her late husband had so cherished. Two years had passed since his death, yet hot tears still stung the backs of her eyes when she remembered what a kind soul Adam had been. There was much to be said for a girl marrying a childhood pal and later her best friend as they grew to adulthood.

She came to love the quiet man who had loved his God, his farm, and his wife...in that order. Hannah wasn't complaining. Romantic love with heart-pounding sensations and runaway emotions was for fancy people. Practical Hannah had her house to run, a man who worked his land with deep faith, and their thriving business. Taxes must be paid on Amish farms same as on any other, and the sale of wool and spring lambs adequately supplemented the farm's income. Her nightly devotions had been filled with praise and thanksgiving for all she'd been given.

Only one prayer had gone unanswered during their six years of marriage, the prayer for a baby. No sons had come to carry on her husband's name and someday help with the plentiful chores. No baby for her to cradle in her arms and sing lullabies to in the evening. No little girl to teach to sew and knit and bake delicious cookies. No child to fill a heart that overflowed with love. Now that she was widowed, she might never know the joy of hearing a little one utter "mama." Would she spend the rest of her life alone and die a heart-broken old woman? *There were worse things in life*, she remembered as she willed herself not to cry.

She was reminded of Psalm 34:4: "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." Hannah blinked several times to help her stop wallowing in self-pity and turned her attention on two rams squaring off in the far pasture. She didn't hear the footsteps until the person was right behind her.

"They are not going to do anything different than be sheep, even if you watch them all afternoon, sister." Her younger brother, Thomas, stepped onto the rail beside her and pulled a long blade of Timothy grass to chew.

"Must you sneak up on a person like that?" Hannah asked, a little peevishly. She tried to wipe away her tears discreetly before her observant brother noticed.

"I thought surely you would've heard my buggy coming up the lane. That right rear wheel must be out of round. It makes an awful

lot of racket.” He swatted at a pesky gnat and then peered down at his sister. “Say, why are you crying? Is it because you’re selling me your farm? It doesn’t have to be so. I told you that. I can move here from *mamm* and *daed*’s, and we’ll manage things together. We always got along reasonably well growing up.” He tugged on one of her *kapp*’s ribbons.

Hannah hopped down from the rail and slipped an arm around her brother’s waist. “And when you get your courage up to ask a certain red-haired gal to ride home from a singing with you? Maybe even ask if you might court her? What then? No newlywed wife wants to share her household with a bossy sister-in-law.”

Thomas jumped down too and placed a hand on Hannah’s shoulder. “You’re not bossy—maybe a little opinionated, that’s all. And I do believe you’re putting the horse way before the buggy.” He gazed off across the rolling pasture and distant hayfields. The sun’s rays reflected off the golden heads of winter wheat like fire. “You’ve got no call to move to Ohio to live with Julia unless it’s what you really want. Your home will always be here on this farm, with *mamm* and *daed* down the road, and me—even if I end up a bachelor all my days.”

Hannah chuckled to herself. Her handsome brother needn’t worry about finding a wife. She’d seen too many female heads glance in his direction during Sunday preaching services. “*Danki*, Thomas, but I miss Julia. Her *kinner* are growing up quickly, without their loving aunt offering her two cents’ worth. And Julia could use my help in the garden with canning and herb drying. Her hands are growing stiffer each year. Besides, the sale of my wool could help Simon buy land for his two sons. They’ll need their own farms someday, and land isn’t getting any cheaper.”

Hannah started walking toward the house. “Are you hungry?” she asked over her shoulder, wishing to change the subject. “Let’s have some of the stew I’ve been simmering all morning.” She didn’t want Thomas to see how uneasy she was about her relocation to Ohio. She wanted to help Julia with her four lively children—two boys and two

girls. And Julia had assured her that the sheep would be welcome. But Julia's husband was a deacon in their district—a district a bit stricter than Hannah's own in Pennsylvania. He'd found her opinions too liberal during her rare visits in the past. Could she meld into the Miller household and offer assistance instead of disruption?

"And what about Simon Miller?" Thomas asked, easily catching up to her with his long strides. "He's a stern man and rules his household a bit firmer than your Adam did, I reckon."

It was as though her little brother had read her thoughts, something he'd done often while they were growing up. She stomped up the porch steps a bit noisily for a grown woman. "It's not my place to judge my brother-in-law, Thomas, nor yours. Julia writes nothing but positive things about what a good husband and father he is, and what a good deacon he is in their district." She pushed open the door and entered the kitchen, fragrant with the smell of home cooking.

Thomas washed and took his seat at the table, looking abashed. "You're right. Sorry."

She patted his arm lightly after carrying over the kettle of thick stew. "Nothing for you to worry about. Simon and I will get along just fine."

In her heart, Hannah wasn't so sure, but what choice did she have? She'd run her home efficiently during her marriage and managed to keep the farm going with her *daed's* and Thomas' help after Adam's death. But she couldn't depend on their kindness forever. Her father was getting old, and Thomas had his own life to plan. She had to trust—and pray—for a smooth transition into Simon Miller's household. Picking up her spoon, she found her appetite had vanished.

She ate two spoonfuls before pushing the bowl aside. "I received a letter from our sister the other day. Would you like to read it?"

"Why don't you read it to me?" Thomas said as he ladled more stew into his bowl. He broke off another piece of brown bread and looked up expectantly.

Hannah drew a breath and read aloud the letter that had warmed her heart and given her courage:

My dearest Hannah,

I hope this letter finds you well, along with mom, dad, and Thomas. And I truly hope you are not working too hard between the spring planting of the fields and all the chores your critters entail in the springtime. I trust you're not starting seeds to bring with you because I have more than enough sprouted for a huge vegetable and herb garden once the soil warms up. And if there's some plant you favor that I've forgotten, you'll have plenty of time to soak seeds once you're settled in.

We are counting the days until we can welcome you to our home. All is well with us. Little Leah is busy embroidering your name on three hankies while Emma plans to bake a lemon cake with sour cream frosting on the day of your arrival. I told her it was your favorite. My boys are glad you're bringing sheep along, and not more cows to milk. Even Simon has been checking and repairing the fences so that our shepherdess can keep track of her flock. As for me? I look forward to having my loving sister near me again. Your sunny disposition has never failed to lift my spirits. And I can use your help in the kitchen as my hands are not as capable as they once were.

I know it is with great sorrow that you leave the farm you and Adam purchased as a young couple, but Thomas will care for it just as well, and you will still be able to visit. The Lord never closes a door without opening another. I am eager for you to meet Simon's brother, Seth, who also lost his spouse a couple of years ago. He is a kindhearted, hardworking man with a sweet little daughter to bring up alone. He has asked about your wool business more than once when I've mentioned you during meals. Now I must close, but soon I will have your helpful counsel whenever I need it.

Your loving sister, Julia

Hannah smiled as she refolded the letter and placed it in her apron pocket. So like Julia to try to matchmake even while hundreds of miles away. She thought back to the time Adam had come courting. Julia had had a hand in encouraging Adam to court her and see Hannah as more than a good friend. But Hannah wasn't a young woman with dreams spinning around her head, wearing her hopes on her sleeve. At twenty-eight, she would gladly spend the rest of her life as a widow if only God had blessed her with several *bopplin*. But she had no babies and probably never would.

"Your *sunny disposition*...who is Julia talking about, sister?" Thomas asked, breaking her reverie with his teasing.

Hannah swatted his arm lightly but couldn't help but smile. "Julia's been gone for some time. She must have forgotten my true nature."

"It is that true nature I will sorely miss." Thomas brushed a kiss on her forehead before heading outdoors to his chores.

Lately Hannah had felt neither helpful nor sunny, knowing Simon had originally insisted that she sell her sheep or give them to Thomas before making the move.

Hannah's place was with her sister. So like Ruth, that is where she would go. But she would not move without her sheep. Caring for those animals, the gentlest of God's creatures, allowed her days to be productive and meaningful. But they might be more than the Miller clan ever bargained for.

Holmes County, Ohio

Simon Miller swept his hat from his head as he entered the live-stock barn and wiped his brow with his handkerchief. When his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he spotted his two sons sitting side by side, milking cows. The heifers chomped noisily on hay from their trough, not paying much attention to the boys' small hands. "Awfully warm for March, no?" Simon asked.

"*Jah*, sure," his elder son agreed, glancing up briefly. Matthew at

twelve years old was growing so fast Julia was always lengthening his trousers. Wiry and fleet as a fox, the boy hurried wherever he went. He wasn't much of a student, but his love of the farm equaled Simon's own, and he seldom had to be told what chores needed to be done.

"Put some elbow to it, Henry, or you'll still be sitting there come dark." Simon chuckled at his younger son, who usually worried about angering the heifer by pulling too hard or not warming his hands enough. He was as different from his brother as the hawk to a dove. Although not lazy, Henry meandered through his chores, easily distracted by an ant colony or a cloud formation or a newborn calf. Although he was usually quiet, when the child did start talking, he poured out a bucketful of questions.

"Finish up, sons, and get that milk into the cooler. Your *mamm* will have dinner on the table soon. And I for one am hungry."

"Me too," they answered in unison, and even Henry worked the udders faster.

Simon walked slowly to enjoy the sun slanting over his white frame house. Sunset was his favorite time of day. With the chores behind him and night coming on, he looked forward to a good meal with his family. Julia was an excellent cook. Her pies and cakes were the best in the district. His mouth watered at the thought of her fresh peach cobbler.

They didn't need Hannah Brown coming to live with them. They would be able to manage fine until his daughters were old enough to take on more of the household chores. But the Bible was clear on the topic of widows and orphaned children. It was his responsibility to take in Julia's sister and provide a home for her. He was a deacon in the district. What kind of example would he be setting if he allowed her to struggle on her farm alone? With only one brother back home and an aged father, Hannah should not remain her parents' burden.

But did she have to bring sixty smelly animals that produced no milk, no cheese, and no butter with her? And wool was scratchy, no

less. *Ach*, he mumbled, trying to put the move from his mind for the tenth time that day. He'd crossed paths with Julia's sister during some of her previous visits. The woman appeared to have an opinion about everything. It wasn't an Amish woman's place to be so forthright. And he'd seen books on her mantel that had no place there—books of higher learning and agricultural references. Everything he needed to know about farming he'd learned from his *daed* and would pass down to his sons. He didn't need any textbooks to teach him about crop rotation or natural pesticides. Adam should have put a stop to all that book learning after their marriage, but Adam had been too lenient with Hannah. Even Julia admitted it. Julia had said Hannah would lose interest in studying once children came. But poor Hannah and Adam hadn't been blessed with God's greatest miracle of all.

Simon walked up his back steps where a welcoming lamp glowed in the window. He whispered a silent prayer of thanks for his four healthy children. It wasn't easy to be widowed at such a young age with an active farm to manage. He pledged to be patient with his sister-in-law when she arrived, remembering Romans 12:12: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."

He would let Julia deal with her sister because the house was a woman's domain. He had a problem to solve with his own sibling. His younger brother, Seth, had been widowed for more than a year and a half. Time to at least start thinking about marrying again. Seth's little girl needed a mother, and what's more, Seth needed sons. One skinny little daughter wouldn't help in the fields during the years to come. Seth had a hay crop and a corn crop, and he needed *kinner*. Simon yearned for the day his brother remarried and once again had a loving wife to set his table with a meal, mend his shirts, and keep the house clean. Seth usually ate cold sandwiches with pickled beets or chow chow twice a day. Only his fried eggs or oatmeal in the morning broke the routine. That wasn't right. Never a baked chicken, slice of smoked ham, or piece of spiced apple pie with ice cream dripping down the sides.

With a glance over his shoulder, Simon spotted his boys closing the barn door behind them, and he entered the kitchen feeling immensely blessed. He would make it his business, no, his duty, to see his younger brother remarried and settled into a happy home.



Seth straightened his spine at the sound of horse hooves. He was refitting a mule harness with new buckles at the anvil so it would be ready for spring planting. A buggy was coming up his lane, and Seth recognized the horse as his brother's. But it wasn't Simon who stepped down and tied the horse to the hitching post but his sister-in-law, Julia. And she was carrying a large wicker hamper. Seth wiped his hands quickly against his leather apron and hurried to meet her.

"*Guder mariye*," she called as he approached. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, but as always there was a smile on her pleasant face.

"Good morning to you, Julia. What have you in the basket?" He couldn't help but grin in anticipation. "Something good to eat, I hope?"

He reached to take the hamper, but she sidestepped him and headed for the house. "No, just a basketful of baby kittens. Simon was concerned you might have too many mice this spring after the mild winter."

"*What?*" Seth followed Julia up the steps, across the porch, and into the house.

She managed to stay beyond his reach until she set the basket on the table with a mischievous grin. "I hope you like calico with white paws."

Seth lifted the lid cautiously, not wishing for a dozen little kittens to scamper in all directions. He needn't have worried. Inside was a pie tin of biscuits, a stuffed chicken smelling of sage and chestnuts, and an entire custard pie. "You tease me, Julia. This is much better

than a litter of mouse catchers.” He leaned close and inhaled deeply. “What kind of pie? Banana cream?”

Julia walked to the sink to wash her hands. “I tease you because you should laugh more. And the pie is lemon cream,” Julia replied, laying her wool sweater on a chair back.

“Oh, mercy. My favorite,” Seth uttered before heading for plates and forks. “Phoebe,” he called in the direction of the stairs. “Come down. Your Aunt Julia is here, and she’s brought lunch for us.” Seth set three plates on the table with a clatter, but Julia picked up one to return to the cupboard. “I’ve already eaten. But I’ll have a cup of coffee with you and Phoebe.” She tucked a lock of her dark hair back under her *kapp*.

“Coffee it is,” Seth said as he reached for the pot on the stove, shoving aside the frying pan. His attempt at making pancakes yesterday had been a disaster, and he hadn’t had a chance to scrub off the burned results. He noticed Julia eyeing his kitchen while she thought him distracted—the wilted geranium on the windowsill, the stack of unsorted mail on the counter, the laundry Julia had washed on Monday that he still hadn’t put back in Phoebe’s bureau. It was a far cry from the tidy kitchen his late wife had kept.

He moved the laundry basket closer to the steps. “Don’t think I don’t appreciate your washing our clothes, Julia. I’ve just been busy getting ready for the spring planting.” He poured coffee into a chipped cup while Julia went for the pitcher of milk.

“I know that, Seth. Your outdoor chores take all your energy this time of year. I’ll take the clothes up before I leave, and Phoebe and I can put them away together.”

“That child,” Seth said, his impatience growing.

“Wait, Seth. Let’s talk a moment before she comes down.” Julia smiled in her bashful fashion as she often did when about to venture into touchy matters. “Has she said anything this week? Has she raised her voice in song or praise? Has she talked *at all*?” Distress knit her brows and creased her forehead.

"She prays silently before meals and before bed, as do I. God doesn't require that we shout loudly to the heavens." Seth knew Julia meant well, but he wished she'd stop worrying about his daughter. Phoebe had simply chosen to be quiet for a time. "When she's ready to start talking again, she will, and making a big fuss won't hurry things along."

Julia set the chicken on a carving platter, along with a sharp knife and large fork, and then pulled back the foil covering the biscuits. "I agree, but it's been almost two years since Constance's passing. And I'm worried that if Phoebe doesn't resume talking soon, she might never."

Seth exhaled a weary sigh. "It's not been two years; it's barely one and a half. Don't worry so about Phoebe. There's not a thing wrong with that child."

At that moment, the subject of their discussion leaped from the bottom step and hurtled herself across the kitchen, her face aglow with pleasure on seeing her aunt. Julia swept the five-year-old up into her arms, still easy to do as Phoebe remained small for her age. "Hello, dear Phoebe," Julia said, bouncing her on her hip. There was certainly nothing wrong with the hug she delivered to Julia's neck or the huge grin on her sweet face.

"Let's all sit and bow our heads," Seth said when Julia set the child down. After prayers, Seth sliced off a chicken leg for Phoebe and a breast and wing for himself. He then spooned stuffing for them both.

When the child began to eat with gusto, Julia settled back in her chair. "Come back to our house on Sunday afternoon after the preaching service and noon meal. Phoebe can play with her cousins, and your *bruder* will breathe easy that you are not starving to death here by yourselves."

"*Danki*, Julia. I'll come if it's just going to be family." He leveled his sister-in-law a knowing look, one he didn't need to explain. Julia and Simon were determined to see him remarried to

somebody—anybody—in the district. He often felt like an animal on the auction block in Kidron during one of their fix-up evening meals.

Seth was happy with how things were. His marriage to Constance had been good, but he wasn't ready to remarry. With God's grace, he and Phoebe would continue to manage on their own. He had more pressing matters on his mind than matrimony. He needed a cash crop, another business to augment his meager farm income. Land taxes kept going up while the price of grain fluctuated too wildly to be counted on.

Another source of farm income, that's what he needed.

Certainly not a new wife.