

# THE MARRIAGE PACT

*Also by Kathleen Fuller*

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(available September 2025)

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*The*  
MARRIAGE  
PACT

AN AMISH OF MARIGOLD NOVEL

KATHLEEN FULLER

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*The Marriage Pact*

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To James. I love you.

# *Bontrager Family Tree*

THOMAS BONTRAGER (68) M. MIRIAM BONTRAGER (68)  
Children: *Phoebe (47), Devon (39), Owen (38), Zeb (37), Zeke (37), Ezra (35),  
Nelson (33), Perry (31), Jesse (30), Mahlon (28), Mose (28), Elam (25)*

PHOEBE M. JALON CHUPP  
*Malachi (30), Hannah (22)*

MALACHI M. JUNIA  
*Joseph, Thomas, Emma Mae, Katie, Rebecca*

DEVON M. NETTIE  
*twins Samson and Susan, Clara, Noah*

OWEN M. MARGARET  
*Vernon, Karl, Levi, Titus, Uriah*

ZEB M. AMANDA  
*Mary Rose, Dorothy, Eli, Marietta, Alice*

ZEKE M. DARLA  
*twins Thomas and David, Charlene, Aaron, Will*

EZRA M. KATHARINE  
*Paul, William, Kristina, LeAnna*

NELSON M. ELLA  
*John, Neva, Rachel, Perry*

JESSE M. CHARITY  
*Cevilla, Shirley, Ranae, Kaylene, Lisbet, Malinda, Joy*

MAHLON M. MATTIE  
*Gertie, Gideon*

MOSE M. VONDA  
*Jolisa, Aaron*

ELAM M. ADAH  
*Christopher*



*And then there was one . . .*

**BIRCH CREEK, OHIO**

Ten of the eleven Bontrager brothers gathered inside the family's expansive horse barn on this chilly, early spring day to discuss the latest family quandary. Perry, their only single brother, was about to be in a peck of trouble.

He was back home in Marigold nursing a serious cold while Devon, their oldest brother who lived in Fredericktown, was in Birch Creek on a quick visit. Phoebe, the eldest Bontrager sibling and their one and only sister, wasn't invited to this particular meeting. She had already tried to help him, to no avail.

Devon leaned against one of the huge vertical beams, his expression dubious. Identical twins, Zeb and Zeke, were seated on a hay bale near one of three dusty windows, their arms identically crossed. The rest of the brothers—Owen, Ezra, Nelson, Jesse, the second pair of identical twins, Mose and Mahlon, and the youngest, Elam—were alternately sitting and standing throughout the barn entryway, their faces a mix of amusement and annoyance. They all had blue eyes and varied tones of dark brown hair, some straight, some wavy, and one corkscrew curly.

They were also all married.

Horses stirred in their stables, as if they were curious about the unusual conference. It was a rare sight to see the brothers gathered in the barn all at once. When they were younger, before having wives and families of their own, they worked the family farm with their father, Thomas, while their patient mother, Miriam, kept them fed, clothed, and content. The Bontragers weren't without their hard times or their family squabbles. But they were a close-knit, caring, and incredibly *huge* Amish family.

"So what if he's not married yet?" Devon finally said. "He's only thirty-one. There are and have been plenty of older single people in our districts."

"Cevilla, for instance." Mahlon scratched his bearded chin. "But I doubt Perry will be in his eighties when he gets married for the first time."

"Not if *Mamm* has anything to do with it." Owen regarded his brothers. "She's been trying to fix him up. With *everyone*."

"*Trying* being the operative word." Ezra, the tallest, stretched out his long legs. "I think she's run out of single women to beg and plead with."

"I could put another bachelorette ad in the paper."

Every Bontrager turned to Jesse in horror.

"*Nee*," Zeb and Zeke exclaimed at the same time.

"Are you *ab im kopp*?" Nelson smacked him on the side of the head, flipping Jesse's straw hat to the ground.

"Ow." Jesse grabbed his hat off the barn floor, but he was grinning. "Hey, if it weren't for me, none of you would be married. Except Devon," he added when his oldest brother scoffed. "But the rest of you owe me."

The men's collective groan brought the horses to life. They pawed

in their stalls, and one mare neighed, as if agreeing with the disgruntled men.

Jesse snickered. "I'm kidding."

"*Gut*," Nelson said. "Or you'd be walking home tonight."

"We all agree. No ad." Zeb, who, other than Perry, was the most stoic of the brothers, moved to the center of the barn. "Maybe Jesse and Nelson can marry him off."

Jesse's good nature disappeared, while Nelson looked at Zeb in serious panic. "What?" they said in unison.

"He lives closer to you guys," Owen said. He managed Bontrager Farms and lived on the property with his wife, Margaret, and their five sons. "Besides, *Mamm* is getting desperate."

Mose held up his hands. "She's even making *Daed* a little nuts."

Elam looked at Jesse and Nelson. "You and Devon don't have to constantly hear about Perry's 'woeful bachelor' status."

All three brothers who didn't live in Birch Creek shook their heads. "*Mamm*'s been talking to Charity," Jesse said.

"And Ella," Nelson added.

"Even Nettie." Devon sighed.

"She's obsessed," Ezra said. "Since her and Phoebe's attempts at matchmaking didn't work, she told Katharine she's starting a circle letter with the sole intent to find Perry a *frau*."

"She wrote twelve letters just this morning." Owen grimaced. "It's only a matter of time before Marigold is inundated with single women."

The men held a moment of silence for Perry.

Zeke spun a stalk of hay between his fingers. "I know I resisted getting married at first—"

"We all did," Devon said.

"Not me." Ezra leaned back and smirked.

“—but Perry has taken avoiding women to the next level.” Zeke shook his head. “I’m starting to wonder—”

“If there’s something wrong with him,” Zeb finished.

“He’s fine,” Nelson said. “He just hasn’t met—”

“The right woman.” The twins spoke in precise unison.

“Someone should at least warn him,” Devon pointed out.

“I nominate Jesse.” Elam grinned.

Jesse balked. “Hey—”

“All in favor, say aye,” Zeb said.

“Aye.” Nine voices rang out in the cavernous barn.

“Now wait just a minute,” Jesse said, scowling. “Don’t I get a vote?”

“*Nee*,” they all said together.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll give him a heads-up.”

“Glad that’s settled.” Devon opened the barn door. A cool spring breeze blew inside, stirring the hay on the dirt floor. “We’re starting to sound like a hen party.” All but Jesse and Nelson followed him out the door.

“Do you really think we should get involved in this?” Jesse asked.

Nelson glanced at him. “What do you mean, ‘we’? You’re the one who’s going to talk to him.”

“*Ya*, but things are never that simple. Not when it comes to our *familye*.”

Nelson sighed. “True. Well, all you have to do is tell him about *Mamm*’s letters. Then let him handle the rest.”

They headed out of the barn. “You’re right,” Jesse said. “Perry can take care of himself.”

Nelson nodded. “For his sake, I sure hope so.”

## *Chapter 1*

**MID-APRIL**

**DOVER, DELAWARE**

**D**id you enjoy the pot roast, Maynard?” Daisy Hershberger perched on the edge of the couch, waiting for him to lower the newspaper in front of his face and answer her.

“Uh-huh.” Seated in a comfortable chair across from her, he crossed his legs and turned the page.

A cozy fire crackled in the wood fireplace, and the scents of the supper Daisy had spent the afternoon making lingered in the air. Everything had been done from scratch, down to the yeasty rolls and flaky pie pastry. She loved cooking, and she’d heard one time that the way to a man’s heart was through his stomach, or something like that. Maynard ate every crumb, but he was so quiet and reserved, she still wasn’t sure if he enjoyed the meal.

She glanced at the wicker basket on the floor near the sofa where she kept her cross-stitch supplies—aida cloth, a case of colorful embroidery floss, several wooden hoops in various sizes, a packet of needles, and tiny scissors. Her current project was a scripture verse for

her older sister's birthday, and she was almost finished. In fact, she could wrap it up tonight if she went back to work on it while Maynard read the paper.

While she liked the coziness of them being together, basking in the warmth of the living room fireplace inside the house she lived in with her parents, her mind wasn't on cross-stitch, and she didn't want Maynard to read the paper. She wanted him to sit next to her on the couch—the closer the better. Even though her parents were in the kitchen playing checkers and could walk in at any time, she yearned for him to put his arm around her and kiss her on the temple or—*gasp!*—on the cheek. If her parents saw, so be it. It wasn't exactly a secret that she liked, nay loved, Maynard Miller.

Except, apparently, to him.

Daisy sighed and waited for him to notice her frustrated exhale.

He didn't move. Just kept reading, the paper blocking her view of his face.

She tried conversation again. "Were the mashed potatoes creamy enough?"

"*Ya.*"

"What about the peach pie? Was that *gut?*"

He flipped down one corner of the paper, his reddish eyebrows flat over pale blue eyes behind silver-framed glasses. "I already said it was, right after I ate it."

"Oh. That's right."

Maynard went back to reading, and Daisy returned to fretting. It had taken almost three weeks to sync up their schedules so he could come over for supper. He always had an excuse for refusing her invitations. He was too busy at work. He had to get up early in the morning for work. He needed to do more work. And she had no reason to doubt he was telling the truth. He was a carpenter

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for the number one furniture maker in Dover, Delaware, and they were busy year-round. Their hickory rockers alone had a two-year waiting list.

But every time she was about to give up on him, he would surprise her. Like tonight. When she made a final attempt to get him to come over, he'd easily agreed. It was because of those times that she still held hope that someday, one day, he would come to his senses and realize they were meant to be together. In the meantime, she had to do her part to stoke the flame he kept neglecting.

"Maynard?" she asked tentatively.

After a long pause he said, "What?"

Surely, he wasn't annoyed with her. She had cleaned the house until it shone, had cooked his favorite meal, had fixed warm apple cider and brought it to him, made sure the fire was the perfect temperature, and when he pointed at the newspaper on the coffee table, she'd handed it to him. Maybe that had been her mistake. If she had told him no, he would be forced to at least look at her.

Who was she kidding? She never told Maynard no. In the eighteen months she'd known him after he and his family had moved to Dover from upstate New York, she had always said yes. She wished that someday soon she could give him the ultimate yes after he asked her to marry him. Of course, they would have to hold hands first. And share a kiss or two, at the very least. There would be plenty of hand-holding, snuggling, kissing and . . . *other things* . . . after their wedding. *Sigh.*

He yanked the paper onto his lap. "Are you ill, Daisy?"

"What? *Nee*, I'm fine."

"You're not acting like it."

*Then maybe you should take my temperature. Slowly.* Her cheeks flamed. But the idea of Maynard gently touching her forehead with

the back of his hand, then lightly stroking her cheek as he gazed into her eyes—

“You’re acting *seltsam*.” He put his feet on the floor, the newspaper rustling as he moved. “Are you sure you’re not sick?”

She nodded and folded her hands on her lap, disappointed he hadn’t noticed her new emerald-green dress or how it brought out her hazel eyes. At least she thought it did. She couldn’t exactly ask her parents that question without them thinking she was, um, *seltsam*. “Do you like my dress?”

He quickly glanced at her. “Looks like the rest of your dresses.”

“Nice?”

Maynard lifted the paper again. “Suitable.”

She muzzled her annoyance. For the umpteenth time, she reminded herself that he was the man God had set apart for her. She knew it the moment he and his parents had walked into church service that fateful Sunday morning. Her knees turned wobbly at the sight of him, and she couldn’t concentrate on the singing or the sermon. At the age of twenty-five she had finally, *finally* experienced what her siblings, friends, and cousin Grace already had—the excitement of falling in love. In church, of all places! But it made sense, because Maynard was heaven-sent.

Sometimes it was hard to keep that fact in mind. Like when he was consumed with work, or how he always left with his parents immediately after church service was over, eliminating any possibility of him taking her home or just going for a buggy ride.

She had to be going about this all wrong, thinking that being subtle would get his attention. She’d never made any overt romantic overtures toward him, although she had few opportunities to do so. At her request, he’d taken her home a couple of times when their small singles group met once a month to do community service activities.

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Those rides had been quiet. But nice too. She always enjoyed a good buggy ride.

She also assumed it was the man's place to get the romance ball rolling. That's what her sisters said when they met their husbands. Her cousin Grace had mentioned the same thing in the letters she wrote to Daisy after she met her fiancé, Kyle. She could ask her brother, Nathan, if that were true for all men. He was also married, but talking about romantic stuff with him seemed kind of icky. He was almost ten years older than her, and they weren't exactly close.

Maynard was a bit different from other men she knew. What if he was waiting on her to make the first move? His shyness had to be getting in the way of moving their relationship forward. *I should have realized that before now.*

Time to test the waters. Wiping her damp palms on her dress, she said, "Uh, Maynard—"

"Now this is interesting." He tapped the paper. "They're calling for an extra-hot summer this year. Probably a record breaker."

"Maynard—"

"Then again, they've always predicted record-breaking winters, and we've had normal ones for the past five years."

"Would you . . . um . . ." She swallowed. Talking about love was harder than she thought. "Um . . ."

He glanced at the clock on the wall, then frowned. "It's that late?"

She looked at the time. Barely seven o'clock.

He folded the paper and put it on the coffee table.

She jumped from the sofa. "You're leaving already?"

His brows furrowed, as if she were speaking a foreign language.

"It's past seven, Daisy," he said as he stood up.

"But you just got here!"

Maynard adjusted his glasses. "You know I like to be in bed by eight."

She couldn't let him leave now, not when she was mustering the courage to tell him they needed to take their relationship to the next level. And pronto.

True love was worth the wait, but she was getting tired of waiting.

"How are things going?" *Mamm* came into the living room, a tight smile on her face. *Daed* appeared right behind her.

"I was just telling Daisy that I have an early morning tomorrow."

Daisy pinched her lips together. There was no point in trying to change his mind. He was resolute about his eight o'clock bedtime. Besides, her mother and father were looking at them strangely, making her suspect something might be amiss. In a last-ditch effort for some kind of connection, she purposely brushed her pinky finger against his.

"*Danki* for supper," he said to *Mamm* in his usual monotone voice. If he'd noticed Daisy had touched him, he didn't draw attention to it.

"Daisy made it all." *Mamm's* stressed look gave way to a genuine smile. "She's quite the cook."

He didn't acknowledge *Mamm's* compliment as he picked up his hat from the rack by the door and placed it on his mop of bright red hair.

"Drive home safe, Maynard." *Daed* tapped *Mamm* on the shoulder and they went back to the kitchen.

Disappointed, Daisy walked with Maynard to the front door as he put on his coat. Despite it being early spring, the evenings were still cold. She took his scarf off the rack and handed it to him, watching for any kind of reaction to her secret pinky touch as he wrapped the navy blue flannel around his neck. Nothing. Maybe she had brushed his finger too lightly. She hadn't felt anything either.

"Good night, Daisy."

Their eyes easily met since they were the same height, around

five six. “When will I see you again?” Ugh, she sounded desperate, but she couldn’t help it. *Soon. Please, make it soon.*

“Depends on my work schedule.” He opened the door, letting in a rush of cold air that instantly cooled her cheeks. “I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.”

But he was already halfway down the porch steps. As she always did when he left her house, she watched him drive down the driveway. Only when he was out of her sight did she close the door and press her forehead against it. *Why didn’t anyone tell me love was so hard?*

Then the perfect solution hit her out of the blue. Yes, that was the answer to their problem. Loving Maynard was difficult, but that was going to change, and now she knew exactly how to make that happen.

“Daisy.”

She spun around and saw her mother standing there, tugging on the handkerchief in her hand. “Is something wrong?” Daisy asked.

“*Nee, nee,*” Mamm said a little too quickly. “Nothing’s wrong. With me, anyway. Why don’t we sit down.”

Daisy silently complied and sat next to her on the sofa. While she waited for her mother to speak, Mamm kept fiddling with her handkerchief, finally shoving the balled-up fabric into the pocket of her apron. “How did things *geb* with you and Maynard tonight?”

“*Gut.*” They could have gone better, though. And they would the next time she saw him.

“You didn’t say that with much enthusiasm.”

Oops. She gave *Mamm* a bright smile, and it wasn’t too forced. “Sorry. I just have some things on my mind.”

Her mother’s expression turned wary. “What things?”

Daisy took a deep breath and blurted the truth, even though she was sure her mother already knew it. “I love Maynard.”

“Oh dear,” *Mamm* mumbled.

Or maybe her mother didn't know how she felt about him. First Maynard, now *Mamm*. Daisy hadn't realized she'd kept her feelings so locked up. She thought she was an open book.

*Mamm's* smile looked strained. "How do you know?"

"I've always known." Her smile widened. "And now I know something else."

"What's that?"

"I need to tell him how I feel."

Her mother reached for her pocket, then clenched her hands together on her lap. "What if he doesn't return your feelings?"

"I'm sure he will."

"Then you two have been dating all along?" *Mamm* looked confused. "I thought . . . hoped you were just friends."

"We are."

"Then it's possible he doesn't love you."

She wasn't going to let a small detail derail her. "How would he know if we've never talked about it?"

"Oh, Daisy, you're not thinking this through."

"I'll *geh* see him after work tomorrow and we'll have 'the talk.'"

"Tomorrow?" *Mamm* said weakly.

"Once I tell him how I feel, God will do the rest." She beamed.

"Don't you think you're being presumptuous?"

She thought she heard panic in her mother's tone, but she had to be imagining it. Her parents had always been supportive of her and Maynard. Well, maybe supportive wasn't the precise word, but they never said no when she told them he was coming over for supper or commented when he drove her home.

But Daisy was too excited to pay complete attention to her mother's words. All she could think about was surprising Maynard after work and having "the talk" with him. Then they would officially be a couple.

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“What’s the hurry?” *Mamm* held up her palms. “I’m sure your conversation can wait a little while. A few days . . . months. A year or two, even.”

She let out a long-suffering sigh. “*Mamm*, I’ve been patient. I also think I’ve been too much of a friend to Maynard and not enough of a girlfriend.”

“But—”

She popped up from the couch, excited that she would finally get what she’d yearned for—Maynard’s love. *And kisses. Don’t forget the kisses.*

“Daisy—”

“*Gute nacht, Mamm!*” She danced to the stairs and floated up to her room. Her whole life was about to change, and she couldn’t wait.



Daisy woke up the next morning primed and ready to talk to Maynard. She decided last night that being straightforward was best, although she did briefly entertain being coy and flirtatious, only to nix the idea because she had no clue how to flirt or be coy. She couldn’t risk making a mistake at this critical juncture in their relationship.

When she entered the kitchen, she was surprised to see her mother and father at the table, and they weren’t eating breakfast. By now, *Mamm* would be frying up her father’s favorites—scrambled eggs, a thick slice of ham, and three pieces of buttered toast.

“*Gute mariye.*” *Daed*’s smile was strained and *Mamm* was practically stretching her handkerchief to the breaking point. “Have a seat.”

Alarmed, Daisy sat. “Is something wrong?”

Her parents exchanged a look before her father spoke. “We just need to talk to you, that’s all.”

“Before breakfast?” Now she was positive something was wrong. Her father was a stickler about his morning meal.

“We have some news,” *Mamm* said, looking a little less stressed, although that might be because *Daed* was holding her hand now. “*Aenti* Rosella wants you to help her plan Grace’s wedding.”

Daisy grinned, no longer concerned. She loved planning weddings, and from all accounts, she was good at it. She excelled at organization, from her bedroom to her schoolwork to her cross-stitch supplies, and she had helped plan her four older sisters’ nuptials. When she started her part-time job at the local scratch-and-dent store three years ago, she had taken charge of keeping the stockroom neat and orderly—not always the easiest task.

“That is wonderful,” Daisy said. “I can’t wait to help her and Grace this summer.”

*Mamm* shook her head. “She wants to plan it now. In Marigold.”

“Okay. When do I leave?”

“This morning.”

Stunned, she looked at both her parents. “I can’t *geb* today. I have to let Mr. Brickman know I need time off.”

“Already done,” *Mamm* blurted. “He said to take all the time you want.”

Daisy frowned. “When did he say that?”

“I called him thirty minutes ago.”

“But the store doesn’t open until eight.”

“I have his personal number, remember? In case of emergencies?”

This didn’t seem like an emergency to Daisy. And she didn’t understand why she had to leave today instead of tomorrow, or next week, or even in June or July, when it would make the most sense. “Isn’t the wedding in November?”

“It’s been over two years since you and Grace have seen each

other,” Mamm said, standing up with *Daed*. “It will take time to figure everything out. I’ll fix breakfast while you pack. The taxi’s coming to get you in two hours.”

“Two hours?” Daisy shook her head. “I have to talk to Maynard—”

“Rosella and Grace need your help.” *Daed* was stern as he gestured for Daisy to get up. As soon as she did, her parents herded her out of the kitchen toward the living room to the staircase.

“You know how picky Grace can be,” *Mamm* said.

“Since when?” Her cousin was the most laid-back person Daisy knew.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, she turned and faced them. Lowering her voice, she leaned close to *Mamm*. “I’m having ‘the talk’ today, remember?”

Something flickered in *Mamm*’s eyes. “I’ll tell him you said goodbye.”

“But—”

“I reserved a ticket for you,” *Daed* said. “It will be at the bus station.”

“You don’t want to let your *aenti* and cousin down, do you?” *Mamm* said.

Ugh. There it was. Guilt. Besides, her parents were presenting a united front, one she couldn’t seem to breach. Dazed, she made her way upstairs to her bedroom. *What just happened?*

A few minutes later, a knock sounded at the door. Her mother opened it. “Can I come in?”

Daisy nodded and *Mamm* walked inside and shut the door. “I’m sorry we’re rushing you, Daisy. We found out last night that your Aunt Rosella was wanting your help so soon.”

“Why didn’t she just call me?”

"I . . . well, you know how busy wedding planning can get."

"She has seven months."

"And those will fly right by." *Mamm* took her hands. "I know you're concerned about not telling Maynard. I promise I'll talk to him. And you can call or write to him from Marigold anytime you want."

"Except when he's working." She tried to keep the bitterness out of her tone. Daisy had never been one for talking on the phone, and idle chatter was forbidden by the *Ordnung* anyway.

"Of course." *Mamm* squeezed her hands. "He is *such* a busy, busy *mann*."

*What did she mean by that?* She inwardly sighed. She didn't have it in her to disobey her parents, and they had already booked the taxi and reserved the ticket. But as soon as she helped Grace and Rosella, she was coming right back to Dover and straight to see Maynard.

*Mamm* grabbed Daisy in a tight hug. "Trust me, this is for the best. I'll let you pack."

She waited for her mother to leave, then frowned. This seemed odd. Her placid cousin was in an awful hurry for Daisy to visit her in Marigold, Ohio, months before her wedding. Not that it wouldn't be nice to spend time with Grace. They were inseparable up until eight years ago when Grace's family had moved away. Daisy had been the first one to hear about Kyle, and of course she had told Grace about Maynard . . . with a little embellishment. *Okay, a lot.*

She sat down on the bed, her mind on him again. Her family's timing couldn't be worse. Now she'd have to wait to talk with him, just after finally coming up with a plan.

Then she regrouped. She would enjoy her visit with her cousin,

## THE MARRIAGE PACT

aunt, and uncle, and write plenty of letters to Maynard. Maybe she would even call just to hear his voice. Surely that wouldn't violate the *Ordnung*. As soon as she returned home, they would discuss their future. Perhaps even set a wedding date for this year. *I've waited long enough.*