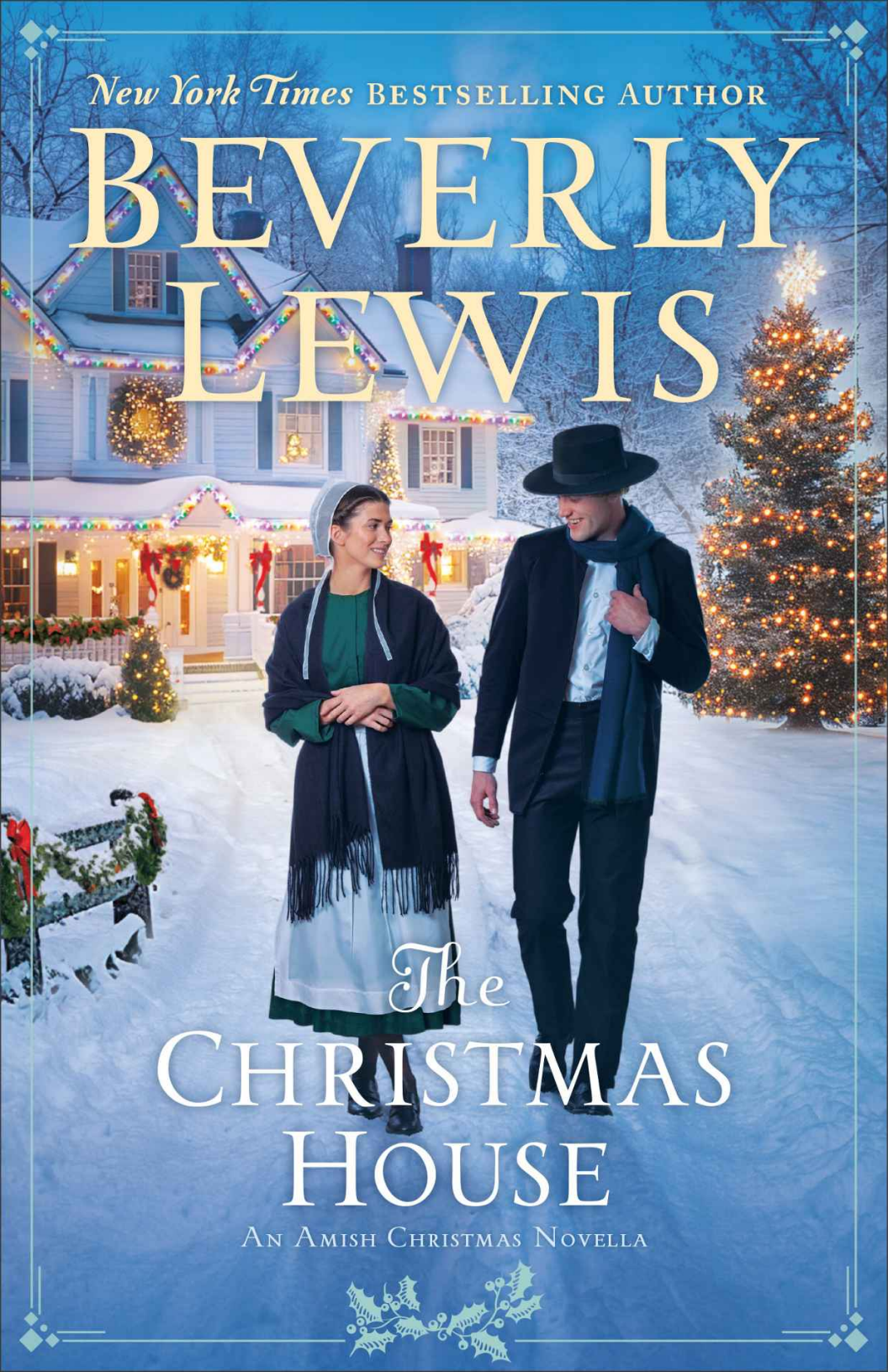


*New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# BEVERLY LEWIS



*The*  
CHRISTMAS  
HOUSE

AN AMISH CHRISTMAS NOVELLA



*The*  
CHRISTMAS  
HOUSE

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*The*  
CHRISTMAS  
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AN AMISH CHRISTMAS NOVELLA



BEVERLY  
LEWIS



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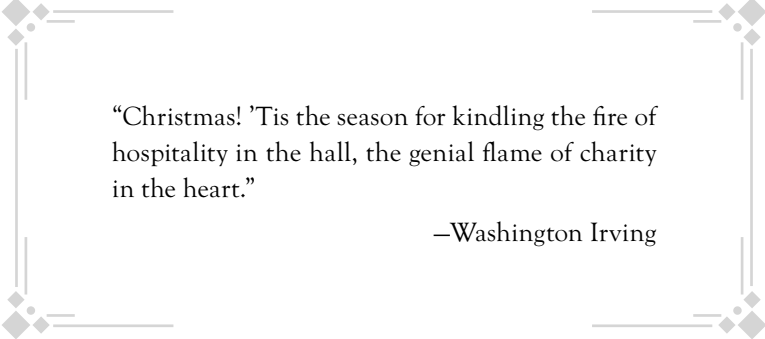
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To my readers who requested  
a Hickory Hollow Christmas story.





“Christmas! ’Tis the season for kindling the fire of  
hospitality in the hall, the genial flame of charity  
in the heart.”

—Washington Irving

 1 

Signs of the Christmas season were visible all over Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, even this early in November. Vendors at the local farmers markets had put out homemade candy canes, snowman-shaped chocolates, and chunks of fudge wrapped in cellophane and red bows. Many of the big chain stores had been displaying artificial trees, lights, and ornaments for a while now, nudging shoppers into the spirit of giving.

The signs were less noticeable in Hickory Hollow's strict Amish community, though. Oh, there were a few battery-operated candles already twinkling in young Amish couples' front windows, and in *all* of Ella Mae Zook's windows, upstairs and down. She had even boldly decorated her front door with a simple evergreen wreath, but then, the elderly widow was known to march to the beat of her own drum.

Otherwise, things in the secluded farming community looked much as they did any other late autumn day during wedding season. On nearly every road come Tuesdays and Thursdays in November and much of December, there were numerous horse-drawn carriages, as well as large church wagons filled with

wooden benches and boxes of tableware, headed to various brides' family homes for the big celebrations.

Twenty-two-year-old Liz Lantz was a little reluctant to attend weddings this season since she had no beau to pair up with during the afternoon festivities. Her bustling tourist business, Amish Buggy Rides, was a needed distraction this time of year. The steady flow of folks who reserved tickets for her Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday tours meant she had to dedicate the off days to her household chores. Even so, she was looking forward to the return of her very popular Christmas House Buggy Tour starting the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Liz still marveled at the number of Englisher folks eager to experience the novelty of a ride in an Amish buggy. That appeal, and Liz's commentary about the sights of her community, which sometimes turned into a bit of storytelling, had quickly given her great word of mouth, bringing new customers beyond the big-city tour buses and her own website. Thankfully, her Mennonite cousin, Roy Miller, had been willing to create and maintain the online site where people could purchase tickets. *A winnerbaar-gut business*, she thought, grateful each Monday when Roy stopped by with a list of names and tour reservations for the week.

"Coming to Lancaster for a breather has turned out to be one of my better ideas," a smiling middle-aged gentleman with a New Jersey accent had told her just that morning before the first ride of the day. He waited in the partially enclosed wood structure built for her customers adjacent to Hickory Hollow's hardware store.

"If you're looking to relax, you've picked the perfect way," Liz agreed with the congenial man. "We Amish try to take one day at a time, 'specially durin' the busy wedding season."

The man bobbed his head as he stepped closer to hand his

ticket to Liz's nineteen-year-old brother, Adam, her assistant since starting the business two years ago.

Ah, *wedding season*, thought Liz, who would not be one of the Hickory Hollow brides after all. Her former beau, Calvin Kinsinger, and she had mutually parted ways almost a year ago now, when he moved from the area. And all for the better, it turned out. While Calvin was a pleasant young man, she hadn't missed him as much as she'd expected. Even though she was about the age when most Amish young women were engaged or getting married, Liz knew it was wise to be patient for the right person to come along, someone who wanted similar things in life and entrusted the future to God, for certain.



Thankful for the brisk business on this chilly yet sunny day, Liz welcomed her second group of morning customers, a family of four and a young couple, all wearing puffer jackets and some wrapped in plaid scarves. They boarded the extra-long and extra-wide buggy her father had generously paid to have custom built when she first started offering rides. It had many windows and more space than the traditional family buggy.

Her brother made small talk with the six passengers as they got settled into the enclosed carriage with its handy dashboard heater. While she'd initially protested to her father that it wasn't necessary for her to have Adam go along on these rides—something *Dat* had insisted on to keep her safe when interacting with strangers—she'd come to appreciate what her sometimes reticent brother brought to every excursion with his even-keeled approach and occasional humorous remarks. He had told her, however, that he did not view this part-time job as something that would be permanent, wanting to settle into a full-time job elsewhere and eventually marry.

“*Willkomm*, everyone!” Liz said as Adam stepped away to untie their black Belgian draft horse, King, from the hitching post. “Thanks for joining us for our Amish Back Roads and Tasty Treats Tour.”

“Be sure to keep your arms inside the carriage at all times,” Adam said as he slid into the front seat and picked up the driving lines. “As we go, my sister Liz here will share some things ’bout Amish life which, honestly, ya might not hear anywhere else.” He chuckled.

“Prob’ly so.” Liz smiled. “Just leave your cares behind as we ride through beautiful Amish farmland. Today you’ll see working windmills, our historic general store, a harness shop, and the one-room schoolhouse Amish children attend until eighth grade. If you have questions along the way, please don’t be shy ’bout asking.”

Wasting no time, a petite girl sitting with her parents raised her hand. “Does your school have a kindergarten?” she asked.

“Scholars actually start in first grade,” Adam replied, “so no kindergarten.”

Glancing in the large rearview mirror, Liz noticed the little girl looking up at her mother with big, inquisitive eyes. She paused in case the child had another question, then continued. “Toward the end of the tour, we’ll be makin’ a stop at our *Aendi Hannah’s* for some melt-in-your-mouth cookies and sticky buns. She’ll bring the goodies out to the carriage, so for your safety, please stay put when we stop.”

Back when Liz was only toying with the notion of possibly starting a buggy-tour enterprise, Aunt Hannah had suggested offering baked goods as part of the ride package. Liz had jumped on the idea, knowing it would provide extra income for their widowed aunt, a baker extraordinaire. Not surprisingly, Adam had declared the baked goods the best part of the tour.

“Now, if everyone is ready and there are no further questions, we’ll be on our way.” Adam clicked his tongue and directed King past the waiting area, where he and Liz planned to hang a large Christmas wreath with a big red bow in a couple of weeks. Englishers enjoyed the sights and sounds of the holidays, as evidenced by the popularity of last year’s Christmas House Buggy Tour. To Liz’s delight, many of the bookings were already sold out.

Adam directed the horse with a gentle tug on the left rein, and they headed out of the lot adjacent to the local Amish hardware store owned by *Mamm*’s older brother, *Onkel* Joe, who’d graciously given Liz and Adam permission to meet passengers there. As always when they started out, Liz prayed silently for God’s protection over each person in the carriage, thankful for this chance to give customers a laid-back yet enjoyable experience—a little taste of Plain life.

As for Adam, *his* mind was likely focused on Aunt Hannah’s tasty treats. Liz smiled at the thought.



While helping make supper that evening, Liz heard Dat talking to Adam at the kitchen table. Not in hushed tones, either, so their conversation wasn’t private.

“I need ya to go with me to help build a large addition to my cousin’s farmhouse over in Somerset,” Dat was saying. “It’s a big job. The whole east side of the house will be enlarged—the front room and kitchen—to accommodate their growing family. He and his wife are hoping to have it done in time for Christmas. We’ll leave a week from today, bright an’ early. They should have all the supplies by then.”

“I don’t mind, but who’ll go with Liz on her buggy rides?” Adam asked, pouring coffee for Dat and himself.

“Oh, I’ve seen to that already.” Dat ran a callused hand through his blond bangs.

Surprised that her father still thought it necessary for her to have someone along on tours, Liz stepped away from the gas range as her plump, blue-eyed *Mamma* came upstairs carrying a quart jar of chow chow. Going over to the table, Liz said, “I couldn’t help hearin’ what ya said, Dat. How long will yous be gone?”

“Depends on how everything goes, but we should be back by Christmas.”

“May I ask who ya lined up to take Adam’s place?”

“Matthew Yoder from Bird-in-Hand has agreed to fill in for the time bein’. He’s the son of an old friend of mine,” Dat explained. “Now that the harvest is in, Matt’s been doin’ odd jobs and house repairs. But he’s glad to pick up a part-time job here and there. Dependable as a pillar, he is.”

“So, he’ll start next Tuesday, then?” Liz wished she could put an end to the plan. To her thinking, Dat seemed a little too eager for this guy to help out. She didn’t know Matt, and she felt anxious about working with a stranger.

Dat nodded. “Matt’s a mighty careful driver. I’ve known him since he cut his first tooth.” Her father’s lips parted in a half smile. “And he’s not spoken for, either.”

Liz cringed inwardly—she’d never heard her father say such a thing. Was he that concerned she was still single?

Even Adam’s eyebrows rose at this, though Mamm remained silent by the stove.

Martha Rose, Liz’s twenty-year-old sister, just coming in from the hen house with a basket of fresh eggs, stood with eyes wide in the doorway of the utility room. She stared at Liz curiously, evidently trying to grasp what Dat had said.

Dat himself filled the awkward silence. “Years ago, I dug a

well with Matt's father and uncle, before Matt was even born. Hardworkin' family they are—with nine fine *Kinner*, too. They're all just as devout as deacons." He nodded approvingly. "And to keep things simple, I've arranged for Matt to come by Amish taxi. He'll meet ya over at the hardware store and return home the same way. I've already paid the fare through just before Christmas."

Adam gave Liz a sympathetic look, but it was apparent there would be no backing down on Dat's part. He'd decided who would fill Adam's place and, stranger or no, that was that.

"Trust me, Lizzy. This'll all work out chust fine." Her father seemed confident enough, but Liz certainly didn't feel the same.

 2 

Liz's mind was going a mile a minute as she considered the news Dat had given her last evening. Adam seemed to be taking the sudden change of plans in stride, however, as King pulled the tour carriage at an unhurried trot this morning.

When she'd asked him earlier if he was acquainted at all with Matt Yoder, Adam had admitted he was not. "But I wouldn't fret about it, Lizzy. Dat wouldn't've picked him to fill in if he had any concerns."

Liz figured that, but she also knew she would miss the comfortable back-and-forth she and Adam shared during the tours. With her brother, she really only had to think about the customers—something she'd been hard-pressed to do this morning, and he wasn't even gone yet. How would it be with a new guy at her side?

But there was no time to ponder that now. Liz turned toward the passengers seated behind her and put on a smile as she shared a bit of the history of Hickory Hollow. "Back in the 1730s, this plentiful land drew Amish settlers to farm here. My ancestors considered farming a sacred duty. In fact, we still think of plowing and planting the soil as God-given responsibilities—one of

the reasons there are so many Amish farmers. My grandfather *Dawdi* Lantz has always said farmin' is the best kind of work."

Adam took over then to talk about the various types of farms found in the community, and it wasn't long before Ella Mae Zook's *Dawdi Haus* came into view. Liz could just imagine the dear woman either brewing peppermint tea or sitting across the table in her home from a friend in need as they sipped tea together. That was her calling, she'd often said—listening to folks as they opened their hearts for her guidance or prayer, or both.

Adam slowed King's trot, and Liz resumed her commentary. "Accordin' to the local grapevine, the delightful woman who lives in that addition might be over one hundred years old, but no one knows for sure. Folks wonder if her family is sworn to secrecy, since none of them has fessed up to the actual number. And whenever the woman is asked, she simply beams and says that one's age really ain't as important as showin' kindness to one's neighbor and followin' the Good Book. Oh, and drinkin' at least one cup of peppermint tea with honey daily."

There was a round of laughter, and even Adam grinned despite having heard this many times before.

A young teen on board raised her hand. "Does her family live in the larger attached house, then?"

"*Jah*, and a short hallway connects her home to her daughter's family, so she has the freedom to live in her own space. But if she needs help or wants to go next door for a meal or a visit, it's convenient."

"We call her the Wise Woman," Adam added, "partly because of her longevity and life experiences, and partly because she gives godly advice when asked for it."

"Sounds like you might know firsthand," an older passenger observed.

“*Puh!* Did I just tell on myself?” Adam chuckled, and a couple of the adults on board muffled a laugh.

Curious, Liz glanced at her brother. She’d never known he’d visited Ella Mae. *Why would he?*



Aunt Hannah’s house appeared at the bend of the road, their final stop of this particular tour. Adam made the turn into the driveway and halted the horse. There, waiting on the back stoop, stood Hannah, a short black coat over her long green dress and matching apron, a smile on her rosy cheeks. Her white *Kapp* concealed her graying bun, and her brown eyes shone with welcome as she stepped down into the sunlight and approached the carriage with a rectangular tray of treats.

Liz got out of the carriage to tie King to the hitching post while Adam remained in the driver’s seat on the right, where he preferred to be even though he and Liz took turns driving every other tour. *Interacting with customers is my favorite*, she thought as she headed over to meet Aendi Hannah.

To the customers’ obvious pleasure, they were given a choice of warm chocolate chip cookies or pumpkin cinnamon rolls with caramel frosting, today’s fresh-baked offerings.

Observing her Aendi, Liz thought again of how good it was of her to continue to offer these treats—Liz had had to convince her to do so for a charge, she was that generous. *Her husband, Ammon, was generous, too . . . always directing barn-raisings and never taking a penny for it.* Liz fondly recalled the expert carpenter who had passed away some time ago.

She knew of many others in the hollow who quietly spread kindness without seeking attention for it. Her own Mamm would happily drop everything to help stitch up a wedding or anniversary quilt or to make knotted comforters to donate to Christian

Aid Ministries for the poor around the world. Liz respected such big-heartedness and tried to reflect that in her own life, too.



After the final tour of the day, she and Adam rode home past Logan Hyatt's big spread of land, one of very few farms owned by Englishers in the heart of the hollow. Logan and his wife, Ashley, had managed to outbid the Amish bishop about fifteen months ago, getting things off on the wrong foot with not just Bishop John Beiler but his newly married nephew, who'd hoped to rent the home from his uncle. Like other Plain communities, the Hickory Hollow Amish preferred to keep farmland in the family and out of the hands of the English, especially with a farm like this that had been Amish-owned for generations.

Much like their neighbors, Logan and his family kept to themselves, but immediately after moving in, they did something that put them at odds with everyone around them: They installed electricity in the house and the barn, and even put in outdoor sensor lighting.

Then, last November, the Hyatts began to lavishly decorate for Christmas. It was nothing short of shocking, considering that, except for Ella Mae's simple wreath, not a single house around the hollow was decorated, and certainly not with outdoor lights.

When, in addition to a spotlighted nativity scene with its own angel chorus, there appeared a multitude of decorated trees, a gaggle of dancing elves in the side yard, and a large Santa with a sleigh and reindeer on the roof, the People's eyebrows rose all the higher. Some folks got quite *ferhoodled*, wondering what might next appear.

On the day after Thanksgiving, when the display lit up for the first time, the complaining began in earnest. Some even said the neighboring Amish children were having trouble sleeping, and

barn animals were becoming distressed—Liz had heard several wild spins on the matter. In her own family, the Hyatts' property had been a subject for discussion around the kitchen table as they decided whether to ignore the massive light display or try to accept it since, as Dat pointed out, they had little hope of influencing their Englisher neighbors to take it down.

Then things became more tense when the English heard about the Christmas House in the midst of Amish farmland and began coming in droves, clogging up the narrow roads, some cars even sliding into snowy ditches, making it unsafe for horse-drawn buggies to pass through the area. And all for a look-see at Logan Hyatt's over-the-top display. Amish up and down the hollow talked about how senseless it was to spend so much money on decorations and electricity, let alone bring bedlam to the formerly peaceful farm community, disrupting their way of life. Because of the extra traffic, some Amish dairy farmers had a terrible time getting home for the late-afternoon milking, after running errands in town.

Others, primarily Englishers, had a different spin, saying that the Christmas House spread happiness and cheer, building anticipation for the big day. While Liz was aware of the conflicting opinions about the extravaganza and its accompanying loud music, the tourists who took her buggy rides were obvious fans, and the flashy house brought in good business for her. Torn between the People's opinions and knowing how much her customers loved seeing the Christmas House from a horse-drawn buggy, Liz decided not to take a stance.

"Why do ya think the Hyatts picked Hickory Hollow to live and farm?" Adam questioned as they headed toward home.

Liz had wondered about this, too. "It's a mystery, for sure."



Once home, Liz headed upstairs to her room and sat on her bed. She spotted an unfinished navy-blue knit scarf on the chair near the window. That, along with the already completed matching knit hat, was a potential Christmas gift for someone, although she didn't know who just yet. Last year, she'd made two sets like this, one for Dat and the other for Adam. But for some reason, she had started this one. *Was I hoping to meet someone?*

Reclining now, she shrugged the thought away, thankful that at least Martha Rose had a beau. Liz's younger sister was such a good help to Mamm and to Dat, looking after the chickens and gathering eggs in the hen house, selling the excess to the neighbors.

Presently, Liz heard footsteps in the hallway and opened her eyes to see her fair-haired sister holding a letter, undoubtedly from Ben Fisher, Daniel Fisher's nephew. Ben had been dating Martha for quite a while now.

Liz smiled. "From your beau?"

"He's getting more serious here lately," Martha replied, a few strands of hair coming out from beneath her blue bandana. She sat down on the edge of the bed, suddenly looking solemn. "The thing is," Martha said more quietly, "I feel bad that *you* aren't seein' anyone, Lizzy."

"Oh, I've been fine since Calvin and I split up. Really." She sat up and reached for her sister's hand. "Don't worry 'bout me."

"You're sure?"

Liz nodded. "I want nothin' more than for you to enjoy your courtship with Ben, sister."

A faint smile appeared, and Martha gave her hand a squeeze before leaving the room to read her letter, causing Liz to wonder if Martha also felt hesitant about seriously courting since she was the younger sister.

 3 

That Sunday, Liz and Martha Rose rode with Adam to Singing at sundown in his black open buggy. It was a tight squeeze, but thankfully the preacher's farmhouse was only a short jaunt away. Even so, Liz had to sit sideways to fit in the slim space between the edge of the courting carriage and her slender sister.

There was no moon in sight, but the tawny glow of gas lamps in neighbors' kitchen windows cast light on the surrounding furrowed fields. Liz could scarcely wait for the first snowfall, when Dat would let her use his large sleigh with its builtin seating for her tours. The horse-drawn sleigh made rides all the more festive and fun, especially for folks on the Christmas House Buggy Tour, who always enjoyed the finale of traveling past the show of lights, life-sized nativity scene, Santa and reindeer, holiday music, and everything else related to Christmas. Without snow on the ground, though, her custom-made carriage and the merry bells hanging from King's harness would have to suffice.

Adam broke the stillness. "Will you be all right on your own after Singin', Martha?"

"I believe so."

“So happy for ya, sister,” Liz whispered.

“If need be, I can drop ya off at home, Liz,” Adam offered.

“If ya don’t mind, I’d appreciate it,” Liz said, a little disappointed at the prospect of having to ride home with her sibling yet again.

Stars sparkled as they appeared, and Liz wondered if she’d ever dare ask Adam about his visit to Ella Mae’s, recalling what he’d said the other day about her godly advice. She smiled in the fading light, squished next to Martha Rose though she was. Maybe there’d never be a good time, and besides, it wasn’t her place to question his doings. Nevertheless, she had a hard time imagining her younger brother seeking counsel . . . or drinking tea of any kind, for that matter.

Adam pulled into the preacher’s driveway and jumped out to tie King to the post across the driveway from the back porch. Entering the house, Liz and Martha headed downstairs, where the Singing was to take place. For now, they sat with the other girls sixteen and older. With their two older sisters married and busy with two small children each, Liz and Martha were each other’s best companion. And Liz was grateful, especially after the breakup last year. *Martha made sure I was not alone at youth gatherings.*

Soon, two of their girl cousins joined them, and Liz and Martha moved over to make room. Liz greeted Fran and Naomi warmly, Fran being almost as close as another sister, though more so to Martha Rose.

Just now, Liz noticed Martha stealing glances across the table in Ben Fisher’s direction. *How serious are they? Liz wondered. If I were already wed, would they be getting married this wedding season? Ach, do they think they must wait another year because of me?*

Liz glanced discreetly at the young men around the room and realized that, once again, there were no new faces amongst them.

Inwardly, she sighed and wondered if it made sense for her to keep attending the gatherings when no one there was likely to ask her riding—most of the eligible young men in attendance had already paired up with someone, and none of the others sparked her interest, really.

*Am I too picky?*

As she waited there on the bench for the Singing to begin, Liz thought back to a discussion she'd had with Dat more than two years ago, before she'd started her business. . . .

Liz and her father leaned on the white fence on the perimeter of the barnyard, observing the grazing mules in the near distance. The July morning was hot and sultry, and the meadow was profuse with golden dandelions, some already gone to seed.

Liz contemplated how to begin. "Dat," she said, forging ahead at last, "there's somethin' I'd like to discuss with ya." Slowly, she began to share her desire to offer buggy rides to tourists. "Not as a livelihood, though. I want to work only three days a week, but with what I'd be chargin', I could still give ya a nice amount for room and board."

Turning to study her, Dat was silent at first. "No need to work outside the home, Lizzy." He glanced at the bluing sky, clouds skittering off toward the east.

"It's somethin' I'd *like* to do, though."

Her father removed his straw hat and fanned his perspiring brow. "Workin' in a job like that means you'd be rubbin' shoulders with outsiders." He reminded her that spending time with worldly folk—in a confined space, no less—wasn't the wisest choice for a single, young Amish woman.

She'd prepared herself for this. "Well, I'm a baptized church member an' committed to God, Dat. Don't worry that I'd stray."

“Still, there’s temptation on every side.”

Liz couldn’t deny that. “But what if it was a way to let my light shine to folks I might never meet otherwise, and maybe even to glorify God, too?” She quoted Matthew five, verse sixteen, one of her favorites since childhood. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Dat bobbed his head slowly. “Do ya really think takin’ Englishers on rides would accomplish that?”

“Why not?”

He paused yet again. “Well then, here’s somethin’ else to think on: What if you married after ya got started with these tours? Your husband might not want ya workin’ amongst the world or at all, ’specially not once you start a family. Have ya considered that?”

“Well, plenty of Hickory Hollow married women work away from home at quilt shops and as waitresses,” she pointed out. “But I agree that a family must come first. Right now, though, that might not be a concern for me.”

She contemplated what to say next. “Honestly, though, it’d be interesting to talk to new people and maybe even quash some Amish myths floating around.”

Although running a buggy tour business was a little unusual for a single Amishwoman, her father had ultimately given his permission, but only on the condition that Adam accompany her, an arrangement she’d quickly come to appreciate. Her father was a sensible and caring man, after all.

Sitting up straighter now, Liz was glad to see Preacher Yoder and his wife coming downstairs to give their welcome. After several announcements, including one about an upcoming hayride

and barbeque, everyone sang the birthday song for those with November celebrations.

Then Preacher Yoder's wife blew into her pitch pipe and started the first gospel song of the evening, "I'll Meet You in the Morning." As was customary, they sang the verses in German and the chorus in English, switching easily between the two languages.

Liz joined her voice with those of the other *Youngie*, glad to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. *I need to focus on what matters.*

Whatever tonight and the coming days might bring, she would continue to pray for the right fellow to come along, someone who shared her hope to bring encouragement, even blessings, to others.