

THE
SECRET
KEEPER

BEVERLY
LEWIS



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For
Jackie Green,
with love.

And . . .
for all of my devoted reader-friends
whose heart's cry is to live more simply—
if not Amish,
then a more peaceable life.

Prologue

*T*oday's the day I'll tell them.

I parked my car beneath the brilliantly red sugar maple tree at the impressive Connecticut estate—my childhood home. It was a yearly custom for my parents to throw a dinner party to celebrate my October birthday.

Twenty-five and still trying to fit in . . . somewhere.

I glanced at the console and spotted a pile of mail tucked away there, including a card from Marnie Lapp in Lancaster County. *May this be the best birthday ever, dear Jenny!* she'd written beneath her name.

A chance meeting several years ago while on vacation, and curiously enough, Marnie and I had become friends. Despite being Amish, she was one of my closest confidantes.

Getting out of the car, I drew a deep breath and strolled toward the formal entrance. At the grand double doors, I paused to muster up the required poise, straightened my breezy floral skirt, and pushed back my shoulder-length auburn hair. Ready or not, I reached for the gleaming handle and stepped inside the two-story foyer.

My older sister, Kiersten, greeted me, her brown-eyed gaze lingering with unconcealed disapproval on my high-necked blouse and open-toed sandals. “Happy birthday, sister,” she said, waving me into the intimate gathering room near the dining room. “Mom’s knocked herself out, as usual.” Then, pausing as we passed through the doorway, she added, “Oh, and I should warn you. Robb brought along a colleague from work. His name is Frank.” Her eyes communicated the message *Not my fault!*

So my brother-in-law, Dr. Robb Newburg, was obviously as concerned as Mom about my single state.

I cringed. Now what? How could I possibly reveal my plans?

Attempting to conjure up some enthusiasm, I smiled as Robb rose from his comfortable perch and rushed over to extend his hand. He turned to introduce a good-looking, very tall blond man.

Frank gave me an engaging smile. “It’s great to meet you,” he said, all charm.

“Thanks for joining us,” I replied politely even as my heart sank. I didn’t like the idea of postponing my inevitable news. This was supposed to be the night I actually dared to be honest with everyone.

“My sister’s something straight out of the nineteenth century,” Kiersten declared. “In case you wondered, Frank.” She punctuated her remark with foolish laughter.

Ah . . . *Kiersten*. True to form, interlacing her banter with shards of truth. She glanced coyly at Robb, who smiled back at me, apologizing with his blue-gray eyes.

“Um, what’s so special about *this* century?” I asked, glancing over at my brother, Cameron, and his girlfriend, Tracie Wells. “High-tech gadgets aren’t everything.”

Kiersten simpered as she fingered her diamond earring.

“Does this mean you *still* don’t have a cell phone?” asked Cameron, feigning pain when Tracie poked him.

“Life is far less complicated without one,” I replied.

My own family. After all these years, they still didn’t know what made me tick.

In the corner of the room, our father was hunched over one of his many research books, oblivious to the undercurrents. *All the better. Wouldn’t want to spoil things for Mom.* Such parties translated to fun and socializing for her—the more, the better. Dad, however, preferred to immerse himself in his work as a research scientist for a pharmaceutical company, more at home with books than with people.

I went over to say hi. “What’re you studying, Dad?”

He glanced up as if just realizing I was there. He blinked at me, a vague look on his face, apparently still deep in thought about his book. So typical of my cerebral father. “Hi, Jenny.”

Not “Happy birthday, honey.”

Then Mom appeared in the dining room archway, impeccably coifed, pretty eyes smiling. She was ready to serve dinner and motioned gracefully without a word, contentedly leading the way.

The chandeliered space was adorned with silver streamers, and matching candles flickered across the gleaming table. We’d celebrated numerous birthdays here in Mom’s favorite room, yet I’d never stopped feeling out of place.

Once we were all seated, I tried to make conversation with my mother, but she was eager to talk about an upcoming gala instead.

The prime rib was wonderful. But with Frank seated next to me at the table, it wasn’t easy negotiating our forced meeting. *Really, Mom?* The uncomfortable pauses between Frank’s upbeat comments—and his attempt to ask me out—were the

last things I needed at my final dinner party in the modern world.

And sitting there with my family gathered near, I wondered, *If I were to disappear, would they even notice?*

After dinner, my mother produced a spectacular chocolate layer cake and lit the birthday candles. Kiersten studied me like a lab tech with a specimen while Mom coaxed me to blow out my candles, as if I were still six. “The evening’s not perfect without a birthday wish. Make it a good one, Jenny.”

Making wishes was the easy part. It was the end result that was iffy. Despite that, I closed my eyes to appease her, knowing all too well my *mother’s* dearest wish—that I’d settle down and marry. The sooner, the better.

I puffed out the candles, but my wish had nothing to do with a man—not that I was opposed to marriage and a family of my own. More times than I could count, I’d imagined what it would be like to live in a simpler era, when people actually *listened* to one another.

The ideal world . . .

But there would be no announcement tonight. Hours after the superb meal, we parted ways and I drove to my modest condo on the outskirts of Essex. Inside, I hurried to my bedroom and sat on a chair to reread Marnie’s card. Remembering the serene Pennsylvania setting that was her home, I savored the thoughtful birthday greeting, then scanned the sparsely furnished room where I’d hatched my secret plan.

Not even my closest friends had seen my room. Not that they were missing much by their standards. My cherished decorating style was essentially Early Attic.

I breathed out the number of my years, “Twenty-five,” and rose to reach for my scuffed antique silver brush on the simple dresser. I pulled it vigorously through my hair, eager to lose

myself in something other than my parents' decked-out home or frivolous table chatter. I stared into the antique oval dresser mirror, recalling how Kiersten *always* introduced me: "My sister's an old soul. . . ."

Absolutely, I agreed. I was born too late.

Turning from the mirror, I strolled to the cozy window seat and opened its top. Inside were scores of clippings from my subscription to a Lancaster newspaper, arranged by categories I'd labeled more than a decade ago. I recalled the first time I'd heard of the Amish. I was only eleven when I was transfixed by a TV documentary.

People actually live and dress that way?

Mom hadn't known how to react back then; my fascination with the simple life perplexed her. "What can they be thinking—no cars, no electricity, and even some outhouses?" she'd mused aloud.

Regardless, by the time I was fourteen, I'd devoured everything written about the People, including novels with Amish settings. I yearned to know why the Plain folk continued to live as though they were locked in time. Several years later, my first road trip had led me to Lancaster County, where I had returned each summer thereafter, walking barefoot along the dusty byways and stopping at roadside vegetable and fruit stands, relishing the way the sweet, juicy peaches split right open. What fun it was to make small talk with the more outgoing Amish girls. I met Marnie Lapp at one such stand, and she agreed to exchange letters with me, apparently curious about why an Englisher girl was so taken with all things Plain.

Oh, hers was such a gloriously peaceful world, one firmly grounded in the past. I sincerely desired the stability of Amish tradition and hoped my own personal issues might simply

disappear in such an established, dependable community. I'd held that hope within me for years now—I'd even committed it to prayer. *After all, God gives His children the desires of their hearts.*

If only my earthly family—my parents, especially—had taken the time to really try to understand me.

"Bloom where you're planted," Mom had often insisted while I was growing up, but what if you were planted in the wrong soil? What then?

I was very sure I knew the answer. And I was willing to give up everything to follow my dream. Never had I felt so free.

Chapter 1



Rebecca Lapp felt so numb and stiff she could scarcely move. It was past three o'clock in the morning according to the wind-up clock on the small table near the headboard. Breathless from the harrowing dream, she worried, *Is it a warning?*

Slowly, lest she awaken Samuel, she inched her way up to a sitting position, her eyes wide against the darkened room. But her heart was a lump of lead. She pondered her dream in a stupor, wishing she could release the misery.

Minutes ticked by, and at last she inched out of bed, creeping to the dresser a few feet away. She probed the area with her fingers in search of the box of matches. Clumsily, she managed to light the small kerosene lantern. The wing of flame faltered, then blazed brightly.

Just a silly dream, she assured herself. *Everything's fine—I haven't been found out.* Besides, most dreams had no particular meaning; she knew that.

Samuel's snoring was familiar and steady, even comforting, as Rebecca reached for her warm bathrobe on the wooden wall peg and wandered down the hall to Katie's former bedroom.

She stepped inside and perused the vacant room by lantern light. Breathing deeply, she felt sure there was still a hint of Katie's lilac-scented potpourri. Mrs. Daniel Fisher had been blissfully married now for six years and kept busy with four-year-old Samuel Dan, known mostly as Sammy, and his baby sister, Kate Marie, eighteen months old next week. Other than her blond hair—so like her *Dat's*—little Kate was the spitting image of her pretty *Mamma*, though Kate Marie wasn't the most Amish-sounding name Katie might have chosen.

Close enough, Rebecca mused.

She still could not shake the notion that the dream might be prophetic. Samuel and their sons—Elam, Eli, and Benjamin—would surely think so. After all, she *was* pushing the boundaries of the *Bann*, going over to see shunned Katie and the children now and then these past few months. *If I'm caught, I'll be accused of hindering the effect of die Meinding*, Rebecca thought. She didn't want to stand in the way of God's work in her wayward daughter's life, yet Katie's was the harshest shunning in all of Lancaster County. Rebecca was terribly conflicted—wanting to obey the church ordinance while also heeding her heart's cry to see Katie and the grandbabies.

She set the lantern on the end table and tiptoed to the neatly made bed and knelt there. Goodness' sake, there was plenty to pray about, considering that her niece, twenty-one-year-old Marnie Lapp, had dropped by unexpectedly last week, all rosy cheeked and talking up a storm, *babblich* as ever. It seemed she had befriended an out-of-state *Englischer*—a young woman named Jenny Burns—and written her letters for several years. Oddly, the outsider had sold off near everything she owned somewhere in Connecticut—even her car. To top things off, she was coming to live in Lancaster County as an Amish seeker and needed a place to stay for a while, till the

bishop acknowledged her as a convert. “*I was wondering if she might rent one of your empty bedrooms,*” Marnie had suggested, her blue eyes ever so hopeful.

Another one of Marnie’s rather ferhoodled ideas . . .

Marnie had clasped her hands as she stood fidgeting in the utility room just beyond the kitchen, a fallen gold leaf stuck to her black woolen shawl like a curious posy. From the look on her niece’s face, there was not a doubt in Rebecca’s mind that Marnie was thrilled about the prospect, outsider though Jenny Burns was.

Rebecca had never known any of the People to open their homes for the purpose of giving a stranger time to learn the Old Ways and *Deitsch*, too—certainly not with the hope of joining church. When she’d mentioned the idea to her husband after Marnie left, Samuel was not keen on the idea, though in the end he’d taken up the matter with Bishop John Beiler.

Presently, she bowed her head and pressed her hands together. Rebecca hardly knew what to pray. “Almighty God, grant divine guidance and grace in this peculiar matter,” she whispered. “And help us know how to proceed. We want to do the right and wise thing, to glorify thy name.”



The day following her birthday, Jenny had given her two weeks’ notice at Always Antiques, where she’d worked as an appraiser since college graduation. While neither her job nor her home state of Connecticut had any real hold on her, she would miss her friends, especially Pamela and Dorie Kennedy, two sisters she’d known since childhood. It was a significant blessing that her condo lease was finally up. She would also

miss Woodbury—the antiques capital of Connecticut, about forty minutes away—and beautiful Essex. Her parents' estate was located a mere block from the Connecticut River. *Rushing . . . like time's own swift current*, she thought while making a list of things to pack.

Her soul was starving for a sensible, more solicitous life. Since her first visit to Lancaster County years ago, Jenny had decided to make it her home, but she hadn't seen her way clear until now. Thanks to Marnie's working behind the scenes, finding her a place to live, she was finally able to move ahead. The Amish life offered what Jenny longed for: more time to savor each moment, slow the torrent of time, and grow as a child of God. She was ready to embrace a unique people, one set apart.

Perhaps one day her own family would come to accept this near-constant yearning in her bones. Up until now, they'd barely endured her obsession with the past, frowning at her frustration with ever-changing modern society.

But now Jenny was sure she had the ultimate answer. "Hickory Hollow," she breathed.

In the diffused autumn light, she caught herself staring at the old pine desk in the corner of her bedroom, where she'd stored a beloved album from the past. The memory of creating it tugged at her, as did the thought of leaving it behind. But her heartache of that time had since mended—the split had come more than two years ago. She had moved forward, glad to have more than survived the demise of her first love.

I'd do everything differently, given the chance, she vowed.

She went to the desk and removed the cherished scrapbook. Taking her time, she memorized each page of the romance represented there. Every picture, every memento—the movie

stubs, photos of flea market events, and visits to the Mystic Aquarium . . . the bits and pieces of two remarkable years.

She headed to the living room and built a blistering fire in the quaint fireplace. Without another thought, she tossed the album into the flames. “Good-bye, Kyle Jackson,” she whispered. “Good-bye forever.”

Jenny could hear the beating of her own heart. That small, fragile sound made her wish for peaceful Lancaster County more than ever. *Heaven on earth*, she thought, counting the days until she could finally move.

She watched the moon rise and settle into the trees beyond her living room window while the familiar question persisted: *Can I really do this?*

Suddenly, Jenny remembered what Marnie Lapp had penned in a recent letter: *My dear friend, there’s only one way to find out!*

Chapter 2



That's right, Hickory Hollow," Jenny Burns repeated for the cab driver outside the Lancaster train station. The short, balding cabbie looked completely baffled, so she opened her purse and located the house address on Hickory Lane.

Tired from the long trip, Jenny recalled the cell phone joke her brother had made two weeks ago at her birthday party. Surely the cab driver had a smartphone, or at the very least, a GPS. He shuffled to the trunk of the cab and opened it, then *thwomped* her large suitcase inside. He glanced at her as if to say, "*Whatcha got in there, Missy? An elephant?*" Then he closed the trunk and waved her toward the backseat. "I'm sure if it's in the area, we'll find it."

Carrying her purse and smaller bag, Jenny slipped inside the cab. She could have happily described the golden vale of a place—the fertile, sheltered hollow bounded on the north by the Old Philadelphia Pike and on the south by the Lincoln Highway.

Jenny buckled up and realized she'd only visited here in summertime. Presently, the air was swollen with the scent of

sun-drenched autumn and, unmistakably, manure. “It must be harvesttime,” she murmured.

“Excuse me?” the cabbie said.

“Uh, nothing.”

“Ah, here we are.” The cabbie pointed to the small screen on his dash. “You were right. That’s Hickory Lane, over there to the east.”

Soon they were off, heading toward Bird-in-Hand. Along the way, they encountered a number of gray horse-drawn, box-like buggies, with two carrying young children who peered out the back. One young girl squinted at them, her eyes smiling when the cab passed the carriage on the left. The little girl’s white cap was tilted askew on her head.

“Welcome to Amishland,” the cabbie grumbled. He shook his head with something close to disgust. “I don’t get it, and I never will.”

“I think theirs is a noble way of life,” Jenny said, surprised by his attitude and feeling defensive.

“Are you kidding? Can you imagine living Amish? I mean, seriously.”

“It works for them,” she replied. “Has for more than three hundred years.”

He muttered something. Then he said more audibly, “I know an Amish fellow who got fed up with the church and left.” He looked at her in the rearview mirror. “Know why?”

Miffed, she merely shook her head.

Mr. Cabbie tapped his forehead. “Told me he wasn’t permitted to think for himself.”

Some fit in and some don’t, she thought.

“He wanted a high school education—a no-no for Amish. When he left, he got his GED and went on to college. Wanted to be a lawyer, I guess. An odd career for an Amishman.”

“Well, this country could use some *honest* attorneys.” She smiled at herself.

“Last I heard, he had a nice big house over near Eden—opposite direction from where we’re headed.” The cabbie nodded his head. “This fellow just wasn’t cut out to be Plain.” He glanced at her in the rearview mirror. “Know much about the Amish?” he asked.

“I’ve met a few Plain women . . . bought tomatoes and cukes at their roadside stands.”

The highway narrowed as they headed through Smoke-town, then entered Bird-in-Hand proper, past the Old Village Store on the left and the farmers market on the right.

“All I know is that they make my job harder, clogging up the roads,” he said. “Why they don’t just get cars, I’ll never understand.”

“How much farther?” Jenny was ready to end the stream of criticism.

“Not too far. By the looks of it, Hickory Hollow’s east of Intercourse Village.”

She made herself relax. Thankfully, the cabbie was less keen on chattering now. Jenny enjoyed the sun’s warmth as she watched the landscape whiz past, thinking ahead to riding in a horse-drawn carriage with Marnie. She was captivated by the eight-mule teams and the Amishmen working the fields, sporting straw hats, their suspenders crisscrossed against dark blue, green, or gray shirts.

Like in the books I’ve read . . .

From what Marnie Lapp had said, her aunt Rebecca was the ideal person to mentor Jenny, at least until she found her own place. “*You’ll like her,*” Marnie had predicted in the last letter. “*For sure and for certain.*”

Jenny’s own resolve still surprised her, particularly the sale

of her car a few days ago, after having already sold most of her household possessions and dispensable personal effects at area consignment stores following her birthday. She only regretted not being more specific with her parents, especially her mother, although as it turned out, her mother seemed as distracted as her father, most likely finalizing her latest gala. Mom had looked up from her list, her mind seemingly miles away. “*Where are you going again?*”

Jenny had hesitated. “*I’ll get in touch once I’m there.*”

Mom’s frown was inscribed on Jenny’s memory; she could see the confused expression even now. “*Well . . . whatever you think is best, dear.*” She paused, fixing Jenny with a look of concern. “*Is everything okay?*”

Jenny opened her mouth, wondering if she shouldn’t just come clean, but before she could answer, her mother suddenly remembered something and reached for her cell phone, raising her finger. “*Hold that thought.*”

It occurred to her not for the first time that it might be weeks before her mother even realized she was gone.

Kiersten had been indifferent, more concerned with Jenny’s supposed snub of Frank, her husband’s “*really wonderful associate*”—she’d seemed more anxious than usual to get off the phone. And Cameron had just assumed Jenny was taking an extended vacation. “*Must be nice . . .*”

And while she’d tried to tell him it wasn’t that at all, Jenny believed in her heart that saying anything more would be a mistake. They would just try to talk her out of moving to Amish farmland, abandoning the materialistic English world. *Their beautiful world.*

When the cab made the right turn onto Cattail Road, Jenny’s skin prickled, and she wondered how close the Lapp farmhouse might be. She saw what looked like a waterwheel

near a creek. For an instant, she wished for her camera, but she'd sold that, too.

Leaning back again, she remembered working on a little lap quilt as a young teen while her sister played video games with their brother and neighborhood friends. *I was passionate about simple things while everyone else was into high tech.*

She thought of various fancy things she could have brought along—makeup, for one. And toiletries. But those weren't for a dedicated Amishwoman, as she intended to be. She'd walked out on her lipstick, her jewelry, most of her clothes, even her books.

It's time to live. Forget the stuff.

Just that quick, it occurred to her that Marnie might have forgotten to set things in place. Her emotions imploded. Surely not! Arranging things with the Lapps was vital—there was no backup plan. Oh, why was she thinking this way? If she couldn't trust Marnie to follow through, whom could she trust? *And given Marnie's excitement . . .*

Despite that, corresponding by letter about the arrangement now seemed terribly risky. Why hadn't Jenny gotten confirmation before she jumped?

Her heart pounded as she considered again the major changes ahead—changes that she was willing to make. *For the rest of my life . . . if the People will have me.*

She forced her gaze toward the heavens. *Lord, if you've put this desire in my heart, then here I am.*

Besides Jenny's strong feeling about all this, Marnie had nearly promised that her aunt Rebecca was the key to Jenny's pursuit. The Amish life lived under the watchful care of Samuel and Rebecca Lapp would lead Jenny aright, solve her lifelong desire. In every way, she was coming home.