

BEVERLY LEWIS



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lewis, Beverly.

The River / Beverly Lewis.

pages cm

Summary: "When two sisters return home for a visit after leaving the Amish world, both are troubled by the secrets—and the people—they left behind"—
Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1273-4 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7642-1245-1
(pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7642-1274-1 (large-print pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Amish—Fiction. 2. Sisters—Fiction. 3. Lancaster County (Pa.)—Fic-
tion. 4. Christian fiction. I. Title.

PS3562.E9383R58 2014

813'.54—dc23

2014012199

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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

Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services
Art direction by Paul Higdon

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To
Loretta Steiger,
with love and gratitude
for all the years of our friendship.

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Give unto them beauty for ashes,
the oil of joy for mourning,
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

—Isaiah 61:3 KJV

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PROLOGUE

AUTUMN 1977

*M*y Amish family would be shocked to lay eyes on me now, considering my chin-length hair, makeup, and jeans. They'd be just as dismayed by my home's modern appliances—the freezer, the microwave, the dishwasher, all miraculously fueled by electricity. And they'd be stunned at how easily I've taken to driving a car, a *red* car, no less, as if I'd been born an Englisher.

So, needless to say, I'm digging in my heels about returning home for my parents' anniversary gathering at the farmhouse where I managed to grow up without any of the conveniences I now take for granted.

Honestly, I figure there's no need to add salt to an open wound. Besides, I've never known anyone to celebrate such things in Eden Valley. Not amongst the Plain folk I was raised around.

Even so, my oldest brother, Melvin, wrote urging me to come, adding: *And please bring Ruthie. It's ever so important. Everyone else will be there!*

Everyone? It seems like decades since I stepped off the screened-in back porch and waved good-bye to poor worried *Mamm* and Lancaster County. But it's only been eight years, to be exact.

Despite how quickly I acclimated to the fancy world, my Amish roots are planted deep within me. My Englisher husband confirms that fact frequently as he witnesses my devotion to hard work and my continuing appreciation for gardening, sewing, and cooking from scratch. And I know he values my efforts to inspire a love of the simple gifts—biblical characteristics essential for a happy life—in our four-year-old twin daughters. After all, it's both a blessing and a challenge to grow up in the world of the English.

Dawdi Mast, my mother's *Daed*, would turn in his grave if he knew I'd embraced the fancy life. But believe me, I never abandoned *das Alt Gebrauch*—the Old Ways—to cause anyone ill. Some probably suspect I fled to escape the enduring strain between my tetchy father and myself, and two of my older brothers—Chester, as well as Joseph, one of the twins. Goodness, but *Daed* and I never saw eye to eye, always feuding about one thing or another, neither of us giving in a speck.

Mainly, though, I had to leave because of little Anna. *Precious Anna, never forgotten, forever missed.* The memories of my sister's accident are still so raw and real. *Ach*, those bitter years following that dreadful day . . . forever impressed on my heart.

Some of the People thought it was the enticing draw of the Conestoga River—the sweep of its power—that lured my five-year-old sister to its blustery, narrow banks that mid-July day. Others spoke *vorwitzich*—boldly—of God's sovereign

will, saying that it was sweet Anna's time to depart this old world.

But I knew the truth. My little sister drowned because of me.

I glanced again at Melvin's handwritten note and wondered just how hard it would be to step back into the muddle of my Plain family—six married brothers and our aging parents. Melvin had hinted that our father was no longer his vigorous self at fifty-eight. Was he ailing?

“Will I regret *not* going?” I wondered aloud.

I turned toward the kitchen window as Kris's brand-new apple-red 1977 Buick Skylark pulled into the driveway. He'd taken our girls to run a few “secret errands” after working at Rockport Hardware, where he was now manager.

Promptly, I stuffed the invitation into the nearest drawer, reluctant to broach the topic with my husband as he made plans for my thirty-first birthday, more than a week away.

From my vantage point, I watched our identical golden-haired darlings get out of the car, all smiles and giggles, so similar in likeness to little Anna when she was their age. How remarkable that the Lord had seen fit to give me two constant reminders of my youngest sister. Some days, it was almost haunting.

Naturally, Kris had never seen pictures of Anna, because according to the church ordinance, they were forbidden. The second commandment was ever my family's guide on that subject, yet I'd known Amish couples to stray from the bishop's strict rule, snapping furtive photos of their newborns.

My twins, Jenya and Tavani, their birthday purchases in hand, scampered toward the front door, eyes bright. All the while, my brain noodled Melvin's invitation. *Can I bring myself to do this?* I wondered. *Will Daed and Mamm even welcome me?*

Not likely. One thing was sure: I would *not* return to Amish country without my only living sister as a kind of buffer. And since the chances of Ruth agreeing to go at all, even with me, were slim to none, I finally dismissed the notion and opened my arms to our daughters.

Kris waited patiently for his own hug and inquired about supper, beaming his contagious smile at me as the twins hurried off to their rooms, jabbering to each other.

“Did you find everything you went for?” I teased, going to the fridge.

“The birthday girl’s not supposed to ask questions.” Kris winked. “Isn’t that what you always tell *us*?”

Lost in thought, I removed the defrosted chicken, recalling the days I gutted Daed’s chickens and turkeys. Ruthie was the plucker. Oh, the long, tiresome days pulling innards out of those dead birds.

“Hon?”

I turned, dazed, caught between two worlds. “Oh . . . right.” I paused, raising my palms. “No, really, I have everything I want right here,” I said to Kris. “You, the girls, and our life together.”

A quizzical expression crossed my husband’s handsome face, and his dark eyes penetrated mine. “You all right, hon?”

My husband always knew. He just did. But I wasn’t ready to talk about my brother’s note. Not yet. Not until I phoned Ruthie to see how quickly she, too, might dismiss the idea.

I gave Kris a haphazard shrug, and he touched my arm. “We’ll talk when you’re ready,” he said softly. “Okay?”

“Sure.” I smiled faintly.

Kris nodded and reached for the newspaper on the counter. He headed down the few steps to the family room while I washed my hands to prepare supper.

Truth be told, there was no way Ruth would think of returning to the scene of her own private heartache. “*Nix kumm raus*—Nothin’ doing!” she would say. She’d demonstrated real dignity when Wilmer Kauffman ditched her for the Jamborees. And while we both had been taught to forgive, I doubted Ruthie would ever quite forget. In fact, her wrenching disappointment had played right into the joy of having her join me in the English world, five years after my own hasty exit from our secluded Amish valley—yet another reason for our parents’ frustration with me.

I stole her from them. Occasionally, I felt some remorse over that. But now we were both reasonably settled in Rockport, Massachusetts, like two fugitives from the Amish world, living our fancy lives within walking distance of the harbor.

No, pondering Ruth’s painful past and my own unsettled issues, the answer was clear to me. Our Amish siblings would just have to carry on without us at the November celebration. And that’s all there was to it.

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CHAPTER 1

Eden Valley.

Someone perceptive had chosen the name for the verdant area where Melvin Lantz and his five married brothers resided. Although empty nesters, their parents, Lester and Sylvia, continued to work the farm at the old homestead just west of Melvin's, near the turnoff to Stone Road.

Back when that section of God's green earth was first organized into a rural community of acreage and roads, someone had also decided the narrow road running past Melvin's big farm should be called Eden Road. It was true that the surrounding farmland and woodlots, corncribs, and lines of fields were often described as almost heavenly by the good folk who lived and worked there, including Melvin himself.

No, there was absolutely no doubt in Melvin's mind that the Lord God above had reached His mighty hand down and placed a second Eden-like garden right in the midst of them. And as strongly as he felt about it, Melvin couldn't help but wonder why his sisters hadn't managed to stay put there with the People.

From the doorway of his harness and tack shop, the thirty-

eight-year-old Amishman watched his younger brother Joseph lift the reins and head out of the lane with his horse and open wagon.

Don't be too antsy, Melvin told himself, recalling the uneasy conversation with Joseph just now. After all, it had been only a week since he figured his Plain-turned-fancy sisters had received his invitation by mail. But to think Joseph was already pushing his nose in to see if there'd been a response.

Tilly and Ruth, Melvin thought, buttoning his black work coat. *Such an impudent pair!*

It wasn't the first time he'd considered them in such a light. Even now, it still unnerved him when he thought of Tilly's gall in persuading their more mild-mannered sibling, just twenty at the time, to leave behind her upbringing. The whole thing had stumped him and his wife, Susannah. But then, you just never knew what people were thinking deep in their heart of hearts.

The Good Lord knew, though, and Melvin had tried not to let his sisters' leaving get the best of him. All the same, his father believed it was a blemish upon their family, even though Tilly and Ruth had never surrendered their lives in holy baptism, joining church. And with Tilly married and solidly settled in the English world, her return was near impossible. But that didn't stop Melvin from hoping and praying that *Gott* might lead *Ruth* back to where she belonged.

Somehow . . .

Shielding his eyes, Melvin watched a crow spread its black wings wide and coast easily across the gray sky. He wondered if Tilly, especially, was ever sorry she'd spread her own restless wings. That kind of freedom was what his wife and two of his brothers assumed Tilly had sought in stepping away from the

church. As for Ruthie, however, none of them really understood why she had followed in her older sister's footsteps. Not when she'd always before made her own decisions.

Melvin forced out a breath, knowing it was time to get back to work. It was a mild October day with scarcely a breeze. *The air sure could use a good clearing out*, he thought, recalling his wife saying the same thing that very morning as she eyed the dreary sky. "*All the poor folk round the valley suffering here lately with sore throats and runny noses could certainly benefit.*" Recently, she'd seemed more anxious for the arrival of cold weather than other autumns. She was even busy sewing two coats—one for herself, the other for a sister. It dawned on him that she might be wishing Tilly and Ruth were around to make coats for, too. But no, they'd been gone too long for her to think that.

My dear Susannah, he thought. *The girls' leaving tore her heart up, same as Mamm's. . . .*

Down near the front of the house, not far from Eden Road, Melvin spotted his next younger brother shuffling up the lane. Though just thirty-six, Chester had lost his easy stride after his oldest son, Curly Pete, left the People with plans to join the army as soon as possible.

Melvin carried a soft spot in his heart for poor Chester, who'd been through rough waters with his boy. "Hullo, *Bruder!*" called Melvin, moving away from the shop just yards from the back door of his house. He walked toward Chester. "What brings ya?"

"Ain't gonna be but a minute." Chester offered nary a smile. Something was up.

"Just killin' time, then?"

"Nee. Not a'tall." Chester removed his black felt hat, then

motioned for Melvin to go inside the harness shop and followed in step right behind. The familiar smell of oil and cleaners filled the air. Chester glanced about the place, as if checking to see if they were alone. "Might I speak bluntly, Melvin?"

"Why should today be different than any other?"

Chester's gray eyes narrowed. "Have ya heard anything back from Tilly and Ruth?"

"Not a word."

"Well, now, that wonders me."

Melvin drew a slow breath before saying what was on his mind. "I doubt they'll come at all."

Shaking his head, Chester muttered, "Probably embarrassed after turnin' away from Plain life like they did." He turned to sit himself down on the three-legged stool by one of the wooden worktables. Behind him a wall of shelving was bursting with bridles and lines, essential equipment to help driving horses pull buggies with ease. Chester leaned his elbow on the table and glanced at the ceiling, then at Melvin. "Best be contacting them again in a week or so, if ya don't hear back right soon."

"Why's that?" Melvin asked, not wanting to push the issue with either Tilly or Ruth. After all, other than an occasional letter to Mamm or one of the womenfolk from Ruth, they hardly had contact with them.

"Not to worry ya, but . . ."

"What is it?" Melvin frowned.

Chester picked up a nearly finished bridle from the worktable as if to inspect it. "Wasn't gonna say anything, but maybe I oughta." He paused and made eye contact again. "I just came from visiting Daed and Mamm. To tell the truth, our father's lookin' awful pale. Whiter than fresh milk."

Melvin didn't like hearing this. "He's been complaining

'bout his heart racing and sometimes skipping beats, Mamm says. But I didn't think it was that bad."

Chester nodded slowly. "Heard that, too."

"Has he seen a doctor?"

"A few days ago, *jah*." Chester looked down at his hat. Then, slowly, he raised his eyes to meet Melvin's. "Doc says he might need a pacemaker if he wants to live much longer."

Daed won't hear of it, Melvin knew full well, and the knowledge settled uneasily into his gut.

The two of them were mighty quiet, and the sound of Melvin's hunting dog filled his ears just now. The old hound was barking himself nearly hoarse, down by the road.

At last Melvin said quietly, "How long can Daed manage . . . without it?"

"Optimistically? A few months, according to the doctor." Chester's face was grim. "Like I said, better try and call our sisters. I 'spect if one comes, the other will follow."

Melvin doubted it. Although he'd sent Tilly an invitation, he couldn't imagine her showing up, with or without Ruth.

Besides, Melvin disliked using their father's poor ticker to get the two of them home for the anniversary. Just didn't seem right.

Neer . . . *better they come on their own, without anyone pushin'*.



Melvin's wife served his favorite meal at noon—battered noodles and hot porcupine meatballs with onions and ground black pepper. It was one of Susannah's best-ever dishes.

Later, after a dessert of chocolate fudge pudding, he lingered at the head of the table—his designated spot. It was a rare moment when he was alone with his wife in the kitchen. Their

teenage sons, Caleb and Benny, had made themselves scarce this afternoon and hurried back out to the barn, and then who knew where. His boys were in the midst of their *Rumschpringe*—the running-around years—and Melvin, though he'd raised them to be God-fearing young men, found himself frequently giving them up to the Lord God's protection and grace.

Susannah kept studying him, like she sensed he was procrastinating on something. And she was right, even though he'd never been one to put off important things before. His father had disciplined that character flaw right out of him.

Truth be told, he wasn't the best choice to phone Tilly. Not in the least. He sat there, trying to relax. Susannah's eyes twinkled as she mentioned a wedding quilt for one of their many nieces.

"I want to help stitch it up a few days from now," she said.

He gave a nod, soaking in her presence. Like him, she was creeping up on forty, but Susannah was still attractive, without a speck of gray in her hair.

"You're awful quiet, dear." She reached for his hand. "Everything all right?"

He hemmed and hawed, then finally revealed what Chester had told him about Daed's weak heart. "Ya know, I really hate havin' to tell my sisters this," he admitted. "Bad enough having to tell it to you."

"Even so, they oughta know, *jah*?" Susannah pursed her lips, her gentle eyes on him.

He nodded, grateful for her cool hand in his.

Her shoulders rose and fell. "Well, and if Chester knows what he's talking 'bout, it might just be the last time the whole family gathers for—"

“Now, now, Susannah, we don’t know anything of the kind. We’ll leave that with the Lord, all right?”

With a bob of her head, she slid her hand away and rose to carry the dessert dishes to the sink.

He sat still, recalling the last time the family had been together, all of them. Back before Tilly left. Daed and Tilly had butted heads, enough to keep Tilly away for such a long time. It seemed that very little ever got past Daed when it came to that sister. He was her brick wall, so to speak, and looking back, Melvin realized she’d regularly pounded her head against that wall. For the hundredth time, he wondered why Daed and Tilly had been at odds. *From her early childhood . . .*

Without saying more, Melvin stood and made his way out to the back room, where he pulled on his work coat, still thinking about his ailing father. Always such a strong man . . . till now.

The door squeaked when he opened it, and he decided to turn right around and go back inside, where he found the WD-40 and sprayed the hinges. Then, once he’d returned the spray back to its shelf, Melvin finally headed outdoors and picked his way over the acreage, fertile land farmed for two hundred years and counting. Aware of the hush that afternoon, he squinted into the sun and thanked God for this peaceful place just south of Strasburg, hidden away from the world and its temptations.

Lord, grant me the right words tonight, he prayed. And if it be Thy will, soften Tilly and Ruth’s hearts to the family . . . and our need of them at this time.