

The ROAD HOME



BEVERLY LEWIS



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2018 by Beverly M. Lewis, Inc.

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lewis, Beverly, author.

Title: The road home / Beverly Lewis.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017050531 | ISBN 9780764219672 (softcover) | ISBN 9780764219924 (hardcover : acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780764219931 (large-print : softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Amish—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3562.E9383 R63 2018 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017050531>

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

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. 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

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



To
Paul and Diane Cucciniella,
my longtime reader-friends
and fellow bookworms!





Pray, and let God worry.

—Martin Luther



Prologue

AUGUST 29, 1977

If you're anything like me, you want to plan ahead. Not too far, but enough to feel prepared. Or at least somewhat settled.

I felt that way while stepping out the back door with my little brother Chris on his way to his first day of school at the one-room Amish schoolhouse of Centreville, Michigan. Carrying a shiny red apple for his teacher to show her respect, Chris was *gut* and ready. I'd taught him to count to fifty in English and drilled him in the alphabet, too.

Chris glanced up at me with his big blue eyes, and I almost leaned down to hug him. He was so adorable in the new school clothes I'd made for him—a pale blue shirt and black trousers—and his thin black suspenders and new straw hat. From the time he was nearly two, I had sewn his clothes, seamstress that I was. After having ten children, *Mamma* was plumb tuckered out, so she had assigned most of Chris's care to me once he was weaned.

This day, though, things were about to change. And right quick, too, as our four school-age brothers would burst out of the house at any moment now. Chris would walk to school with them,

swinging his little lunch pail in rhythm with theirs, moving ever so quickly into the world of boys and, eventually, young men.

Out near our mailbox, Chris stopped briefly to greet one of *Dawdi* Schwartz's peacocks, which had come strutting out onto the dirt road toward us. Then, of all things, if the bird didn't spread its colorful feathers and just stand there while Chris grinned at him. *Dawdi* and *Mammi* Schwartz lived in an addition built onto our uncle Matthew's farmhouse. With only two bedrooms, it was small, but the sitting room was oversized, unusual for most *Dawdi* *Hauses*. Best of all, it was less than a quarter mile from us and a short distance from the three-year-old Amish schoolhouse.

"Mammi Schwartz will prob'ly wave to you on the way home from school," I told Chris. "On nice days, she might even come out and offer a treat."

"I like *your* snacks best, Lena," he said in *Deutsch*, anticipation shining on his little face.

I patted his slim shoulder as he mentioned the gathering we'd had last evening at the house. Like usual, I'd helped Mamma with the big feast, even though my sister Emma did most of the everyday cooking. Mamma's kitchen was always filled with people and delicious food.

Chris licked his lips. "Your chocolate cake made me want more than one slice."

"I noticed that." I grinned at him. "But no one paid any mind since it was *Dat's* birthday."

"And the start of school for *me*," Chris said with a dramatic nod of his head.

At just that moment, here came Hans Bontrager in his father's buckboard, his brown bangs peeping out from beneath his wide-brimmed straw hat.

"Hullo, Lena Rose!" Hans slowed his beautiful chestnut-colored horse. "Where are ya goin' this fine August mornin'?"

I blushed, and little Chris must've noticed, because his eyes started blinking right quick. "Oh, just sayin' good-bye to *mei Bruder*."

"A new scholar?" Hans smiled as he studied Chris.

"*Jah*," I said. "And eager for book learnin'."

Hans glanced behind me, where four more of Chris's and my brothers were coming our way now, laughing and talking. "He might as well join the rest of the *Kinner*, ain't?"

I nodded. "This day couldn't come soon enough for him."

"*Gut* thing they finally allowed Amish schools around here, ain't so?"

I wholeheartedly agreed. Like Hans, I'd had to attend public school. How *Dat* had despised sending us older kids off to the world thataway! Why, some of the men in nearby Elkhart County, Indiana, had been put in jail for keeping their school-age children home. It had been an awful time for many Old Order families.

Hans picked up the driving lines. "Well, I'll see ya at the deacon's house for Ping-Pong come Saturday night," he said before clicking his tongue to signal his horse forward.

Once Hans was out of earshot, Chris said quietly, "He must like ya, *Lena Rose*."

I smiled down at his earnest face. It had long been my hope that Hans and I might court one day, and now that we were an official couple after two months of dating, my dream had come true.

"Ya comin', Chris?" asked our brother Timothy.

I brushed a stray bit of milkweed fluff from Chris's hat. "Have yourself a *wunnerbaar-gut* day," I said, proud as a Mamma to see him off.

He turned and gave me the dearest smile. "See ya after school," he called in return. Twice more he looked back, waving each time as though I might disappear from sight.

Standing there, I watched Chris fall into step with our brothers Timothy and Benjamin, ages eight and nine, and the twins—Mose and Sam—ten and a half. All of them hugged the side of the road, bobbing along as they picked up their pace.

Ach, the moment was bittersweet. Even so, I was happy for Chris, and I marveled at how much he'd grown since the days when I steadied him while he learned to walk, or put a small spoon in his dimpled right hand to teach him to eat his applesauce.

Like any doting big sister, I trusted that he'd do well now that he, too, was one of the big kids.

Walking back toward the house, I looked over my shoulder at Chris once more before heading inside.

Today, Mamma had entrusted Emma and me with making sure the younger children were cleaned up and ready for school on time. She'd hated having to miss seeing Chris off herself, but early this morning she had gone to Middlebury, Indiana, to substitute teach at an Amish-Mennonite school not far from the RV factory where Dat worked as a supervisor in the cabinetry department. Naturally, I'd promised to tell her all about Chris's morning once she and Dat arrived home this afternoon. Oh, I could hardly wait to share Chris's joy with her . . . despite my own mixed feelings.

Mamma will understand. She's been through this ten times now!



In the kitchen, seventeen-year-old Emma was making an attempt to hurry along our younger sisters, Liz, turning fourteen in October, and Verena, twelve, both dallying as they were known to do. “Yous don’t wanna be late on the first day, do ya?” Emma said as she motioned them toward the back door. “Time’s a-wastin’!”

“Pay close attention to the teacher,” I said as they poked along,

jabbering in *Deitsch* as if in a world of their own. “If you’re late, you might have to wash all the chalkboards after school!”

At my warning, they scurried along.

“You sound like Mamma,” said Emma, who turned her attention back to the four apple pies she was making for tonight’s supper—two for the twelve of us, and two for our close neighbors, Elmer and Polly Neuenschwander. Although our amiable neighbors were Old Order Amish like we were, they gave all of us children gifts every year at Christmastime. And because of that, Mamma had made pies and fresh-baked bread to take over to them for all these many years.

I sat down at the table and sighed. “I was glad to see Chris head off for school. But honestly, I feel a twinge of sadness, too.”

“Aw . . . well, he’s been itchin’ to start.” Emma pushed one pie after another into the old black wood stove.

“*Jah*, and I’ll get more work done without my little shadow, ain’t?”

Emma was more interested in baking than in looking after a younger sibling. In fact, I’d often hinted that she would do well to run a bakery somewhere and skip marriage. She would just roll her brown eyes at me and laugh. Truth was, every courting-age young woman round these parts was keen on getting hitched up with a fine Amish boy, settling down, and having babies.

“Maybe it’s time to turn the pages of your own life, sister . . . with Hans.” Emma came over to sit beside me on the long wooden bench, flour on the tip of her nose.

I agreed, thinking how exciting it was to be his girl. “He said he’d see me at Ping-Pong Saturday night,” I said.

Emma eyed me for a moment. “He *told* ya . . . didn’t ask?”

I wasn’t sure how to take her seeming concern. “*Puh!* We have an understanding now.”

“Well, surely he’s polite and still invites you on dates.”

“Now and then, *jah*.” I was so new at all this courtship business, I really didn’t know what was considered acceptable. I was surprised Emma already had opinions on such things.

“I’ve seen him wink at ya during Singings.” Emma’s eyes locked with mine. “I s’pose Mamma has an idea you’re seein’ someone.”

“Not just yet, but I’ll tell her soon. Still . . . ain’t like I’ll be wed by this November.”

“*Nee*, yous need time to get well acquainted.” Emma put her arms around me. “I’m happy for ya, if you think he’s the one.”

“You’ll be the first to know when I’m engaged,” I assured her, filled with hope.

“And I’ll hold ya to it,” Emma said as she went to check on her pies.

CHAPTER

1

Centreville, Michigan, was situated on the Prairie River. It was a close-knit town, and Lena loved it for just that reason. Everyone knew each other by first name . . . and also minded everyone else's business, which was either good or bad, depending on who you were or what you'd done. There were always amusing stories floating around on the grapevine: which sixteen-year-old fellow had raced a train in his new open carriage at the railroad crossing in nearby Wasepi, or which young woman had sewn the hem of her dress too short. Or even which Amish farmer had sneaked off to listen to his portable transistor radio when Hank Aaron beat Babe Ruth's home run record.

Aside from ordinary gossip like that, there was no one more caring and generous than the People up and down those southern Michigan back roads. These were the folk Lena Rose had known all of her eighteen-and-a-half years, and her heart was tightly wound around her hometown and the family she loved so dearly.

That hot late-August afternoon seemed to drag on like never before as she helped Emma put up peaches. Lena caught herself looking at the day clock, wondering what new things six-year-old Chris was learning.

She remembered again her own school days, when she and other Amish children were required to attend public schools. *How far we've come*, Lena thought, glad Chris got the chance to do his learning amongst the People. She fastened the lid on the last jar of peaches and put it in the canner, thinking ahead to what she might prepare as an after-school snack for her younger siblings.

“Goat cheese and crackers, and sliced apples,” she murmured to herself.

Emma glanced at her. “*Ach*, delicious,” she said. “But it’s too soon after the noon meal for a snack, ain’t?” she teased.

The two of them discussed what they planned to make for supper, wanting to have the food ready to serve and the table set when Mamma arrived with Dat. “No need to have her lift a finger today,” Lena said, eager to see to it that everything was just so for their hardworking mother.

“Are we sure there won’t be any extra mouths to feed tonight?” Emma asked.

“I hardly think so, considering all the family was together yesterday.” Lena recalled last evening’s wonderful-good time with Dawdi and Mammi Schwartz.

Pouring some coffee, she thought ahead to hearing Chris tell about his first day. Surely he would be as full of stories and fun as ever. She remembered last Sunday, when she’d driven Dat’s second family carriage to Preaching service—they regularly had to use two buggies to fit all twelve of them. After settling herself into the driver’s seat that morning, Lena had watched Chris race across the driveway and hop right in next to her, excited to talk about his plans with cousins that afternoon.

My sweet little brother, she thought, taking a tentative sip from her steaming mug.

At that very moment, their house cat leaped lightly down

from her favorite spot on the sunny windowsill near the entrance to the utility room. She stretched long and leisurely, mouth wide.

“Your food dish is full,” Emma told the cat, pointing over to the corner, “in case you’re hungry *again*.”

“Our Tubby Tabby,” Lena said, laughing softly. “All she does is eat and sleep.”

“Dat says if we all ate as often as she does, we’d be as round as full moons.” Emma smiled.

They continued their work in the kitchen until they were startled by several loud raps on the frame of the screen door. Lena and Emma turned in unison to see two policemen standing on the porch.

A myriad of worries bloomed in Lena’s head—had something happened to one of the children at school? To little Chris?

Emma coaxed Lena to go to the door, where she was so nervous she could scarcely answer sensibly when the officers asked if this was the residence of Jacob and Elizabeth Schwartz.

“*Jah*, ’tis,” she managed to eke out.

The kind-looking older policeman asked if they might step inside for a moment, his jaw set solemnly. And even before they suggested the two young women sit down, Lena Rose sensed something dreadful, felt it clear down in her bones.

“There’s no good way to say this.” The younger officer looked at his feet for a moment before revealing that Dat and Mamma had been in a terrible road accident. “It happened earlier this afternoon in Indiana . . . on the outskirts of Middlebury,” he said, his voice low.

Holding her breath, Lena waited for more information. *Are they in the hospital?*

Behind her, her sister whispered, “Will Dat and Mamma be all right?”

The policemen's expressions remained grim, and the two men exchanged glances.

"I'm awful sorry," the younger officer said then.

She couldn't bear to hear what followed.

"No one in the passenger van survived."

Lena tried to process what this meant. Mamma and Dat were both strong and in perfect health. How could her precious parents be gone? *Gone all too suddenly to Glory.*

"They never knew what happened." The older officer said this as if to reassure them, but Lena felt a wave of despair descend as the awful words lingered in the air.

After the policemen left, Lena Rose held Emma in her arms for the longest time, too stunned to cry herself. *How can this be?* she kept asking herself, trapped in a state of disbelief. She could scarcely take a breath, shocked to think that their parents had died, along with other Amish passengers from the nearby town of Sturgis.

Only hours before, Mamma had kissed all of them good-bye before getting into the large van with Dat—their usual routine. Lena had hugged Mamma extra close. Who would have imagined that it would be the last she'd see her and Dat alive—the last time they would say "*Ich liebe dich*" to each other?

Somehow, Lena and Emma managed to get themselves out of the house. They searched first in the barn for their fifteen-year-old brother, Wilbur. Not finding him there or in the stable, where the market wagon was missing, they trudged across their father's wide pasture to Deacon Joe Miller's adjoining farm. *We must talk to him before the younger children return home*, Lena Rose thought as the train whistle blew in the distance. Her heart ached at the very idea of telling them the dire news.

Fortunately, the middle-aged deacon was home, so Lena

informed him of what the police had said only a mere half hour earlier. Stone-faced and shaken, the dear man vowed to undertake the job of getting the word out that Jacob and Elizabeth Schwartz had perished . . . and that their ten children were suddenly orphans.

“What’ll happen to us?” Emma asked later as she and Lena waited in their Mamma’s kitchen for the rest of their siblings to return from school. The minutes seemed to stretch into hours. Wilbur had returned from the Truckenmiller hardware store in town and was out in the barn with Uncle Noah, their father’s eldest brother, who had pulled up in his buggy shortly after receiving word from the deacon. And Mammi Schwartz, a good many aunts, and Clara Yoder, their nearby preacher’s wife, as well as a host of other womenfolk, including English neighbors, had arrived to take over making supper and other chores.

When the younger children hurried into the house, with confusion on their faces at all the activity and the sight of so many buggies parked in the side yard, Lena went with Emma and Wilbur to sit with all of them in the front room. “This is the hardest thing I’ll ever have to say, my dear brothers and sisters,” she said softly, struggling to get the words out as she told them what had befallen their Dat and Mamma.

The school-age boys wore deep frowns as they turned to look at one another, mirroring the shock and horror of their older siblings. Wilbur put his arm around the twins, and Lena and Emma reached for Verena and Liz as the girls wept. Yet it was young Chris who took it hardest. The poor boy slipped between his sisters and crawled into Lena’s lap like a toddler, crying as she held him, his shoulders shaking. It wasn’t long before the rest of the children formed a sort of circle around them, hands clasped. *They all depend on me*, Lena thought, wishing she were

stronger. How would she tend to them when her own heart was in tatters?

After the family picked at their supper amidst an atmosphere of leaden sadness, Dawdi and Mammi Schwartz lingered with them at the table, and Deacon Miller opened his *Biewel* and began to read. Then all heads bowed at the table for a silent prayer before Lena Rose and Emma helped Mammi ready the younger children for bedtime.

In the midst of her own distress, Lena fleetingly wondered if it might be possible for them to stay together in their parents' farmhouse. But the question loomed much too big in her mind for such a day. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep us together," Lena told Emma later, determined to be courageous for her siblings' sake.

"I know ya will," Emma said, tears flowing freely as she sat on the edge of the bed.

But truly, Lena had no inkling what the future held.