

Susanna's Christmas Wish

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HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Eicher, Jerry S.

Susanna's Christmas wish / Jerry S. Eicher.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7369-5151-7 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-5152-4 (eBook)

1. Christmas stories. I. Title.

PS3605.I34S87 2012

813'.6—dc23

2011053281

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Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 / BP-CD / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*T*his book is dedicated to the other side of the story:
To all the Amish girls who have been left behind, to their
love, and to their life built from the ashes of what was lost.



Acknowledgments

I was more the scribe than the writer on this one. This story appeared with only the minimum of digging on my part. And thanks to the editors at Harvest House, Nick Harrison and Barb Gordon. They touched the story with great tenderness, adding beauty and grace.



One

Susanna Wagler stood by the living room window watching Herman's broad shoulders as he guided the team of horses into the field. Was he really her husband? The thought raced through her mind, and she pushed it away. These were not the thoughts a woman of God should have. Of course Herman was her husband. They had said the marriage vows in front of Bishop Jacob not three weeks ago. She could still hear Bishop Jacob's voice intoning, "Do you, sister Susanna, believe *Da Hah* has given our brother Herman to you as your husband?"

The words had hung in the air only for a moment before she whispered, "*Yah*."

Herman was the husband *Da Hah* meant for her. She had been certain of it. As certain as she could be. He was a man deeply loved by the community for his honest ways, his open face, and his dedication to the faith of the fathers. This was why she had said *yah* to Herman's first timid request when he'd asked her home from the hymn singing. And so far Herman Wagler hadn't let her down. Not like someone else had... Susanna also pushed that thought away.

She had forgotten about him—shut his memory from her mind. But even now she shouldn't think badly of Matthew Yoder, though he had broken her heart. The truth had come out, and it was better this way. How awful would it have been if the truth had

waited to appear after they were married? That was what her sister Mary told her, and she was right. Mary was wise about Matthew, having married his brother Ernest. Even before Matthew had left, Mary had seemed unsure of his intent. Older sisters were good for something after all, it seemed.

Still, Susanna tried to give Matthew the benefit of the doubt. He must have had his reasons for leaving the community. Even though she couldn't understand them...or follow him into the *Englisha* world. And his reasons were obviously greater than his love for her. That was what hurt the most when he'd informed her he didn't plan to stay in the Amish community. He hadn't been able to tell her before, he'd said, though he'd assured her he hadn't been playing her along all those years.

But a man didn't suddenly make up his mind to leave, she figured. Such a desire had to have been there for a long time. Matthew had known something, regardless of how much he insisted he hadn't. If she had loved him enough, she would have gone with him, she supposed. But how could a woman love a man who loved the *Englisha* world more than he loved her? Still, she had wavered for weeks over the matter. Struggled with the agony of it. Was she at fault? Did love require the sacrifice of everything...of all she held dear? Things like this land of her people? These open fields she'd grown up in? This place where she'd been born?

Matthew seemed to have no problem leaving all of it, and he'd soon put his words into action, getting himself placed in the *bann* in the process. As if she could face something like that. The cutting off of all contact with her past. This couldn't be love, she'd finally told herself. She could not choose this.

So Matthew was gone.

And slowly she had put the fragments of her heart back together. Finding a piece here and a piece there that fit. Herman, with his tenderness, had helped. And her heart had healed somewhat, hadn't it? She wouldn't have married Herman if it hadn't, would she?

She loved Herman. She did. Herman was the kindest man around. She should be thankful he had even considered her. Especially after Matthew left and caused such a stir in the community. No Amish young man would have been blamed for avoiding her completely, like she was a second-rate, cast-off shirt. And yet Herman hadn't thrown her away. He had asked her home from the hymn singing and eventually asked if she would be his *frau*. Someone to love and cherish forever while they lived on this earth. Herman had done that, and was that not love?

Susanna's eyes lingered on Herman's face as he turned the team of horses around. The prancing hooves left tracks in the light dusting of the overnight snow. For a moment Herman glanced toward the house, and she ducked behind the drapes. It wouldn't be decent for him to see her staring at him from the window. Not yet. Even if he was her husband. They should learn to know each other better first.

When Susanna stole another look, Herman was headed out over the open fields, hanging on to the lines. He is a handsome man, she told herself. And one she was thankful to have as her husband.

There was at least one brokenhearted girl in the community that she knew of. Herman had left behind Ruth Byler. She sure hadn't kept her desires to have Herman take her home from the hymn singing a secret. And if there was one who did so openly, there had to be others who had hid their feelings. Yet Herman had chosen her.

Susanna turned back to the kitchen with a sigh. This had to stop. This wondering and puzzling over things. She had expected it would be over after the wedding. In fact, there had been plenty of signs during the weeks before the wedding that her doubts had flown away. Now they apparently were back in force.

But they would live through this, Susanna told herself. Herman loved her and she loved him. He had made that plain enough

in the days since the wedding. And she had no reason to complain. She was sure Herman was aware that her heart hadn't totally healed from Matthew, but he was being kind and understanding. What woman wouldn't love such a man?

Susanna ran hot water into the kitchen sink while she brought the last of the breakfast dishes to the counter. Herman's plate was sopped clean—it looked almost washed, like it always did. Even though it had been a large breakfast of eggs, bacon, and home fries she'd fixed him. Herman would have made a *gut* bachelor, that was for sure. The way he kept everything tidy around himself. And yet he felt the need of her, felt it necessary to bring her into his life.

But why?

Because he loved her, of course, Susanna told herself. There didn't need to be a reason beyond that. Perhaps it was the conversation at the breakfast table this morning that was bringing this indecision up again. Well, it was more of an argument, really. Their first timid disagreement. And she had been shocked at the feelings that rose up inside of her. The insistence that Herman see things her way. And she had even grown angry, though Herman hadn't, even as he remained firm. There would be no celebration of Christmas in their new home. And they wouldn't be going to her parents' place to celebrate either. It was not the way of his family, and it would not be their way.

Susanna washed the dishes and stared out the window at the snow. Soon the snow would be falling in earnest, the flakes floating past this very window. The joy and hope of Christmas would be in the air. The celebration of the Christ child in the manger would be coming. Was this feeling just an *Englisha* thing, like Herman claimed? He said her family had given in to worldly influences and his family had not.

Yet how could this be true? Her family didn't celebrate Christmas like the *Englisha* did, with their Christmas trees and lots of store-bought presents. *Nee*, their celebration was simple. They

began by gathering on Christmas morning for breakfast. In his deep voice, *Daett* would read the story of the Christ child's birth. Then the day would be spent together visiting, eating candy and goodies galore, and letting the children race around the house. Maybe that was a little like the *Englisha*, but she would be willing to adjust something, like leaving early, if that helped Herman get used to her family's ways.

But Herman had said no. No hesitation, right out, flat no.

And she had gotten angry. Even her cheeks flushed and her fingers tingled. She had stood up from the table to get a drink at the sink even though her glass was still full of water. His eyes had followed her as he seemed to be waiting for harsh words from her.

But she had not spoken them. She knew that Herman, being her husband, was in the right. And she knew what he would say further on the matter—that she knew *before* the wedding what his feelings were. He had made no secret of them. And there had been the talk with his *mamm*. Herman's *mamm* had made two or three special trips to the Keim farm before the wedding to visit Susanna. From that first visit, it seemed as if his *mamm* was sizing her up as a daughter-in-law. Would she be good enough for her Herman? That was her purpose in that first visit. She must have passed the test because there had been the second visit. That's when Mrs. Wagler told Susanna what Herman's favorite dishes were and how important it was to honor their family traditions. That was when she mentioned their longstanding abhorrence of the celebration of Christmas that had somehow infiltrated the community. Those visits had been uncomfortable enough, but then only two days after the wedding Herman's *mamm* had showed up to help her organize her kitchen. Hadn't it occurred to her that if Susanna needed such help she would have asked her own *mamm*?

Nee, she couldn't say she didn't know how Herman and his family felt about Christmas, Susanna acknowledged. And now with their first Christmas together approaching, Susanna was realizing

it would also be her first Christmas without the joy she had experienced at home. *Nee*, she would never get to be at *Mamm* and *Daett's* for Christmas morning again.

Knowing about his objections beforehand wasn't making it any easier, no matter how often she'd told herself it should be. She had thought maybe there was some sort of compromise possible. Surely there had to be. Susanna sighed. It was useless, really. She already knew that. Hermann was handsome and nice and calm, but he was "Amish stubborn." That was just how it was. And she was his *frau*.

Well, she could imagine that Christmas was no big deal. Perhaps she was being silly about such a small matter. They would find something else to do on Christmas morning.

Susanna dried the plates and placed them in the cupboard above her. She would have to learn submission, that was the only answer. This was the first big test being placed before her by *Da Hah*, and she would have to pass somehow. Oh, if she only could. Who would have thought she would have trouble with being a *gut frau*? That had been the least of her expectations. A sloppy housekeeper, perhaps, or being unable to keep up with the sewing once she had a bunch of *kiener*. Those things had worried her, but letting her husband have his way about Christmas had not been on her list.

Susanna closed the cupboard door. She would learn this lesson by Christmas morning. She still had time. Thanksgiving was this week, and that left nearly a month until Christmas. Yes, that's what she would do. She would set her whole heart to the task. This would be her gift of love to Herman. She would learn to keep her mouth shut, and even if she didn't succeed right away, it would happen. She would apologize until it did happen. Surely by Christmas the task would be done. Herman would see on that morning how much progress she'd made in fitting herself into his family's lifestyle.

By Christmas Day she would love him fully, with all of her heart. What better wish to aim for than to live in total harmony

with your husband, she decided. And love would keep growing in her heart for him. Perhaps not exactly the love she used to feel for Matthew, but a better love. A higher love. One that would grow from suffering.

Hadn't Matthew shown her how shallow their love used to be? He'd sure been able to cast it off as if it didn't matter.

Running to the window again, Susanna peeked out. Herman was a dim figure now, almost lost from view in the distant field. He looked intent on his work, his head bent toward the ground as his plow turned up the black dirt. Susanna turned away. How like plowing her plan was. Turning her old life under like Herman was doing to the ground today. Preparing for the spring when things come alive again. She would do the same. Plow under her selfish desires to plant a future spiritual harvest. Here was the sign as to what she should do as plain as day and right before her eyes. How like *Da Hah* to show her so quickly that He liked her plan. He would surely be answering her wish soon.



Two

Two hours later Susanna finished her kitchen chores. It was a few minutes before eleven o'clock, and Susanna made her way to the barn, hoping Herman wouldn't notice. *Nee*, he was in the far corner of the field now and wouldn't see her go. Not that he would object to her going to visit her sister. In fact, he already knew she was going. But if he saw her before she had Bruce hitched to the buggy, Herman might feel compelled to leave his horses and come in to give her a hand. Especially after their argument this morning.

She knew him well enough to have that figured out. Herman would want to show her that he held nothing against her even as he stood his ground. It was better that she harness Bruce on her own. Once he saw her on the road, Herman would remember she was going to Mary's house for the day to help prepare for Thanksgiving.

Tonight she would make things up to Herman by putting a *gut* supper on the table. She had already made an overture by laying cold cuts out for his lunch. Maybe her kindness after their disagreement would cause him to consider a little about how she was feeling. It wouldn't hurt him. And by Christmastime, *Da Hah* would have worked a *gut* miracle in her, and she would have moved a long way toward being a submissive wife.

Herman's horse greeted her with a loud whinny when she walked into the barn. Already Bruce knew her well, and he

apparently liked her. No doubt in part because every time Herman had called for her at her parents' place, she'd always taken the time to stroke his neck and talk to him while Herman tied him up by the barn.

"How you doing there, old man?" Susanna asked, opening the stall door to grab his halter. He bobbed his head as she ran her fingers through his mane.

"Herman put you in here for me, didn't he?" Susan looked around for a moment. "Well, I'm sorry you had to stand all morning in a tight little stall when you could have been running around the pasture. But see, my husband is trying to be nice since we had a little tiff this morning. Do you think you can understand that?"

Bruce whinnied again as she led him outside the stall to throw on the harness. With the straps on tight, he followed her willingly to the buggy and swung under the shafts when she held them up.

Bruce was a well-behaved horse, just like his owner. Steady and always helpful, though he didn't have much speed—except for short spurts downhill. But he could be counted on to get her somewhere in time and with little hassle.

"Get-up," Susanna said once she was inside the buggy and had taken up the reins. She turned to take one last look toward the back field, as they drove out the lane. Herman had spotted her now, and he was craning his neck in her direction.

Susanna leaned out of the buggy to wave, and Herman's hand came up in return. He was too far away for her to see if a smile crept across his face, but it would be there. She also knew that characteristic. He would get the message that she wasn't going to throw another fit about this morning. He would understand she had to have time to work through her feelings. In that way, he also had her figured out, which was a nice, warm thought. Herman was a patient man. They would make a *gut* couple by the time all was said and done.

Susanna slapped the reins against Bruce's back, urging him on.

As they drew close to Bishop Jacob's place, she saw a team of Belgians in the field. The bishop was also busy at fall plowing. She waved as she went past, and Bishop Jacob turned to wave back, his face breaking into a broad smile.

For Bishop Jacob to be behind the plow must mean his son-in-law must be behind on his own plowing, Susanna figured. The bishop only helped with the chores now that he'd turned his farm over to his youngest daughter's husband. They'd been married a few years now.

What would Bishop Jacob think if he knew about her little argument with Herman this morning? He probably wouldn't be smiling. But maybe he would understand that all young married couples have issues to work through. Most of those problems surely didn't involve things like celebrating Christmas or having an ex-boyfriend who was in the *bann* though.

Bishop Jacob wouldn't be holding Matthew against her, would he? He hadn't mentioned it when she and Herman had gone to ask if he would marry them. But if Bishop Jacob knew she was thinking again of Matthew, he might have something to say about it. His face would no doubt fall in disappointment. His high hopes in the young couple he had married only a few weeks ago would be troubled.

She knew Bishop Jacob had high hopes because he'd said so when she and Herman had arrived that Saturday evening to announce their wedding plans.

"*Gut* evening," Bishop Jacob had greeted them with a twinkle in his eye. This was obviously a routine he had seen many times before. "May I do anything for you?" he had asked, as if he didn't have a clue.

Herman hadn't missed a beat. Almost as if he had done this a hundred times before, he'd said, "May we have a few words with you inside?"

"Of course," Bishop Jacob had said, opening the door wide.

Once they were all settled, Herman had wasted no time. "Susanna and I have agreed to wed. And we would like to be published in two weeks—if you have no objections."

"Me? Have objections?" Bishop Jacob had laughed. "I'm expecting I'll have no objections. After I've asked the few usual questions, of course. I've been observing your courtship, and I think both of you are making a very wise choice."

Susanna had looked away from the bishop's gaze that night. She still remembered how she'd felt though—all warm inside at his kind words. How *gut* it was to know she had been doing the right thing by dating Herman and agreeing to wed him. And she still felt that way. It was just that Herman and she were having a little trouble right now. But that would all be over soon, if *Da Hah* willed it. And surely He did.

Ahead of her, Mary's house appeared, and Susanna pulled back on the reins. Bruce turned down the driveway like he knew exactly where she was going, coming to a stop at the hitching post beside the barn.

Susanna jumped down and unhitched. With a glance around, she stopped short, her hands on Bruce's halter. Why was there an *Englisha* car parked behind the barn? Beside her, Bruce lunged forward, almost stepping on her as he came out of the shafts.

"Whoa, boy!" she muttered. "I wasn't quite ready for that."

Recovering, she led Bruce toward the barn. Mary would have an explanation once she arrived at the house. An *Englisha* car behind the barn would be hard to explain though. Any *Englisha* people who stopped in, whether they were buying produce from Mary's garden or had business with her husband, Ernest, would park in plain sight.

"Howdy there," Mary's voice hollered from the front porch, jerking Susanna out of her thoughts.

"Hi," Susanna called back. "I'm taking Bruce into the barn."

"Do you need help?" Mary asked. "Ernest isn't here right now."

"Of course not!" Susanna hollered back with a laugh.

Now why would Mary ask such a thing? Mary knew she was perfectly capable of unharnessing a horse by herself. She must be in a teasing mood. But Mary wasn't exactly a teaser. Well then, she must be in a *gut* mood with Thanksgiving coming up later this week. Getting ready for family gatherings always puts *my* family members in a *gut* mood, Susanna thought. She slid open the barn door. At least Herman hadn't objected to Thanksgiving meals with her family. "If they aren't too extravagant," he'd said last year. And as long as no one ate too much. He had come to Thanksgiving last year and was apparently satisfied. Why else would he have agreed to their coming to Mary's house this year, as well as her helping Mary prepare beforehand?

If her family thought her new husband strange, they had yet to mention anything. Of course, they hadn't gone through an actual Christmas as a married couple yet. Perhaps that would make a difference.

It'll be okay, Susanna told herself, turning Bruce loose in an empty stall. She threw him a slab of hay before leaving. He was munching away when Susanna glanced over her shoulder to check on him before closing the barn door.

Mary was waiting on the front porch when Susanna stepped outside. She looked very troubled now. Had Mary also had an argument with her husband this morning? Was that it? But that couldn't be. Mary and Ernest had been together for years now, and they had doubtlessly worked through all their marriage problems.

"*Gut* morning," Susanna greeted Mary. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, *yah*..." Mary's smile looked stiff. "I'm so glad you could come."

"Did you boil over something in the kitchen?" Susanna guessed. Mary wasn't beyond forgetting a kettle cooking on the stove.

"Oh no," Mary said, her eyes shifting toward the barn. "It's been going well all morning."

Susanna turned to look again, remembering the *Englisha* car. "Is that someone who has business with Ernest?"

Mary shook her head. "Maybe we'd better stay out here on the porch for a moment. I need to tell you something."

"What has happened?" Susanna took Mary's arm, leading her over to the rocking chairs. She sat down once Mary was seated.

Mary was breathing deeply. "I would have let you know before you came, but there was no way to get hold of you in time."

"Mary, what has happened?"

"Maybe you should just go home right now." Mary leaped to her feet. "In fact, that's what I think you should do. It would be best for everyone concerned."

Susanna pulled her sister down. "You're going to tell me right now, or I'm going to search the whole house until I find out what's wrong."

Mary's face turned white. "You shouldn't do that. I'll tell you."

Now Susanna was getting weak-kneed herself. Mary never acted like this, even when little Mose had broken his arm last summer at *Mamm* and *Daett's* place. And by the way, why were the two children not out here? Usually Mose and Laura were climbing all over her by now, happy to see her and chattering a mile a minute. All seemed too quiet.

"Mary," Susanna whispered, "tell me what's wrong."

"He came late last night," Mary whispered back. "He's inside sleeping."

"Who came?"

Now her knees really were going weak. Mary could only mean one person for her to have a reaction like this. But it couldn't be! Matthew wouldn't simply appear like this. Unannounced just before Thanksgiving. Not after leaving like he had.

"*Yah*," Mary said, as if reading her thoughts. "You're thinking right. He's stopped by for the Thanksgiving holiday. Now don't you think you'd better leave before he sees you?"

Susanna was staring at Mary. "Does he know about me? About Herman?"

Mary shook her head. "He asked about you first thing, but Ernest and I avoided his questions. I thought the children might answer him, but thankfully they weren't in the room at the time."

"He has to be told," Susanna managed to get out.

"I will—tonight. Now go home before he hears your voice."

"And leave you alone with all the Thanksgiving work?"

"There are things more important than work." Mary was on her feet, motioning down the porch steps. "Quickly, Susanna!"