

*Allison's
Journey*

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Allison's Journey

WANDA &
BRUNSTETTER

BRIDES OF WEBSTER COUNTY



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DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Leeann Curtis,
who makes beautiful faceless Amish dolls.

*And ye shall seek me, and find me,
when ye shall search for me with all your heart.*

JEREMIAH 29:13

Chapter 1

*W*ith a sense of dread, Allison Troyer stepped into the kitchen. Today was her nineteenth birthday, but she was sure Aunt Catherine wouldn't make a bit of fuss over it. In the twelve years Papa's unmarried sister had lived with them, she had never made much over Allison's or any of her five older brothers' birthdays. Allison figured her aunt didn't care for children and had only moved from her home in Charm, Ohio, to Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania, because she felt a sense of obligation to Allison's father. After Mama's untimely death, Papa had been left to raise six children, and it would have been difficult for him without his sister's help.

Allison glanced at her aunt, standing in front of their propane-operated stove. She was a lofty, large-boned woman with big hands and feet. Aunt Catherine's gray-streaked, mousy brown hair was done up tightly in a bun at the back of her head, and her stiff white *kapp* was set neatly on top.

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The wooden floor creaked as Allison stepped across it, and her aunt whirled around. Her skin looked paler than normal, making her deeply set blue eyes seem more pronounced.

“*Guder mariye*,” Allison said.

“Morning,” Aunt Catherine mumbled, her thin lips set in a firm line. “You want your eggs fried or scrambled?”

“Whatever’s easiest.”

“It’s your birthday, so you choose.”

“I prefer scrambled.” Allison offered her aunt a faint smile. So she hadn’t forgotten what day it was. Maybe this year she would bake Allison a cake. “Would you like me to set the table or make some toast?”

“I think it would be best if you set the table. Last time you made toast, it was burned on the edges.” Aunt Catherine’s pale eyelashes fluttered like clothes flapping on the line.

If you’d let me do more in the kitchen, I might know how to do things better. Without voicing her thoughts, Allison opened the cupboard door and removed four plates and glasses, placing them on the table.

“I thought I might make a batch of peanut brittle after the chores are done,” Aunt Catherine said as she went to the refrigerator and withdrew a jug of milk. “Your brothers and their families will probably join us for supper tonight. I’m sure they would enjoy the candy.”

Peanut brittle? Allison felt a keen sense of disappointment. She liked peanut brittle well enough, but it wasn’t nearly as good as moist chocolate cake. At least not to her way of thinking. Sally Mast, Allison’s best friend, always had a cake on her birthday. Of course, Sally’s mother, Dorothy, was still living and cared deeply for her eight children. Allison didn’t think Aunt Catherine

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cared about anyone but herself.

Allison had just set the last fork in place when her father and her brother Peter entered the kitchen.

"*Hallich gebottsdaag*," Papa said, giving Allison a hug.

"*Jah*. Happy birthday." Peter handed Allison a brown paper sack. "I hope you like this, sister."

Allison placed the sack on the table, reached inside, and withdrew a baseball glove. She grinned at her blond-haired, blue-eyed brother. "*Danki*, Peter. This is just what I needed."

He smiled and squeezed her arm. "Now you'll be able to catch those fly balls a lot easier."

"Fly balls—*puh!*" Aunt Catherine mumbled. "Baseball's such a waste of time."

Papa cleared his throat real loud, and Allison and Peter turned to face him. "I have something for your birthday, too." He handed Allison an envelope.

Allison smiled and quickly tore it open. If there was money inside, she planned to buy a new baseball to go with the glove, since her old ball was looking pretty worn. She pulled a piece of paper from the envelope and stared at it, unbelieving. "A bus ticket?"

Papa nodded, his brown eyes shining with obvious pleasure. "It's to Seymour, Missouri, where your aunt Mary and uncle Ben King live."

Aunt Catherine's thin lips formed a circle, but she didn't say a word.

Allison's forehead wrinkled as she studied the ticket. Why, she was supposed to leave in two days! Tears sprang to her eyes, and she sank into the closest chair.

"Aren't you happy about this?" Papa asked, pulling his fingers

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through the sides of his thinning brown hair. "I figured you'd be excited about making a trip to Missouri."

"I—I had no idea you wanted to send me away."

"Ach, Allison," he said kindly as he took a step forward. "I'm not sending you there for good. It's just for the summer."

That bit of news gave Allison some measure of relief, but she still didn't understand why her father wanted her to be gone all summer. With the garden coming up, it was Allison's job to keep the weeds down, and it was one of the few chores she actually enjoyed and did fairly well. "Why do I have to go to Missouri for the summer? Can't I stay right here in Lancaster County?"

Papa glanced at Aunt Catherine as if he hoped she might say something, but she turned her back to them as she cracked eggs into a glass bowl.

I'll bet this was Aunt Catherine's idea. She probably asked Papa to send me to Missouri so I'd be out of her hair. Allison squeezed her eyes shut. She doesn't like me; she never has!

Papa touched Allison's shoulder, and her eyes snapped open. "I thought you might enjoy getting to know your *mamm's* twin sister and her family. Mary's a fine woman; she's so much like your *mamm*. You probably don't remember her well, but Mary's a fine cook, and she can clean a house like nobody's business."

Allison swallowed around the tears clogging her throat.

"From the things Mary has said in her letters over the years, it's obvious that she has a way with the sewing machine, too," Papa continued.

"Not like me; that's what your *daed's* saying," Aunt Catherine spoke up. "I've never been able to do much more than basic mending, because I . . ." Her voice trailed off, and she started beating the eggs so hard Allison feared the bowl might break.

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"Because why?" Allison asked. "You've never really said why you don't do much sewing."

Aunt Catherine turned to face Allison. Her lips pressed together, deepening the harsh lines in the corners of her mouth. "Before my mamm died, she never spent much time teaching me to sew." She pinched her lips even tighter. "Used to say I was all thumbs and that she couldn't be bothered with trying to show me things on the sewing machine because I kept making mistakes."

Allison felt a stab of compassion for her aunt. Apparently, she'd had a difficult childhood. Even so, was that any reason for her to be so sharp-tongued and critical all the time?

Allison shook her thoughts aside and looked up at her father. "Are you sending me to Missouri because you think I should learn to cook and sew?"

Papa motioned to the baseball glove lying in Allison's lap. "Thanks to being raised with five older *brieder*, you've become quite a tomboy. Truth is you'd rather be outside playing ball than in the house doing womanly things."

Peter, who had wandered over to the sink to wash his hands, added his two cents' worth. "Allison always did prefer doing stuff with me and the brothers. Even when she was little and the girl cousins came around with their dolls, Allison preferred playing ball or going fishing with us."

Allison grunted, her defenses rising. "What's wrong with that? I enjoy doing outdoor things."

"Nothing's wrong with fishing or playing ball, but if you're ever going to find a suitable mate and get married, you'll need to know how to cook, sew, and manage a house," Papa said.

"Maybe I won't get married. Maybe I'll end up an old maid

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like—” Allison halted her words. She knew she’d already said more than she should.

Aunt Catherine’s face flamed as she stomped back to the refrigerator to put the eggs away.

The lump in Allison’s throat thickened. As much as she didn’t want to leave her home and spend the summer with relatives she couldn’t remember, she didn’t wish to seem ungrateful for Papa’s unexpected birthday present. If her learning to cook and sew was important to him, then she would try to act more willing. But she doubted she would ever find a husband. Because none of the available young men in her community seemed interested in marrying a tomboy, unless she learned to be more feminine, she’d probably never catch any man’s eye.

Allison forced her lips to form a smile as she looked at Papa. “I promise to make the best of my time in Missouri.” *But I’ll do it for you, not because I want to.*



Allison had a difficult time eating breakfast that morning. Every bite she took felt like cardboard in her mouth. All she could think about was the bus ticket lying on the counter across the room. Was Papa really sending her to Missouri so she could learn to manage a household? Or was the real reason to appease Aunt Catherine? Allison’s cranky aunt rarely had a nice thing to say, but since Papa needed his sister’s help, he’d probably do most anything to keep her from leaving—even if it meant sending Allison away for the summer.

When breakfast was over and the menfolk had gone outside to clean the milking barn, Allison and Aunt Catherine began

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cleaning up the kitchen.

"That was some birthday gift your daed gave you, wasn't it?" Aunt Catherine asked as she carried a stack of dishes to the sink.

Allison followed with the silverware. "Jah, I wasn't expecting a bus ticket to Missouri."

Aunt Catherine placed the dishes in the sink and ran water over them. "Your daed thinks going there will turn you into a woman, but if you don't listen to your aunt Mary any better than you do me, I doubt you'll learn much of anything."

Allison winced, feeling like she'd been slapped in the face with a dishrag. "I . . . I listen to you."

"You may listen, but you don't do as I say." Aunt Catherine grunted. "You've always had a mind of your own, even when you were a young *maedel*."

Allison silently reached for a clean dish towel.

"If you want to be a woman, you can do that right here," Aunt Catherine continued. "My *bruder* shouldn't have to spend his hard-earned money on a bus ticket to send you away so you can learn from your *mamm's* sister what you could learn from me."

Allison bit her tongue in order to keep from saying anything negative. Maybe being gone for a few months would be good for her. She picked up a glass and poked one end of the towel inside. *It will be a welcome change to be away from Aunt Catherine's angry looks and belittling words.*

A knock sounded on the back door, and Allison hurried to answer it. She found her friend Sally on the porch, holding a package wrapped in white tissue paper.

"Hallich gebottsdaag," Sally said, handing the gift to Allison. "Has it been a good birthday so far?"

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Allison swallowed against the burning lump in her throat and gave a quick nod. She couldn't let on to Sally that the day had begun so terribly. Not with Aunt Catherine standing a few feet away at the kitchen sink.

"Danki for the gift," Allison said. "Won't you come in?"

Sally smiled, her blue green eyes fairly glistening. "Of course I'll come in. I want to see if you like the gift I brought."

Allison pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and offered Sally a seat.

"Aren't you going to sit with me and open your gift?" Sally asked.

Allison glanced at her aunt to get her approval. They were supposed to be doing the dishes, and she knew better than to shirk her duties.

Aunt Catherine grunted and gave a quick nod. "I guess it'll be all right if you finish drying the dishes after you're done opening Sally's gift."

I'll bet Aunt Catherine only said that because Sally's here and she's trying to make a good impression. Any other time, she would have insisted that I finish the dishes before I did anything else.

Allison took a seat next to Sally and tore the wrapping paper off the package. She discovered a book about the Oregon Trail inside. "Danki, Sally. This is very nice."

"You're welcome." Sally smiled. "Since you've always shown an interest in history, I thought you might enjoy reading about the pioneers who traveled to the West by covered wagon."

"I'm sure I will, and it'll give me something to read on my trip."

Sally tipped her head. "What trip is that?"

"I'm going to Webster County, Missouri—just outside the

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town of Seymour," Allison answered. "Papa bought me a bus ticket to Seymour for my birthday."

"Why Seymour?"

"My mamm's twin sister and her family live there, and Papa thought—"

"He thought Allison could learn how to run a household better there than she can here," Aunt Catherine interrupted. Her forehead wrinkled, and she pursed her lips. "Guess my brother thinks his wife's sister can teach Allison things I'm not able to teach her. He obviously thinks Mary King is more capable than me."

"I don't think Papa believes his sister-in-law is more capable," Allison said in her father's defense. "As he mentioned before breakfast, Aunt Mary knows a lot about sewing, and—"

"She can cook and clean like nobody's business." Aunt Catherine grunted. "That's exactly what Herman said."

"How long will you be staying in Missouri?" Sally asked, touching Allison's arm. "I hope not indefinitely, because I would surely miss you."

Allison shook her head. "I'll only be gone for the summer, so you shouldn't miss me too much. Besides, you'll have my bruder to keep you company while I'm gone."

Sally's cheeks turned as red as her hair, and she stared at the table. Peter and Sally had begun courting several months ago. Allison figured it was just a matter of time before they decided to get married.

"I hope you'll write me while you're gone," Sally said.

Allison smiled. "Of course I'll write. I hope you'll write, too."

Sally's head bobbed. "I'll be looking forward to hearing about all the fun you have while you're in Missouri."

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Allison swallowed around the lump in her throat. *I doubt that I'll have any fun.*



When the bell above the door to the harness shop jingled, Aaron Zook looked up from the job he'd been assigned—cutting strips of leather. His best friend, Gabe Swartz, stepped into the room, carrying a broken bridle.

“Hey, Aaron, how’s business?” Gabe asked as he dropped the bridle to the workbench.

“Fair to middlin’,” Aaron replied. “Business always seems to pick up in the summertime.”

Gabe glanced around. His hazel-colored eyes seemed to take in the entire room. “Where’s Paul? I figured he’d be up front minding the desk while you were in the back room doing all the work.” He chuckled. “Isn’t that how it usually is?”

Aaron grimaced. He knew Gabe was only funning with him, but the truth was Aaron’s stepfather did like to be in charge of the books. There were times when Aaron’s father was still alive that helping in the harness shop had seemed like fun—almost a game. But when Aaron first began helping the man who eventually became his stepfather, he’d always felt like he was stuck with the dirty work. Now working here was just plain hard work—but at least he was getting paid for it.

“Paul, Mom, and my sisters, Bessie and Emma, went to Springfield for the day,” Aaron said. “Bessie had an appointment with the dentist. Paul said they’d probably do some shopping and go out to lunch while they’re there.”

Gabe pushed a wavy brown lock of hair off his forehead.

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"What about your brothers? Didn't they go along?"

"Nope. Joseph and Zachary went to the farmers' market in Seymour. Davey's visiting one of his friends."

"Which left you here at the shop by yourself all day?"

"Jah. Somebody has to keep the place open." Aaron stared wistfully out the window. "I do like working here, but on a sunny morning like this, I'd rather be fishing than working."

"Me, too."

"So how are things at your place?" Aaron questioned. "Has Melinda taken in any new critters lately?"

Gabe grinned. "Almost every week she finds some animal that's either orphaned or injured. Just yesterday she found a half-starved kitten out by the road. The pathetic little critter had one of those plastic things that holds a six-pack of soda pop stuck around its neck."

"Will the kitten be okay?"

"Jah. Melinda will see to that."

Aaron fingered Gabe's broken bridle. "Guess there's never a dull moment in your life, huh?"

"That's for sure." Gabe's eyes narrowed as he stared at Aaron. "When are you going to settle down and find a nice young woman to marry?"

Aaron's ears burned. "I'm not interested in marriage. I've told you that plenty of times already."

"Wouldn't you like someone to keep you warm on cold winter nights?"

"Rufus is good at that. He likes to sleep at the foot of my bed."

"*Puh!* No flea-bitten mongrel can take the place of a flesh-and-blood woman." Gabe poked Aaron's arm and chuckled. "Besides, think how nice it would be to have someone to cook,

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clean, and take care of you when you're old and gray."

"It'll be a long time before I'm old and gray, and I don't need anyone to care for me."

"What about love? Don't you want to fall in love?"

Aaron stiffened. Why did Gabe keep going on about this? *Is he trying to goad me into an argument? Or does he think it's fun to watch my face turn red?*

"I know you're dead set against marriage," Gabe continued, "but if the right woman came along, would you make a move to court her even if you didn't have marriage on your mind?"

Aaron shrugged. "Maybe, but she'd need to have the same interests as me. She'd have to be someone who isn't afraid of hard work or getting her hands dirty, either."

"You mean like your mamm?"

"Jah. She and my real daed worked well together in the harness shop. She and Paul did, too."

"I wonder if your mamm misses working here now." Gabe motioned to the stack of leather piled on the floor a few feet away. "I heard her tell my mamm once that she enjoyed the smell of leather."

"It's true; she does. So did my daed. He loved everything about this harness shop." Aaron picked up the bridle and ran his fingers over the broken end. "I love the feel of leather between my fingers. I'm hoping to take this shop over someday—when Paul's ready to retire."

"Do you think that'll be anytime soon?"

Aaron shook his head. "I doubt it. He seems to enjoy working here too much."

"Maybe he'll give the shop to you, the way my daed gave the woodworking business to me after Melinda and I got married."

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Aaron squinted. "Are you saying I'd have to find a wife before Paul would let me take the place over?"

"Not necessarily."

"My real daed wanted me to have this business. He told me that more than once before he was killed."

Gabe leaned against the workbench. "You were pretty young back then. I don't see how you can remember much of anything that was said."

Aaron dropped the bridle, moved over to the desk, and picked up a pen and the work-order book. "I was barely nine when my daed's buggy was hit by a truck, but I remember more than you might think."

"Like what?" Gabe asked as he followed Aaron across the room.

Aaron took a seat at the desk. "I remember how the two of us used to go fishing together. I remember him teaching me to play baseball." Before Gabe could comment, Aaron glanced back at the bridle and said, "How soon do you need your bridle?"

"No big hurry. I've got others I can use for now."

"By the end of next week?"

"Sure, that'll be fine." Gabe moved away from the desk. "Guess I should get on home. Melinda and I are planning to go to Seymour later today. We want to see if the owner of the bed-and-breakfast needs more of her drawings or some of my handcrafted wooden items for his gift shop."

"See you Sunday morning at church, then. It's to be held at the Kings' place, right?"

"Jah." Gabe started for the door. "Maybe we can get a game of baseball going after the common meal," he called over his shoulder.

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Aaron nodded. "Sounds like fun."

The door clicked shut behind Gabe, and Aaron headed to the back room to dye some leather strips. After that, he had a saddle to clean. Maybe if he finished up early, he'd have time to get in a little fishing. At least that was something to look forward to—that and a good game of baseball on Sunday afternoon.