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ISBN 978-1-59789-611-5

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Cover design by Müllerhaus Communications Group

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, OH 44683.

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Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 1

*M*elinda Andrews hurried across the grass, eager to arrive at her favorite spot. Just a few more steps, and there it was—dappled canopies of maple, hickory, cedar, and pine towering over a carpet of lush green leaves and fragrant needles. She drew in a deep breath, relishing the woody scent. The sun had tried all morning to overcome the low-hanging clouds. It had finally made an appearance, and Melinda planned to enjoy each moment she could spend here.

She slowed her pace and crept through the forest, being careful not to snag her long, dark blue dress or matching apron on any low-hanging branches. After awhile, she came to a clearing with several downed trees. “This looks like the perfect place for me to sit and draw,” she murmured.

Taking a seat on a nearby log, Melinda pulled her drawing tablet and pencil from the canvas tote she’d brought along. “Where are you, deer friends?”

WANDA E. BRUNSTETTER

The only movement was the flutter of leaves as the wind blew softly against the trees.

Melinda spotted a cluster of wild yellow crocuses peeking through a clump of grass. Spring was her favorite time of the year, with new life bursting forth everywhere. She lifted her pencil, ready to sketch a tan-colored rabbit that had hopped onto the scene, when two does stepped into the clearing.

“You’re so beautiful,” she whispered.

The does lifted their heads in curiosity as a hawk soared high overhead.

Melinda watched the deer nibble on leaves while she sketched their picture. Her stomach rumbled, which caused her to think about the lemon sponge cake Papa Noah had made last night. She’d had a sliver of it for breakfast this morning, and it had been delicious. She thought her stepfather was the best cook in all of Webster County, Missouri.

Melinda had been six years old when her real father had been hit by a car and killed. Shortly after his death, her mother had given up her career of telling jokes and yodeling among the English. She and Melinda had caught the bus from Branson to Seymour and come to live with Grandpa and Grandma Stutzman in the Amish community where Melinda’s mother had been raised.

Even though Melinda had been young back then, she remembered many things about their arrival in Webster County. She especially recalled meeting her aunt, Susie Stutzman, for the first time. Susie was Grandma’s youngest child, and she was a year older than Melinda. Melinda and Susie had become friends right away and had remained so ever since.

Melinda smiled at the memory of seeing her aunt dressed in a long blue dress with a small white *kapp* perched on top of her head. “Plain clothes” is what Mama had told Melinda. “My folks follow the customs and rules of the Amish church, and they live differently than we’re used to living.”

Melinda hadn’t minded wearing the unusual clothes, for it seemed as if she were playing dress-up at first. The strange rules and numerous jobs Grandma Stutzman had expected her to do were the hardest part. She remembered, too, that Mama hadn’t seemed too happy when they first came home—not until Noah Hertzler had started hanging around, taking an interest in her. Melinda had figured Noah would be her new daddy even before Mama had said she loved him. She’d been real pleased when they’d decided to get married.

Melinda lifted her face to the sun as thoughts of marriage made her think of Gabe Swartz, who had begun courting her a few months ago. Gabe had hazel-colored eyes with little green specks and brown hair that curled around his ears. He was tall and slender yet strong and able-bodied. Melinda had developed a crush on him when they were attending the one-room school-house down the road.

When Gabe, who’d been a year ahead of Melinda in school, graduated from eighth grade and began learning the trade of woodworking under his dad’s tutelage, she missed seeing him every day and looked forward to their every-other-Sunday church services, where Gabe and his family would also be in attendance. Now Gabe, who had recently turned twenty, worked full-time at his father’s woodworking shop.

When Melinda had finished school, she’d begun her

WANDA E. BRUNSTETTER

vocational training at home with her mother, where she learned various household chores that would prepare her for marriage. Then a year ago, she'd begun working part-time for Dr. Franklin, the local veterinarian. At first it was just cleanup work, as well as feeding, watering, and exercising some of the animal patients. But later, when the doctor realized how much Melinda cared for the animals and noticed her special way with them, he had allowed her to assist him with minor things. Melinda had done everything from holding a dog while it received a shot or had its nails clipped, to giving flea baths and bringing animals from their cages into the operating room.

"You've been blessed with a unique gift," Dr. Franklin had told Melinda the other day while she held a nervous kitten about to receive its first shot. "Have you ever considered becoming a veterinarian's technical assistant or even a vet?"

Melinda had to admit that the thought of becoming a vet had crossed her mind, but she figured it was an impossible dream. Not only was she lacking in education, but going to college and then on to a school of veterinary medicine would mean leaving the Amish faith. Since she'd been baptized and joined the Amish church a year ago, it would affect her whole family if she left the faith and became part of the English world.

Melinda remembered several years ago, before their old bishop died and John Frey had taken his place, a young man named Abner had left home during his running-around years, and he'd ended up coming back a few months later, saying it was too hard being away from his family. As a young woman, her own mother had left the Amish faith for ten years, trying to make a name for herself in the entertainment business.

Dear to Me

It would probably break Mama's heart if I left home the way she did when she was my age, Melinda thought. And what would it do to my relationship with Gabe? She shook her head. No, becoming a vet is most likely just an impossible dream. I'll probably never leave my home here in Webster County.



“I can’t believe Melinda’s not back yet.” Faith placed a sack of flour on the counter and turned to face her mother and youngest sister, who sat at the kitchen table. “She said she was going for a short walk and would be here in plenty of time to help with the baking, but she must have lost track of time.”

Susie, Faith’s sister who had recently turned twenty, sighed. “Knowing Melinda, she’s most likely off taking care of one of her critters or out in the woods sketching pictures of the deer.”

Faith nodded. “You’re probably right. My daughter has been taking in injured and orphaned animals ever since she was a little girl. It’s not gotten any better since she became a young woman, either. Sometimes I wonder if Melinda will ever grow up.”

“Just because she likes helping animals doesn’t mean she’s not mature,” Faith’s mother put in. “She wouldn’t be able to work for Dr. Franklin if she wasn’t grown up enough to make good decisions.”

Faith wrinkled her forehead. She didn’t know why her mother was sticking up for Melinda. She sure hadn’t taken Faith’s side of things when Faith was Melinda’s age. *Of course, Faith reasoned, back then I was headstrong and disobedient, running off to do my own thing in the modern world. Mama only saw me as a*

WANDA E. BRUNSTETTER

rebellious teenager, not as a mature woman who made good decisions.

“Be that as it may,” Faith said as she pulled out a rolling pin, “Melinda’s showing her immaturity this morning by not keeping her word and being here to help us with the baking.”

“Would you like me to go look for her?” Susie offered.

Faith pursed her lips and finally nodded. “That’s a good idea, since she’s obviously not planning to come back anytime soon of her own accord.”

Susie stood. “I’ll check the barn first. If she’s not there, I’ll head for the woods.”

As Susie scurried out the door, Faith moved over to the table and took a seat across from her mother. “Since we don’t have the help of either of our daughters at the moment, why don’t the two of us sit and visit over another cup of tea?”

Mama smiled and pushed back her metal-framed glasses, which had slipped to the end of her nose. “Sounds good to me.”

“You know, it’s not just Melinda’s preoccupation with her animal friends that bothers me,” Faith said while pouring her mother a cup of tea.

“What else is bothering you?”

“I’m concerned because Melinda’s been acting kind of strange.”

Mama’s eyebrows lifted as a deep wrinkle formed above her nose. “Strange in what way?”

“Besides the fact that I have to stay after Melinda to get her chores done because she’s too busy tending her animal friends, she seems to be off in her own little world. It’s like her thoughts are somewhere else most of the time.”

“I think you need to be more patient with Melinda. From what I can tell, she and Gabe Swartz are getting serious. I think it’s just a matter of time until they become betrothed.” Mama smiled. “Once that happens, I’m sure Melinda will settle down and act more like the mature woman you want her to be.”

Faith poured herself a cup of tea and took a sip. “I hope you’re right about that, Mama. *Jah*, I surely do.”



Susie had gone a short ways into the woods when she spotted Melinda sitting on a log with her drawing tablet. Susie was tempted to scold her niece for wasting time and trying to get out of work she should be doing, but she figured if she said too much, she and Melinda would probably end up arguing. Ever since Melinda had been a young girl, she had enjoyed spending time with animals. Susie used to think that once Melinda grew up, she would focus on the important things in life. But no, Melinda kept drawing and daydreaming, shirking her duties at the house, and causing her mother to send Susie after her on many occasions.

A twig snapped as Susie took a step toward the log. She halted and held her breath. Should she sneak up on Melinda and take her by surprise or make a loud noise so Melinda would know she was coming? Deciding on the latter, Susie moved closer and cleared her throat.

Melinda, engrossed in her artwork, didn’t budge.

Susie held her hands above Melinda’s head and clapped. “Hey!”

WANDA E. BRUNSTETTER

Melinda jumped, and the deer she'd been drawing bolted into the protection of the thick pine forest.

"Thanks a lot!" Melinda spun around and glared at Susie. "You've scared away my subjects, and they probably won't be back. Leastways not anytime soon."

"Sorry about that," Susie mumbled. She glanced at Melinda's drawing tablet and couldn't help but be impressed with what she saw. Despite the fact that Melinda drew well, was it really necessary to spend every free moment—and some time that was stolen—sketching her woodland friends?

Melinda stood and shook her finger at Susie. "I don't think you're one bit sorry. You look rather pleased with yourself, Susie Stutzman. I'll bet you clapped and hollered like that on purpose, just to scare away my subjects. Didn't you?"

Susie nodded slowly.

"Why?"

"Because your *mamm* has been looking for you, and your *mamm* and my *mamm* need our help baking pies for Sunday after church at my folks' house."

Melinda groaned and flopped down on the log.

Susie pursed her lips. "I also knew that if I just whispered in your ear that you were needed in the kitchen, the deer would have stayed put, and you'd have kept right on drawing."

Melinda pushed a wayward strand of golden blond hair away from her face and tucked it into the bun she wore at the back of her head. "How did you know where to find me, anyway?"

Susie wrinkled her nose. "You're kidding, right?"

Melinda shrugged. Her gaze traveled around the wooded area, and she said, "Just listen to the music of the birds. Isn't it

the most beautiful sound you've ever heard?"

"It's nice, but there's other—"

"Do you smell that fresh pine scent from all the trees?"

Susie nodded and drew in a deep breath as the woodsy aroma filled her nostrils. "It does smell nice in the woods," she admitted.

"It's so peaceful here, don't you think?"

"Jah, but there are other things I'd rather do than sit in the woods for hours on end." Susie took a seat on the log beside Melinda. "What draws you to these woods, anyway?"

"The animals that live here, of course. Every creature God created is special, but the ones that live in the woods fascinate me more than any others."

"There's a big difference between *fascinated* and *fanatical*."

Melinda snickered. "Fanatical, is it? Since when did you start using such fancy words?"

Susie shrugged. "I've been reading a novel about a young woman who likes to solve mysteries. Her mother accuses her of being fanatical."

"You'd better not start shirking your duties because you're reading too much, or your mamm will become *fanatical*."

"Who's going to tell her—you?"

"Of course not. You know I'm not one to blab anyone's secret."

"No, but you sure do like to change the subject."

"What subject was that?"

"The one about animals and your love for them. Ever since you were little, you've been playing nursemaid to any stray animal that came near your place." Susie shook her head. "I just don't understand it."

WANDA E. BRUNSTETTER

“Do you think me wanting to care for animals is a bad thing?”

“I suppose not, unless it’s all you think about.” Susie turned her head sharply, and a wisp of hair slipped out from under her kapp and fell onto her cheek.

Melinda pointed to Susie’s hair. “I thought it was only me who didn’t get her bun put up right.”

Susie snickered. “I guess that’s one thing we still have in common.”

“What do you mean? There are lots of things we both like.”

Susie elbowed Melinda gently in the ribs. “Jah—lemon sponge cakes, barbecued beef, and Aaron Zook’s new puppy, Rufus.”

“I’m wondering if it’s Aaron you’re interested in and not his dog.”

Susie’s elbow connected with Melinda’s ribs a second time. “You’re such a kidder.”

“I wasn’t kidding.”

“Aaron’s more like a *bruder* to me than anything.”

“He’s like a brother to me, too. His mamm and my mamm have been friends a long time. Her *kinner*, Isaiah, and I have grown up together, so I could never see Aaron as more than a brother.” Melinda scanned the woods again. “I wish those deer would come back so I could finish sketching their picture.”

Susie stared at a noisy crow circling overhead. “You and Gabe Swartz have been courting several months now, right?”

“That’s true.”

“Do you think you’ll end up marrying him?”

“That all depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether he asks, and whether I decide to—” Melinda