

*Going
Home*

WANDA &
BRUNSTETTER

BRIDES OF WEBSTER COUNTY



BARBOUR
PUBLISHING

© 2007 by Wanda E. Brunstetter

ISBN 978-1-59789-609-2

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All Pennsylvania Dutch words are taken from the *Revised Pennsylvania German Dictionary* found in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

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Cover design by Müllerhaus Publishing Group

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

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Printed in the United States of America.

DEDICATION/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my in-laws in Pennsylvania
who make “going home” a joyful experience.
And to all my Amish friends
who make me feel at home whenever I come to visit.

*Without faith it is impossible to please him:
for he that cometh to God must believe that he is,
and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*

HEBREWS 11:6

Chapter 1

*F*aith Andrews stared out the bus window, hoping to focus on something other than her immediate need. She feasted her eyes on rocky hills, scattered trees, and a June sky so blue she felt she could swim in it. Faith had always loved this stretch of road in her home state of Missouri. She'd traveled it plenty of times over the last ten years, going from Branson to Springfield and back again, making numerous stage appearances in both towns. She had also been in Tennessee, Arkansas, and several other southern states, but her favorite place to entertain was Branson, where the shows were family-oriented, lively, and fun.

Not like some nightclubs where her husband, who had also doubled as her agent, had booked her during the early days of her career. Faith hated those gigs, with leering men who sometimes shouted obscene remarks and people who asked dumb questions about the getup Greg insisted she wear for a time.

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“You need to wear your Amish garb,” he had told her. “It can be your trademark.”

Faith shook her head at the memory. *I’m glad I finally convinced him to let me go with the hillbilly look instead. Wearing Amish clothes only reminded me of the past and made me feel homesick.*

Whenever Faith was onstage, the past, present, and future disappeared like trees hidden in the forest on a foggy day. When she entertained, her focus was on only one thing: telling jokes and yodeling her heart out for an appreciative audience—something she had wanted since she was a child.

Faith closed her eyes, relishing the vision of a performance she had given six months ago at a small theater in the older part of Branson. Her jokes had brought down the house. She liked it when she could make people laugh. Too bad it was a talent that had never been valued until she’d become a professional entertainer. Her family had made it clear that they didn’t care for humor—at least not hers. Maybe she wouldn’t have felt the need to run away if they’d been more accepting of her silliness.

Faith’s thoughts took her back to the stage as she remembered receiving a standing ovation and basking in the warmth of it long after the theater was empty. How could she have known her world would be turned upside down in a single moment following the performance that night? When Faith took her final bow, she had no idea she would be burying her husband of seven years a few days later or that she would be sitting on a bus right now, heading for home.

Going back to her birthplace outside the town of Seymour, Missouri, was something Faith had been afraid to do. So near

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yet so far away, she'd been these last ten years, and never once had she returned for a visit. She feared that she wouldn't have been welcomed, for she'd been a rebellious teenager, refusing baptism and membership into the Amish church and running off to do her own thing.

During the first few years of Faith's absence, she had sent a couple of notes to her childhood companion Barbara Raber, but that was the only contact she'd had with anyone from home. If not for the necessity of finding a stable environment for Melinda, Faith wouldn't be going home now.

She turned away from the window, and her gaze came to rest on the sleeping child beside her. Her six-year-old daughter's cheeks had turned rosy as her eyelids had closed in slumber soon after they'd boarded the bus in Branson.

Faith smiled at the memory of Melinda bouncing around while they waited in the bus station. "Mama," the little girl had said, "I can't wait to get on the bus and go see where you used to live."

"I hope you like what you see, my precious little girl," Faith murmured as she studied her daughter. The little girl's head lolled against Faith's arm, and her breathing was sweet and even. Melinda had been sullen since her father's death. Maybe the change of scenery and a slower-paced, simpler lifestyle would be what she needed.

Faith pushed a wayward strand of golden hair away from Melinda's face. She looked a lot like Faith had as a little girl—same blond hair and clear blue eyes, only Melinda wore her hair hanging down her back or in a ponytail. In the Amish

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community, she would be expected to wear it pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head, then covered with a stiff white *kapp*, the way Faith had done for so many years.

Will Mama and Papa accept my baby girl, even though they might not take kindly to me? Will Melinda adjust to her new surroundings, so plain and devoid of all the worldly things she's been used to? When I'm gone, will she feel as though I've abandoned her, even though I'll promise to come and visit as often as I can?

As Faith took hold of her daughter's small hand, she felt a familiar burning in the back of her throat. She relished the warmth and familiarity of Melinda's soft skin and could hardly fathom what it would be like for the two of them once they were separated. Yet she would do anything for her child, and she was convinced it would be better for Melinda to live with her grandparents than to be hauled all over the countryside with only one parent. She'd been doing that ever since Greg had died six months ago, and things hadn't gone so well.

Besides the fact that Faith still hadn't secured another agent to book her shows, she'd had a terrible time coming up with a babysitter for Melinda. At times, she'd had to take the child with her to rehearsals and even some shows. Melinda sat offstage and one of the other performers looked after her as Faith did her routine, but that arrangement was anything but ideal. Faith had finished up her contract at a theater in Branson last night, and this morning, she and Melinda had boarded the bus. Faith wouldn't go back to entertaining until she felt free to do so, which meant she had to know Melinda was in good hands and had adjusted to her new surroundings.

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Faith had left her name with a couple of talent agencies in Memphis and Nashville and had said she would call them soon to check on the possibility of getting an agent. She hoped Melinda would have time to adapt before Faith had to leave her.

Faith gripped the armrest as she thought about her other options. When Greg's parents had come to Branson for his funeral, they'd offered their assistance. "Remember now, Faith," Elsie had said, "if you need anything, just give us a call."

Faith figured the offer was made purely out of obligation, for Jared and Elsie Andrews were too self-centered to care about anyone but themselves. She wasn't about to ask if Melinda could live with Greg's parents. That would be the worst thing possible, even if his folks were willing to take on the responsibility of raising their granddaughter.

Elsie and Jared lived in Los Angeles, and Jared was an alcoholic. Faith had met her husband's parents only once before his death. That was shortly after she'd married Greg. She and Greg had stayed with the Andrewses for one week while they visited Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, and some other sights in the area. It hadn't taken Faith long to realize that Greg's parents weren't fit to raise any child. Elsie Andrews was a woman who seemed to care only about her own needs. During their visit, the woman had talked endlessly about her elite circle of friends and when she was scheduled for her next facial or hair appointment. Greg's father always seemed to have a drink in his hand, and he'd used language so foul Faith had cringed every time he opened his mouth. Melinda would be better off in Webster County with her Plain relatives than she would with grandparents who

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thought more about alcohol and mudpacks than about having a relationship with their only son and his wife.

Faith let her eyelids close once more, allowing herself to travel back to when she was a teenager. She saw herself in her father's barn, sitting on a bale of hay, yodeling and telling jokes to her private audience of two buggy horses and a cat named Boots. . . .



“Faith Stutzman, what do you think you’re doing?”

Faith whirled around at the sound of her father’s deep voice. His face was a mask of anger, his dark eyebrows drawn together so they almost met in the middle.

“I was entertaining the animals,” she said, feeling her defenses rising. “I don’t see any harm in doing that, Papa.”

He scowled at her. “Is that a fact? What about the chores you were sent out here to do? Have you finished those yet?”

She shook her head. “No, but I’m aimin’ to get them done real soon.”

Papa nudged her arm with his knuckles. “Then you’d better get up and do ’em! And no more of that silly squawkin’ and howlin’. You sound like a frog with a sore throat, trying to do that silly yodeling stuff.” He started for the barn door but turned back around. “You’ve always been a bit of a rebel, and it isn’t getting any better now that you’ve reached your teen years.” He shook his finger at Faith. “You’d better start spending more time reading the scriptures and praying and less time in town soaking up all kinds of worldly stuff on the sly. You’ll surely die in your sins if you don’t get yourself under control and prepare for baptism soon.”

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When the barn door slammed shut, Faith stuck out her tongue, feeling more defiant than ever. "I should be allowed to tell jokes and yodel whenever I choose," she grumbled to Barney, one of their driving horses. "And I shouldn't have to put up with my daed's outbursts or his mean, controlling ways, either." She plucked a piece of hay from the bale on which she sat and snapped off the end. "I'll show you, Papa. I'll show everyone in this family that I don't need a single one of you. I'll find someone who appreciates my talents and doesn't criticize me for everything I do."



As Faith's thoughts returned to the present, she tried to focus her attention on the scenery whizzing past. She couldn't. Her mind was a jumble of confusion. Was returning to Webster County the right thing?

I'm doing what I have to do. Melinda needs a secure home, and this is the best way to make that happen. Faith thought about Greg and how, even though he wasn't the ideal husband, he had secured plenty of engagements for her. Never mind that he'd kept a good deal of the money she'd made to support his drinking and gambling habits. Never mind that Greg had been harsh with her at times.

It's sad, she mused. Greg's been gone six months, yet I grieved for him only a short time. Even then, it wasn't really my husband I missed. It was my agent and the fact that he took care of our daughter while I was working. If he hadn't lined up several shows for me, I probably would have returned to Webster County sooner.

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Faith popped a couple of her knuckles. It was a bad habit—her parents had said so often enough—but it helped relieve some of her tension. *I'll never marry again—that's for certain sure. It would be hard to trust another man.* She drew in a deep breath and tried to relax. She'd be home in a few hours and would know whether she had made the right decision. If her folks accepted Melinda, the grandchild they knew nothing about, Faith could be fairly certain things would work out. If they rejected her, then Faith would need to come up with another plan.



Noah Hertzler wiped his floury hands on a dish towel and smiled. He was alone in the kitchen and had created another cake he was sure would tempt even the most finicky person. Being the youngest of ten boys, with no sisters in the family, Noah had been the only son who had eagerly helped Mom in the kitchen from the time he was a small boy. In Noah's mind, his ability to cook was a God-given talent—one he enjoyed sharing with others through the breads, cookies, cakes, and pies he often made to give away. If he heard of someone who was emotionally down or physically under the weather, he set right to work baking a scrumptious dessert for that person. He always attached a note that included one of his favorite scripture verses. "Food for the stomach and nourishment for the soul"—that's what Mom called Noah's gifts to others.

Noah stared out the kitchen window into the backyard where he had played as a child. Growing up, he'd been shy, unable to

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express his thoughts or feelings the way most children usually did. When his friends or brothers gathered to play, Noah had spent time either alone in the barn or with his mother in the kitchen. Even now, at age twenty-four, he was somewhat reserved and spoke only when he felt something needed to be said. Noah thought that was why he hadn't married yet. The truth was, he'd been too shy to pursue a woman, although he had never found anyone he wanted to court.

Noah figured another reason for his single status was because he wasn't so good-looking. Not that he was ugly, for Mom had often said his thick, mahogany-colored hair was real nice and that his dark brown eyes reminded her of a box of sweet chocolates. Of course, all mothers thought their offspring were cute and sweet; it was the way of a good mother's heart to see the best in her flesh-and-blood children.

Instinctively, Noah touched his nose. It was too big and had a small hump in the middle of it. He'd taken a lot of ribbing from his friends during childhood over that beak. He could still hear his schoolmates chanting, "Noah! Noah! Nobody knows of anything bigger than Noah's huge nose!"

Forcing his thoughts to return to the present, Noah's gaze came to rest on the old glider, which sat under the red-leafed maple tree in their backyard. He had seen many of his brothers share that swing with their sweethearts, but Noah had never known the pleasure. Since his teen years, he'd shown an interest in only a few girls, and those relationships didn't involve more than a ride home in Noah's open buggy after a young people's singing on a Sunday night. He had never taken it any further

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because the girls hadn't shown much interest in him.

Most everyone in the community thought Noah was a confirmed bachelor; some had said so right to his face. But he didn't care what others thought. Noah was content to work five days a week for Hank Osborn, a local English man who raised Christmas trees. In the evenings and on weekends, Noah helped his mother at home. Mom was sixty-two years old and had been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes several years ago. As careful as she was about her diet, her health was beginning to fail so she needed Noah's help more than ever—especially since he was the only son still living at home. All nine of Noah's brothers were married with families of their own. Pop, at age sixty-four, still kept busy with farm chores and raising his fat hogs. He surely didn't have time to help his wife with household chores or cooking. Not that he would have anyway. Noah's father disliked indoor chores, even hauling firewood into the kitchen, which had been Noah's job since he was old enough to hold a chunk of wood in his chubby little hands.

Bringing his reflections to a halt, Noah began to mix up the batter for two tasty lemon sponge cakes in separate bowls. He would make one of the cakes using a sugar substitute, for him and his folks. The other cake would be given away as soon as he found someone who had a need. Noah had already decided to use Hebrews 11:6 with the cake: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

"Is someone in the community struggling with a lack of faith?" Noah murmured. "Do they need a reminder that will

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encourage their heart and help strengthen their trust in God?" He felt confident that the Lord would direct him to the right person. He could hardly wait to see who it might be.



When Faith and Melinda got off the bus at Lazy Lee's Gas Station in Seymour, Faith picked up their two suitcases and herded Melinda toward the building. The unmistakable aroma of cow manure from a nearby farm assaulted her. She was almost home, and there was no turning back. She had come this far and would go the rest of the way as soon as she found them a ride.

Faith didn't recognize the balding, middle-aged man working inside the gas station, but she introduced herself and asked him about hiring someone to drive them to her folks' place. He said his name was Ed Moore and mentioned that he'd only been living in Seymour a couple of years.

"My wife, Doris, is coming in for some gas soon, and since we live just off Highway C, she plans to stop by an Amish farm out that way and buy some fresh eggs," Ed said. "I'm sure she'd be more than happy to give you a lift."

Faith wondered which Amish family from her community was selling eggs. Could it be Mama or one of her sisters? "If your wife is willing to give us a ride, it would be most appreciated," she said.

"Don't think it'll be a problem. Nope, not a problem at all." Ed grinned at her, revealing a set of badly stained, crooked teeth. "You can wait here inside the store if you want to."

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“It might be best if we waited outside,” Faith replied. “I wouldn’t want to miss your wife.”

“Suit yourself.”

Faith led Melinda outside, and they took a seat on the bench near the front door. “You’ll be meeting your Grandpa and Grandma Stutzman soon,” she said, smiling at Melinda, whose eyes darted back and forth as she sat stiffly on the bench.

Melinda’s nose twitched. “Somethin’ smells funny. I don’t know if I’m gonna like it here.”

“That’s the way farms smell, Melinda. We’re in the country now.”

Melinda folded her arms but said nothing more.

A short time later, a red station wagon pulled up to the pumps, and Ed came out of the building and proceeded to fill the tank with gas. When he was done, he said something to the dark-haired, middle-aged woman sitting in the vehicle. After a few minutes, he motioned for Faith and Melinda to come over. “This here’s my wife, Doris, and she’s agreed to give you a ride.” Before Faith could respond, Ed opened the back of the station wagon and deposited their suitcases inside.

“I appreciate this, and I’ll be happy to pay you,” Faith said to Doris as she and Melinda climbed into the backseat of the vehicle.

“No need for that,” Doris said with a wave of her hand. “Ed and I live out that way anyhow.”

“Thank you.” Faith tucked her daughter’s white cotton blouse under the band of her blue jeans; then she buckled the child’s seatbelt just as Doris pulled her vehicle out of the parking lot.

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Melinda pressed her nose to the window as the station wagon headed down Highway C. “Look at all the farms. There’s so many animals!”

“Yep, lots of critters around here,” Doris chimed in.

Faith reached over and patted Melinda’s knee. “Your grandma and grandpa have all kinds of animals you’ll soon get to know.”

Melinda made no comment, and Faith wondered what her little girl was thinking. Would her daughter find joy in the things on the farm, or would she become restless and bored, the way Faith had? She hoped Melinda would adjust to the new surroundings and respond well to her grandparents and other family members.

Closing her eyes, Faith leaned into the seat and tried to relax. She would deal first with seeing her folks and then worry about how well Melinda would adjust. She only had the strength to work through one problem at a time.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled into the gravel driveway of her parents’ farm. Faith opened the car door and stepped out. Letting her gaze travel around the yard, she was amazed at how little it had changed. Everything looked nearly the same as the day she’d left home. The house was still painted white. The front porch sagged on one end, the way it had for as long as Faith could remember. Dark shades hung at each of the windows.

A wagonload of steel milk cans was parked out by the garden, and two open buggies sat near the barn. Her folks’ mode of transportation was obviously the same as it always had been. Even as a child, Faith had never understood why their district drove only open buggies. Traveling in such a way could be downright

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miserable when the weather turned cold and snowy. She'd heard it said that the Webster County Amish were one of the strictest in their beliefs of the Plain communities in America. Seeing her parents' simple home again made her believe this statement must be true.

Faith noticed something else. A dark gray, closed-in buggy was parked on one side of the house. How strange it looked. Her mind whirled with unanswered questions. *I wonder whose it could be. Unless the rules around here have changed, it surely doesn't belong to Papa.*

"Is this the place?" Melinda asked, tugging on Faith's hand.

She looked down at her daughter, so innocent and wide-eyed. "Yes, Melinda. This is where I grew up. Shall we go see if anyone's home?"

Melinda nodded, although her dubious expression left little doubt of the child's concerns.

Once more, Faith offered to pay Doris, but the smiling woman waved her away. "No need for that. I was heading this way anyhow. So I'll be off to get my eggs over at the Troyers' place."

Faith thanked Doris, grabbed their suitcases, and gulped in another breath of air. It was time to face the music.