

*a  
Sister's  
Secret*

WANDA &  
BRUNSTETTER



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## Chapter 1

A chill shot through Grace Hostettler. Stepping outside the restaurant where she worked, she had spotted a redheaded English man standing near an Amish buggy in the parking lot. He wore blue jeans and a matching jacket and held a camera in his hands. Something about the way he stood with his head cocked to one side reminded her of Gary Walker, the rowdy Englisher she had dated for a while during her *rumschpringe*, her running around years. But it couldn't be Gary. She hadn't seen him since—

Grace pressed her palms to her forehead. Her imagination was playing tricks on her; it had to be. She forced her gaze away from the man and scanned the parking lot, searching for her sister. She saw no sign of Ruth or of her horse and buggy. *Maybe I should head for the bakeshop and see what's keeping her.*

Grace kept walking, but when she drew closer to the man, her breath caught in her throat. It was Gary! She would have recognized that crooked grin, those blazing blue eyes, and his spicy-smelling cologne anywhere.

He smiled and pointed the camera at her. A look of recognition registered on his face, and his mouth dropped open. "Gracie?"

She gave one quick nod as the aroma of grilled onions coming from the fast-food restaurant down the street threatened to make her sneeze.

"Well, what do you know?" He leaned forward and squinted. "Yep, same pretty blue eyes and ash blond hair, but I barely recognized you in those Amish clothes."

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Grace opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off. “What happened? Couldn’t make it in the English world?”

“I—I—”

“Don’t tell me you talked Wade into joining the Amish faith.” He slowly shook his head. “I can just see the two of you traipsing out to the barn to milk cows together and shovel manure.”

Grace swallowed against the bitter taste of bile rising in her throat. “D—don’t do this, Gary.”

He snickered, but the sound held no humor. “Do what? Dredge up old bones?”

Grace wasn’t proud that she’d gone English during her rumschpringe or that she’d never told her folks any of the details about the time she’d spent away from home. All they knew was that she had run off with some of her Amish friends, also going through rumschpringe, so they could try out the modern, English world. Grace had been gone two years and had never contacted her family during that time except for sending one note saying she was okay and for them not to worry. They hadn’t even known she was living in Cincinnati, or that—

“So, where is Wade?” Gary asked, halting Grace’s runaway thoughts.

She shivered despite the warm fall afternoon and glanced around, hoping no one she knew was within hearing distance. The only people she saw were a group of Englishers heading down the sidewalk toward one of the many tourist shops. “Wade’s gone, and. . .and my family doesn’t know anything about the time I spent living away from home, so please don’t say anything to anyone, okay?”

He gave a noncommittal grunt. “Still keeping secrets, huh, Gracie?”

His question stung. When she’d first met Gary while waiting tables at a restaurant in Cincinnati, she hadn’t told him she was Amish. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of her heritage; she’d just decided if she was going to try out the English world, she should leave her Amish way of life behind.

But one day when a group of Amish kids came into the restaurant, Grace spoke to them in German-Dutch, and Gary overheard their conversation. He questioned her about it later, and she finally admitted that she was from Holmes County, Ohio, and had been born and

raised Amish. Gary had made light of it at first, but later, as his quick temper and impulsive ways began to surface, he started making fun of Grace, calling her a dumb Dutch girl who didn't know what she wanted or where she belonged.

When Wade came along and swept Grace off her feet with his boyish charm and witty humor, she'd finally gotten up the courage to break up with Gary. He didn't take to the idea of her dating one of his friends and had threatened to get even with her. Had he come to Holmes County to make good on that threat?

"Wh-what are you doing here, Gary?" Her voice sounded raspy, almost a whisper, and her hands shook as she held her arms rigidly at her side.

"Came here on business. I'm a freelance photographer and reporter now." He jiggled his eyebrows. "Sure didn't expect to see you, though."

Grace heard the rhythmic *clip-clop* of horse's hooves and spotted her sister's buggy coming down the street. "I-I've got to go." The last thing she needed was for Ruth to see her talking to Gary. Her sister would no doubt ply her with a bunch of questions Grace wasn't prepared to answer.

Gary lifted his camera, and before Grace had a chance to turn her head, he snapped a picture. "See you around, Gracie."

She gave a curt nod and hurried away.



Ruth squinted as she looked out the front window of the buggy. What was Grace doing in the restaurant parking lot, talking to an English man with a camera?

She guided the horse to the curb, and a few minutes later, Grace climbed into the buggy, looking real flustered. "H-how was your interview?" she panted.

"It went fine. I got the job."

"That's good. Glad to hear it."

"Who was that man with the camera?" Ruth asked as she pulled slowly away from the curb and into the flow of traffic.

Grace's face turned red as she shrugged. "Just. . .uh. . .someone

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taking pictures of Amish buggies.”

“It looked like you were talking to him.”

“*Jah*, I said a few words.”

“Were you upset because he was trying to take your picture?”

Grace nodded.

“Some of the English tourists that come to Berlin and the other towns in Holmes County don’t seem to mind snapping pictures without our permission. Either they don’t realize we’re opposed to having our pictures taken, or they just don’t care.” Ruth wrinkled her nose. “I feel such *aeryer* when they do that.”

Not even Ruth’s comment about feeling vexed provoked a response from Grace.

“Guess it’s best if we just look the other way and try to ignore their cameras.”

“Uh-huh.”

As Ruth halted the horse at the second stoplight in town, she reached across the seat and touched Grace’s arm. “Are you okay? You look like you’re worried about something.”

“Just tired from being on my feet at the restaurant all day.”

“You sure? That frown you’re wearing makes me think you’re more than tired.”

“I’ll be fine once we get home.” Grace smiled, although the expression seemed forced. “Tell me about the bakeshop. What will you be doing there?”

Ruth held her breath as the smell of manure from a nearby dairy farm wafted through the buggy. “Mostly waiting on customers while Karen and Jake Clemons bake in the other room,” she said, clucking to the horse to get him moving again when the light turned green. “Some days, I’ll be working by myself, and others, I’ll be with my friend Sadie Esh.”

“Are you wishing you could help bake?”

Ruth shook her head and turned the horse and buggy down the back road heading toward their home. “Not really. I’ll be happy to keep waiting on customers until I get married some day. Raising a family is my life’s dream.” Ruth glanced over at Grace. “Of course, I’ll have to find a husband first.”

“What about Luke Friesen? You think things might get serious between the two of you?”

“I don’t know, maybe. For now I’m going to concentrate on my new job.” Ruth smacked her lips. “Just thinking about all those delicious pastries and pies at the bakeshop makes me hungry.”

“I’m sure Mom will have supper started by the time we get home, so you’ll be eating soon enough.”

“Speaking of Mom, I heard her mention the other day that she’d like for the two of you to get busy on your wedding dress soon.”

Grace nodded and turned toward the window. Was she staring at the vibrant fall colors on the trees lining the road, or was she trying to avoid conversation?

“Do you still want me to help with the flowers for your wedding?” Ruth questioned.

“Jah, sure.”

“You’ll need several fresh arrangements on the bridal table, and I’m thinking maybe one big bouquet in the center of each of the other tables would look nice.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Will you want some candles, too?”

Grace nodded.

“Since Cleon’s mother and sister make beeswax candles, I’m sure they’ll want to provide those.”

“Maybe so.”

“I hope Cleon knows how lucky he is to be marrying my big sister.”

“I-I’m the lucky one.” Grace picked at her dark green dress as if she noticed a piece of lint, but Ruth didn’t see anything. Of course, she couldn’t look too closely as she had to keep her eyes on the road. Just last week, a buggy coming down one of the hills on this stretch of road between Berlin and Charm had run into a deer.

Grace sighed, and Ruth gave her a sidelong glance. If something was bothering Grace, she would talk about it when she was ready. In the meantime, Ruth planned to enjoy the rest of their ride home. Shades of yellow, orange, and brown covered the birch, hickory, and beech trees, and leaves of red and purple adorned the maple, oak, and dogwood. A

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dappling of sunlight shining through the trees gave her the feeling that all was right with the world—at least her little world.



Cleon Schrock stepped up to the counter near the front of the restaurant where Grace worked and smiled at Sarah, the owner's daughter. "I came to town on business about my bees, so I decided to stop and see Grace. Would you tell her I'm here?"

Sarah shook her head. "Sorry, but Grace got off work about ten minutes ago. Said something about meeting her sister, who had an interview at the bakeshop."

"Okay, thanks." As Cleon turned toward the door, he felt a keen sense of disappointment. He hadn't seen Grace since the last preaching service, and that had been over a week ago. "Have a good evening, Sarah," he called over his shoulder.

"You, too."

Cleon opened the front door, and just as he stepped out, he bumped shoulders with a tall, red-haired English man. The fellow held a fancy-looking camera in one hand and a notebook with a chunky green pen clipped over the top in the other. "Sorry. Didn't realize anyone was on the other side of the door," Cleon said with a shake of his head.

"Not a problem. As long as you didn't ruin this baby, no harm was done." The man lifted his camera. "She's my bread and butter these days."

Cleon stood, letting the man's words sink in. "Are you a newspaper reporter?"

"Nope. I'm a freelance photographer and reporter, and I've written for several publications." He smiled, revealing a set of straight, pearly white teeth. "The pictures I submit often bring in more money than my articles."

Cleon gave a quick nod; then he started to turn away.

"Say, I was wondering if you'd be willing to give me a quick interview. I'm trying to find out some information about the Amish in this area, and—"

"Sorry, not interested." Cleon hurried down the steps and onto



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the sidewalk. The last thing he wanted was for the Englisher to start plying him with a lot of questions about the Amish way of life. He'd read a couple of articles about his people in the newspaper recently, and none of them had been accurate. Cleon rushed around back to the parking lot, untied his horse from the hitching rail, and climbed into the buggy. If he hurried, he might catch up with Grace and Ruth on their way home.