

AN AMISH  
FAMILY  
REUNION

MARY ELLIS



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## ONE

### Winesburg, Ohio

You would think that a person might be able to enjoy some peace and quiet on a Sunday afternoon. After all, it was the Sabbath—a day of rest. Yet Phoebe Miller found herself hiding behind a tree to escape from her family. There were just so many of them. Living next door to Aunt Julia and Uncle Simon guaranteed plenty of drop-in visits, impromptu potluck suppers, and more unsolicited advice than any seventeen-year-old girl needed. It wasn't that she didn't love her family, because she certainly did. She simply needed more alone time than most people.

Holding her breath, Phoebe stood stock-still until Uncle Simon headed into the barn in search of her father and Aunt Julia entered the house looking for her *mamm*. Hannah wasn't her mother by blood, but she had earned the title during the past twelve years of bandaging scrapes, helping with math homework, and remaining near while Phoebe suffered with the flu on long winter nights. She couldn't remember her birth mother anymore. She had been only five when an impatient driver in a fast-moving truck decided to pass on a blind curve. It didn't hurt much anymore. She had Hannah, her *daed*, and her little brother to love. They were all she needed...except, perhaps, for a little personal solitude.

Phoebe sucked in her gut as ten-year-old Ben ran across the yard, chasing his dog, who was chasing a rubber ball. When the two ducked under a fence into the cornfield, she ran pell-mell in the opposite direction, clutching her box of pencils and sketch pad tightly. She dared not look back for fear some cousin would be waving frantically from the porch. This time she didn't stop to watch baby lambs nursing from their mothers or to pick a fistful of wild trilliums for her windowsill. On through the sheep pasture she ran until she reached her favorite drawing spot—an ancient stone wall constructed by long ago pioneers of Holmes County. Phoebe doubted these early settlers had been Amish. Not too many Amish men would take the time to painstakingly stack flat rocks just so to form a long fence line, not when dozens of tall trees fell over in the woods each winter that could easily be split into fence rails. And not when stampeding cows spooked by thunder, or marauding sheep needing no reason whatsoever to bolt, could knock the entire wall down within minutes. That was probably why this twenty-yard section was all that remained. But it was all Phoebe needed.

Settling comfortably on a smooth flat stone, she gazed over acres of rolling pasture, lush with thick clover and alive with honeybees and hummingbirds attracted to morning glories. Those climbing vines would entwine her if she sat too long. Beyond this pasture, where *mamm's* beloved sheep frolicked and capered like small children, lay alfalfa and cornfields, peach and apple orchards, and stately pines in the distance. Like sentinels, they guarded the property line between their farm and the westerly neighbor, while a pond and lowland bog separated them from Uncle Simon and Aunt Julia to the east.

Phoebe turned to a fresh page in her oversized tablet and selected a charcoal pencil from the box. What would she draw today? Horses nibbling on fresh green grass? Sunlight glinting off dewy treetops at dawn, while the rest of the land remained cloaked in darkness? It was well past midday, but Phoebe had witnessed the dawn enough times to remember what it looked like. Maybe their three-story bank barn

with open hayloft doors against a stark backdrop of pristine, unbroken snow? Everyone loved the serenity that could be found within a winter landscape. It didn't matter that it was May—and an exceptionally warm day at that. A good artist worth her salt possessed a memory capable of retaining visual imagery until the moment she re-created those images on canvas...or in her case, on a sheet of white paper.

"I thought I would find you up here."

Phoebe practically jumped out of her skin, dropping her sketch pad and spilling her box of colored pencils, charcoals, pastel chalk, and various erasers and sharpeners. "Dad! You nearly gave me a heart attack." She fell to her knees to retrieve her supplies.

Seth Miller brushed off a spot on the wall and sat down. "You're too young for a heart attack. And I wasn't sneaking up on you. I came up the same path along the same fence that you took. You were too absorbed in your masterpiece to see me."

With her supplies safely returned to the box, she plunked down next to him, clutching the tablet like a shield.

"Nothing is even started yet. I was waiting for the perfect inspiration." She giggled, knowing how full-blown that sounded.

"Plenty of pretty scenery up here to pick from. It would be hard to narrow it down to just one thing." Seth bumped his shoulder into hers.

Phoebe sighed. "*Jah*, but nothing I haven't sketched a hundred times before."

Seth shifted his position on the wall to offer his profile. "How about me? Or am I too old and wrinkled?"

She shook her head. "You're not old, *daed*, even if you do have some serious crow's feet." She bumped his shoulder in return. "But once Uncle Simon caught me doing a portrait of cousin Emma and he scolded me. He said drawing a picture of an Amish person was no different than capturing their likeness with a camera." Phoebe then lapsed into mimicking Uncle Simon's stern voice, forgetting the person she was talking to for the moment: "As a deacon of this district, I won't have my niece and my daughter committing such a sin."

Her father merely shrugged. “In that case, you could draw our old buggy horse. Now that he’s been turned out to pasture, we no longer have to worry about capturing his image.”

“I think I’ll stick to wildflowers today.” With her piece of charcoal, she pointed at clumps of purple violets, green mayapples, and elusive jack-in-the-pulpits. “Sam usually has too many flies buzzing around his head to contend with.”

Seth stretched out his long legs. “I saw you hiding from your *bruder* behind that tree. Has he been pestering you? Is that why you didn’t want him to follow you?” He shielded his face from the sun, deepening the wrinkles webbing his eyes.

“Oh, no. Ben’s been all right. It’s just that he’s ten years old. He doesn’t understand the concept of sitting still or remaining quiet. If I let him come with me down to the river or to the duck pond, he expects me to catch tadpoles or butterflies with him. Once he dropped a two-foot black snake at my feet and told me to draw him.” Phoebe met her father’s gaze. “I let him come along as seldom as possible without hurting his feelings.”

“Mind if I have a look-see?” Without waiting for her answer, Seth pulled the giant pad from her grasp.

For a moment Phoebe felt a familiar wave of panic. Her art was a private collection, showcasing her limited abilities. But the moment quickly passed. She was Phoebe Miller of Winesburg, Ohio, not Michelangelo of Italy. “Sure, why not?” she said, willing herself to relax.

Seth paged through her assortment of sketches, some barely begun and others filled with vibrant color and intricate shading. “These are quite good, daughter.” He paused to study a picture of a small child kneeling in prayer beside a trundle bed. With white walls and dark pine floorboards, and the girl’s black prayer *kapp* and white pinafore, the drawing was a contrast of light and shadows. One could feel the presence of God in the rays of moonlight streaming through the open window.

She smiled with pleasure, leaning over his arm. “That’s one of my favorites. Not bad for someone with no talent and no training, huh?”

He shook his head. “You have talent—make no mistake about that. And what kind of training does an artist need? Either a person has the gift or they don’t.”

“A few classes would have been nice in school. My teacher’s idea of art was coloring a seasonal mimeographed page. All the trees were green and every autumn leaf either red or gold. Everyone’s picture looked exactly the same.”

Seth dispensed his usual *daed* look. “Plain folk have no need for individuality as long as you’re known personally to God.” He shut the sketch pad and handed it back to her. “But providing you get your chores done, I see no harm in capturing the beauty of nature in your pictures.” He rose to his feet. “Which of the lilies of the field will my artist choose to draw today?” He waved his hand toward the multitude of flowers and weeds growing along the vine-shrouded wall. “It’s going to be time for the evening meal soon. Don’t be late, Phoebe. You know how your Uncle Simon hates not eating at the appointed hour.” Seth started down the path and did not glance back. He didn’t have to. He knew she wouldn’t be late for supper, or neglect her chores, or forget to say her nightly prayers... because she never did.

Phoebe was a good girl. She had never painted her face with makeup as Emma had during her *rumschpringe*, nor taken up with an English boy with a fast green truck. Everything was well and good now that Emma and James were married, raising two little boys, and sheep farming in nearby Charm. But when they first converted to New Order, both sets of parents lost more than one good night’s sleep.

And Phoebe had no desire to go into business like her cousin Leah. Running a diner with a business partner as naive as she had almost landed Leah in the county jail. Who knew not collecting sales tax to send to the State of Ohio was a crime? Phoebe shuddered remembering how long it had taken Leah to pay her share of the debt incurred by the diner. Meeting Jonah Byler had been the only good thing to come out of that fiasco. Apparently, he hadn’t been looking for a wife with any business savvy.

No, Phoebe was a good girl. She helped with cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and she did her fair share of gardening, canning, and berry picking despite having no particular fondness for domestic duties. Her *mamm* and Emma had their beloved sheep, along with the spinning, dyeing, carding, and weaving that came with the woolly creatures. Both women knitted such exquisite sweaters and sofa throws that tourists would pay more than a hundred dollars for one of their creations. Leah had her pie-making cottage industry. Bakeries throughout the county clamored for Leah Byler pies. But Phoebe's heart had never thrilled over a particularly flaky piecrust or the perfect sweet-tart balance of her fruit filling. Only her art held any joy for her. Painting with acrylics from the Bargain Outlet or sketching people while they were unaware lifted Phoebe's spirits like nothing else. Not exactly a practical pastime for someone Plain, but what else could she do?

With a sigh she selected a moss-covered log for today's subject. The dark moist wood, where decay added a blackish-green hue, along with the sun-baked topside, striated and gnarly from wind and weather, would provide a stark background to delicate yellow buttercups in the foreground.

For almost an hour, feeling the warm sun on her face and a cool breeze on her neck, Phoebe surrendered to her creation. Adding a bold slash here or light shading there, the flowers on paper became almost as real as those growing near her feet. She lost herself in her work, unaware of hunger or thirst or the pesky hornet circling her head. Funny how mopping the floor, hanging laundry on the line, or slicing peaches for cobbler couldn't hold her interest like this. When she was busy with those chores, all she could think about was snitching another cookie or refilling her glass with lemonade.

Finally, as the drawing neared completion, she leaned back with a satisfied sigh. There had to be something she could do with her "gift," as her parents called it. She'd been out of school for three years, yet she seldom brought to the household income more than a few dollars

from selling eggs. She'd once hung up an index card at the grocery store that announced "Artist for Hire" with her name and address at the bottom in block letters. She landed two commissions from the advertisement. One, a local farmer needed an autumn replacement for his produce market sign once peaches, organic lettuce, and berries were long gone. Phoebe created a four-foot by six-foot masterpiece showcasing colorful apples, pumpkins, butternut squash, eggplant, and Indian corn. She tried to turn down the second project. An elderly widow needed someone to actually paint the white picket fence around her vegetable patch. But, of course, her *daed* made her take the job. Painting was painting, he declared.

Packing up her supplies, she started down the well-worn path to the rambling farmhouse filled with her parents, brother, aunt, uncle, and cousins. Lately, it felt as though she'd wandered into the wrong house but the residents were too polite to tell her. How could she live surrounded by affectionate and endearing people, yet still feel utterly, completely alone?



Julia stepped down from the buggy gingerly, always a little nervous to see if her legs would hold her. It had been years since her double knee-replacement surgery, yet she remained skeptical about the stainless steel substitute parts.

Simon took her arm to steady her. "Easy does it, *frau*. Did you take your pills today?"

"*Jah*, of course, like I do every day. I'm just stiff from sitting. Run off now and find your brother. With these perfectly fine store-bought knees, we should have walked here. What's the advantage of living next door to Seth and Hannah if we must drag out the horse and buggy even in perfect weather?" Julia leaned heavily on her husband's arm despite her assertion that she could have walked half a mile through scrub forest and bog.

“I’m not running anywhere until you’re planted in one of Hannah’s kitchen chairs,” Simon insisted. “And our old gelding needs the exercise more than we do.”

“If Hannah sees you practically carrying me inside, she’ll start feeding me more of her herbal cures.” They paused midway to the house. “Boswellia, bromelain, yucca, turmeric, sea cucumber—do you know what those things taste like?” Julie wrinkled her nose. “I burped the other day, and it tasted like stagnant green pond water.”

“How is it you know what stagnant water tastes like?” Simon clutched her tightly around the waist as they reached the porch.

“I’d rather not say what my sister was like as a teenager.”

“Whatever she gives you to eat or drink, you’ll take without complaint. One of these days Hannah will land on a miracle cure that will have you skipping like a schoolgirl again.”

Julie gulped a deep breath and climbed the steps, clucking her tongue in disapproval. “Miracles from teas and tonics? And you—the district deacon. What’s gotten into you?” She reached for the door frame to steady herself.

“All miracles come from the Lord, but He uses a wide variety of delivery methods.” Simon kissed her cheek. “I’ll see you at supper.”

Julia waited until she stopped panting like a dog before entering her sister’s large, airy kitchen. “Hannah,” she called, finding the room empty.

Hannah Miller bustled into the room looking as fresh and cheery as she had ten years ago. Amazing what the lack of chronic pain did for a person’s appearance and attitude. “You’re alone?” she said, pulling aside the curtain. “Where are your daughters? I prepared way too much glazed ham and potato salad if the rest of your family isn’t coming to eat.” She left the window and carried tall glasses of iced tea to the table.

Julia smiled, lowering herself onto a chair. “Just Simon and myself, but I promise to eat ravenously. Henry will stop over later. He took the open buggy for a ride after spending hours yesterday polishing

every inch with leather oil. I think he's courting some gal, but when I drop subtle hints, he turns beet red and clams up."

Hannah sat on the opposite side of the long table—a table large enough to seat the entire Miller clan. "You, subtle?" She winked one luminous green eye. "Julia, you're as subtle as a blind bull in a spring pasture. Poor Henry, being the only one left at home. What about Leah? She's not coming either?" Hannah laced her fingers over her still flat belly. "I was itching for one of her peach pies."

"No fresh peaches yet. You would know that if you left your loom and spinning wheel once in a while. And all her canned peaches are gone. Anyway, she and Jonah are staying home today, as are Emma, James, and their two boys." Julia leaned back in her chair. "I saw Ben chasing that dog of his, but where's Phoebe?" She craned her neck to scan the living room. "Let me guess. She's upstairs immortalizing the intricacies of a spider in her web instead of whacking it down with a broom."

Hannah took a long swallow of tea. "Too warm upstairs in her room. She headed to the high pasture with her tablet. Seth walked up to check on her, although she can't get lost or into any trouble up there. Still, he would prefer she stay within eyeshot of the house at all times."

"I remember when you used to hide from people. Sometimes in the woods, sometimes down by the river when you first moved here from Lancaster. Especially whenever my Simon crawled up your neck."

Hannah snorted dismissively. "I wasn't hiding from your Simon. I was plotting how to snare Seth into my web, just like Phoebe's pet spider. It wasn't easy, but I ran away from him so often he finally caught me."

The two enjoyed a chuckle. "The two Kline sisters marrying the two Miller brothers. It sure made things handy, no? Maybe that's what your Phoebe does when she wanders off by herself. She's plotting how to capture the eye of some hapless young man at the next social event. Isn't she seventeen?"

“Almost eighteen. But no, she won’t go to singings. She says they make her nervous. She’ll only attend work frolics and quilting parties. Not too many eligible young men attend sewing bees.” Hannah finished her tea and rose to refill both glasses. “She says she has nothing in common with boys her age.”

“How would she know if she never steps out from behind your skirt? Has she ever talked to boys other than to say ‘Pass me the catsup?’” The words escaped Julia’s mouth before she could clamp her jaw shut. She mentally winced at her bad habit of overstepping the role of big sister. Running roughshod over folks—that’s how Simon referred to it.

“Phoebe’s still young. She has plenty of time. People aren’t marrying so early anymore, not like when we were that age.” Hannah tucked a stray lock of flaxen hair under her prayer *kapp*.

Julia rubbed her fingers one at a time. “She shouldn’t spend so much time alone. It’s not healthy.”

Hannah shot Julia a look that meant *You’re treading dangerously close to thin ice*. “I realize with both of your daughters married that you have no one to needle and advise. You can always go back to me to keep your talons razor sharp.”

“*Ach*, I would, but I threw my hands up years ago and declared you a hopeless case. You listen to advice as well as your sheep.” Julia stared out the window where the lilac bush was in full bloom without seeing the profusion of flowers. “At least your daughter has come a long way since you started courting Seth. How long did Phoebe go without speaking a single word—eight months, a year?”

Hannah paused to consider. “Almost a year and a half. Constance’s death pulled the rug out from under her feet. Seth was trying to cope with a household without his wife, along with his own grief. He was too busy and too distracted to notice a little girl in serious pain.” She furrowed her forehead as memories of some very difficult months returned. “Seth wasn’t spending enough time with her because he had suddenly twice as much on his plate. But how can you explain that to a five-year-old?”

“Then Phoebe watched all her *daed's* attention being lavished on you.” Julia chanced a look at her sister.

Hannah scoffed. “‘Lavish’ would hardly describe Seth’s interest in me.”

“True enough. He erected quite a wall around himself while you patiently worked with Phoebe. Eventually, she came around and started talking again, but she’s still a very quiet child. No one would believe she was a Miller if she wasn’t the spitting image of Seth. They would have figured Constance discovered a foundling in the parking lot of Walmart and brought her home.”

Hannah’s smile looked bittersweet. “Seth didn’t like being told how to raise his daughter, did he, but eventually he ran out of choices and took my suggestions.” She shook off the reminiscence like a dog in the rain. “Now he dotes on the girl, as much as she’ll allow him, to the point of wrapping her in a cocoon. Pity the poor boys that come around when Phoebe starts courting. Seth will probably stand guard in the front room with his squirrel rifle across his chest.”

“I didn’t know Seth ever went hunting.” Julia lifted one eyebrow.

“He doesn’t. He inherited that relic of a firearm from his *daed*. Just don’t tell the young men that gun hasn’t been fired in twenty years.” They enjoyed a good belly laugh while Hannah started pulling side dishes from the refrigerator.

To feel useful, Julia pushed herself up from the table to get plates, glasses, and silverware. Sitting too long stiffened her arthritic joints, hastening the day when she would need more replacement parts. By the time Hannah carried the platter of sliced ham to the table, in trailed Seth, Simon, Ben, and Henry. Julia blinked at her son’s early appearance. “You’re back from your ride already, son?”

Henry’s ears reddened while he washed his hands at the sink. “I saw what I set out to see.” He slunk to a chair like a stray barn cat.

Phoebe slipped into the house then, joining them just in time for silent prayer. The moment everyone lifted their bowed heads and began passing bowls of food, Henry turned to his cousin. “After we eat,

Phoebe, would you like to see my new filly?” Despite the fact he was a grown man at twenty-one, he blushed whenever he addressed females, even family members.

“Sure,” she agreed, popping a gherkin into her mouth. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“Hardly anything. I picked her up at the Sugarcreek auction for a song. She had a mild limp, so other buyers passed her over.” He drained half his glass of milk.

Simon set down his fork, dabbing his beard with his napkin. “You bought a *lame* horse, son? What are we going to do with her if she’s not fit for the buggy or pulling a plow?”

Julia and Hannah exchanged a glance. Father and son had been down this road enough times to wear grooves in the pavement.

“She’s not lame, Dad. A slight limp, that’s all. And she’s much improved since I started applying liniment and wrapping the leg.” Henry built a sandwich with home-baked rye bread, several slices of ham, and hot pepper relish.

Simon grunted, picking up his coffee cup. “Could she at least pull a pony cart to earn her keep?”

“Eventually. Maybe.” Henry bit into the stack, rendering further speech impossible.

“Look at it this way—she is a filly and could turn into a fine brood mare someday.” Seth interjected his two cents’ worth into the conversation.

Simon’s brows beetled above the bridge of his nose, focusing on his brother. “We don’t have room for the horses we own now. They’re already two to a stall, and my horse pasture is grazed down to nubs by July. I’ll have to start feeding them oats and timothy year-round.”

“Maybe I’ll lease you some of our pastureland. Hannah’s flock is down this year. If you’re willing to pay me a fair price, that is.” Seth bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“I think it’s a fine thing you’re doing, nephew,” said Hannah,

slicing pies at the counter. “Rescuing balky horses from the auction kill pen and then retraining them for useful lives is a noble calling.”

Julia watched Hannah aim her dazzling smile at Simon. After all these years, she still loved getting her brother-in-law’s goat.

“*Jah*, Hannah,” said Simon. “But the idea was to resell the horses at a profit and make a little income while he’s doing his good deed.”

“I have sold some,” said Henry, after swallowing another mouthful of sandwich. “Just last month I sold that three-year-old Morgan to the bishop’s son. He couldn’t believe the change that had come over that horse with two years of training.”

Simon rolled his eyes, pushing away his plate. “Two years for a Morgan to let someone put a saddle on his back?” His muttering was barely audible, knowing he was outnumbered by animal lovers in his brother’s home. “Fine, nursemaid your new filly. Just don’t turn my barn into the Miller Horse Sanctuary.”

Phoebe straightened up in her chair. Small and shy, it was easy to forget she was in the room. “That has a nice ring to it.” She flashed Henry a grin. “Would you like me to make you a sign to put down by the road? I could paint a stallion and mare, with a young filly in the foreground. I’m pretty good at drawing horses.” She winked one warm cocoa-brown eye at him.

Some of Julia’s tea slipped down her windpipe and then flew right out her nose as she gagged and coughed. The rest of the family laughed more moderately, except for her beloved husband, Simon. He simply stared at his favorite niece as though she’d grown a tail.

“*Danki* for your generous offer, Phoebe, but that won’t be necessary,” he said in his most patient voice. “Everyone in the county already knows the location of Henry’s save-a-horse society.” Simon reached for the largest slice of pie among the dessert plates.

Julia wiped her face and then left the table to blow her nose, trying to compose herself. She knew she needed to better control her drinking habits because she had a feeling it would be one long, hot summer.