

❖ JOURNEY TO PLEASANT PRAIRIE • 1 ❖

HANNAH'S CHOICE

A NOVEL



Jan Drexler


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Jan Drexler, *Hannah's Choice*
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To my dear husband.
The best friend a woman could ever have.

Soli Deo Gloria

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CONESTOGA CREEK, LANCASTER COUNTY
OCTOBER 1842

Hannah Yoder stamped her feet against the October evening chill seeping through her shoes. Darkness already reigned under the towering trees along Conestoga Creek, although the evening sky had shone pale blue as she walked along the path at the edge of the oat field minutes ago. The north wind gusted, sweeping bare fingers of branches back and forth against scudding clouds.

Where was Adam? She had been surprised to see his signal after supper, when *Mamm* had asked her to check on the meat in the smokehouse. She had been surprised to see the bit of cloth hanging on the blackberry bushes so late in the day. They had used the signal since they were children, ever since Adam had discovered that they both liked spying birds' nests in the woods.

She shivered a little. The cloth on the brambles had been blue instead of the yellow Adam always used. It could be a

mistake. Perhaps one of her brothers had caught his shirt on the brambles instead.

A breeze fluttered dry leaves still clinging to the underbrush around her. She would wait a few minutes more, and then go back into the house. When a branch cracked behind her at the edge of the grove, Hannah lifted the edge of her shawl over her head, tucking a loose tendril of hair under her *kapp*, and slipped behind a tree. Let him think she was late. It would serve him right to worry about her for a change. He had been so serious lately. What was it about turning twenty that made him forget the fun they had always had? Would she be the same in two years?

Like a hunting owl, a figure flitted through the trees to her right. Hannah stilled her shivering body, waiting for Adam's appearance, but the figure halted behind the clump of young swamp willows at the edge of the clearing. So, he was waiting to frighten her when she arrived. Hannah smiled. She'd circle around behind and surprise him instead.

As she gathered the edges of her cloak to pick her way through the underbrush, she heard a giggle from her left. Liesbet? Hannah waited. She didn't want her younger sister spying on her conversation with Adam.

The wind tore fitful clouds away from the harvest moon, illuminating the clearing as Liesbet stepped into the light.

"Where are you?" Liesbet peered into the dark underbrush. "Come now, I know you're here."

Hannah clenched her hands. Liesbet was like a pesky gnat at times, always following her when she wanted to be alone. She was ready to step out from behind the tree to confront her when Liesbet spoke again, in English instead of *Deitsch*.

“George, stop playing games with me. You’re going to scare me.”

Hannah froze. Who was George?

Suddenly a man leaped from the trees behind Liesbet and caught her around the waist. She turned with a little shriek and fell into his arms.

“George, you did it again. I know you’re going to be the death of me one day.”

Hannah covered her mouth to keep a gasp from escaping. The man who had been hiding among the willows wasn’t Adam.

“Ah, lass, you’re so much fun to scare, but you know ’tis only me, not some ghoulie prowling around the woods here.”

Liesbet giggled and snuggled closer to George. As he turned into the moonlight, Hannah could see him clearly, from his blue corded trousers to the snug-fitting cap perched on top of his head. His cocky grin reminded her of a fox carrying off a chicken from the henhouse. Certainly not an Amish man, or even Mennonite or Dunkard. She had never seen him before, but Liesbet had, for sure. She ducked farther behind her tree before either one of them could spot her.

“Give us a kiss, lass. The boys and I are only here for the one night. We’re heading on to Philadelphia tomorrow.”

Hannah could hear the pout in Liesbet’s voice. “You’re going away again? You never spend any time with me.”

“Aye, and my sweet Lizzie, whenever I ask you to come along, you always play the little girlie who stays at home.”

“It wouldn’t be proper for me to tag along with you and your friends.”

George’s low laugh sent chills through Hannah. “No, lass,

not proper at all.” Then his voice took on its teasing tone again. “Admit it, you’re just too young.”

“I’m nearly sixteen!”

“Aye, like I said, you’re just too young.”

They grew quiet, and then Hannah heard a groan from George. She risked a glimpse around the tree. Liesbet was pressed up to him, her hands clinging to his shoulders while she kissed him. As Hannah watched, the man pulled Liesbet closer, one hand reaching up to pull off her kapp and letting her blond curls tumble to her shoulders. He buried his fingers in her hair, continuing the kiss until she struggled to pull out of his grasp. She stepped just beyond his reach and gave him a coy look.

Liesbet, what are you doing?

“Do you still think I’m too young?”

“Lizzie, you’re enough to drive a man to distraction.”

Hannah heard a warning in George’s voice, but Liesbet turned her back on him and walked to the edge of the clearing. She was playing games with the man, but the look on his face in the moonlight was hungry. Predatory. Hannah shivered again.

“When will you get back?”

“In a week or so, you can bet on that, and then I’ll be around for another of your kisses.”

Liesbet turned to look at him, her face a careful pout. “Why can’t you stay here? I don’t like it when you’re gone so much.”

“I have to go, Lizzie, but you know I can’t stay away from you too long.”

There was another pause as Liesbet turned her back on the man. Hannah would have smiled if Liesbet’s game wasn’t so dangerous. It wasn’t often she didn’t get her way.

George snaked out a hand to catch her elbow and pull her close. “Lizzie, lass, give me another kiss. The lads are waiting for me.”

After another lingering kiss, George released Liesbet and turned her around, giving her a solid swat on the behind before he took off along the creek bank, whistling as he went.

Hannah watched Liesbet as she stood in the clearing, bouncing on her toes, humming the same tune George had been whistling, her pretend pout gone.

Stepping out from behind her tree, Hannah tugged her shawl off her head. “Liesbet, what are you doing?”

Liesbet jumped, and then turned on her sister. “You were spying on me?”

“It’s a good thing I saw you. Who is that man and what are you doing with him?”

Liesbet hugged herself and smiled at Hannah. “He’s my beau.”

“Your beau? You mean he’s courting you?”

“Of course he is. You were the one spying on us. Didn’t you see him kiss me?”

“Just because a man takes a kiss doesn’t mean he has courting on his mind.”

Liesbet waved her hand in the air to brush Hannah’s concerns away. “You’re just jealous because you’re not the only one with a secret beau. I know how you and Adam meet out here in the woods and your silly signal flag on the bushes.” Her voice gloated.

Hannah felt the blood drain from her face. “Adam’s not so secret, and he’s not my beau. We’ve known each other all our lives.”

“*Ne*, Adam’s not secret, but *Daed* doesn’t know he’s asked you to marry him.”

Hannah caught her lower lip between her teeth to keep herself from retorting to Liesbet’s accusation. *Ja*, Adam had spoken of marriage, but it was just a game they played. He wasn’t serious.

Liesbet’s smile set Hannah’s teeth on edge. “And I know I saw him kiss you the other day.”

Hannah felt her face heat up. Adam had stolen a kiss, one that had made her heart pound, but one kiss didn’t mean anything, did it?

“Surely you can’t compare that to what I just saw between you and that . . .”

“His name is George McIvey, and I’m going to marry him.”

“Liesbet, you can’t!”

“I am, and you can’t stop me. If you say anything to *Daed*, I’ll tell him all about how you and Adam have been sneaking around.” Liesbet lifted her chin as she faced Hannah. “I’ll tell *Mamm* too.”

“Liesbet, not *Mamm*. You’ll set her off on one of her spells,” Hannah protested, but Liesbet had won the argument. There was nothing she could do to stop her sister except give in to her demands, the way she had for the last nine years. Liesbet still played the delicate invalid, even though Hannah suspected she had outgrown the effects of the diphtheria long ago.

And she couldn’t have Liesbet spreading tales about their neighbor. It didn’t matter that Hannah was eighteen and well into courting age. Adam wasn’t Amish.

“Then you keep my secret, and I’ll keep yours,” Liesbet said.

Hannah hesitated. Liesbet smiled the way she always did when she knew she was getting her way, and her eyes glistened in the moonlight.

“But what if that man is dangerous? Can he be trusted? How long have you known him?”

A frown crossed Liesbet’s face, and then the moon disappeared behind another cloud and the clearing was shadowed once more. Hannah could barely see her sister’s silhouette against the darker trees behind her.

When Liesbet spoke, her voice was unsure. “I’ve known him long enough, and he’s never been anything but kind to me.”

“He isn’t one of us. He isn’t Amish.”

“He isn’t a backward Dutchman, you mean.” Liesbet’s voice was bitter, her uncertainty vanishing as quickly as it came.

Hannah gasped. “You better not let Daed hear you talk like that.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. But you can bet I won’t be marrying any stick-in-the-mud farmer, either.”

Hannah took a step toward her sister. “But, Liesbet, you’ll break Mamm’s heart . . . Promise me you won’t see him anymore.”

Liesbet shrugged, the movement only a rustle in the dark. “Whatever you want.” She turned and ran back toward the house, a shadow in the night.

Left alone in the clearing, Hannah wavered. Following Liesbet would be a waste with her sister’s harsh words ringing between them.

The wind blew another swirl of leaves along the floor of the clearing, propelling Hannah’s feet to action. Could she

confide in Johanna? *Ne*, as much as she loved her best friend, she was too aware of Johanna's loose tongue. Prone to gossip, that's what she was, and this secret wouldn't bear gossip.

Hannah followed the path along the creek bank toward the Metzlers' farm, the path she had traveled often on a sunny afternoon, but never in the dark of night. Adam would know what to do. He would know if Liesbet was in danger from this George McIvey.

Skirting the family cemetery, Hannah glanced at the graves of her little sisters and brother, the small mounds covered with scattered leaves. Mamm would be out here tomorrow, clearing them off again.

The path led her down to a runlet that drained water from the fields into Conestoga Creek. She jumped over the mud at the bottom and struggled through the loose leaves up the other side. The neighbor's farm, Adam's family's farm, was just ahead. The wind had blown the last of the lingering clouds away and the farm buildings stood silent in the evening, the stone corners sharp and clear in the moonlight.

Hannah paused at the edge of the creek bank where the trail led away from the trees toward the white frame house. Lanterns glowed in the windows, but should she dare knock on the door? It wasn't late, even though the evening sky was covered in stars, but if she disturbed the family now, there would be questions.

As she watched, the barn door opened and Adam stood silhouetted against the lighted interior. He closed the door and disappeared into the shadows on the other side of the barn, away from the house. He must be feeding the cattle his father had put in the pen there, waiting for butchering day.

Hannah hurried around the back of the barn. For sure,

there he was, throwing hay into the pen. She circled the split-rail fence and came toward him just as he landed the pitchfork into the haystack one more time. The breeze pulled at his black coat, hanging unbuttoned and loose on his tall frame, but his broad-brimmed hat stayed securely on his head.

He saw her coming and rested the fork's tines on the ground. "Isn't it a bit late for you to be taking a stroll?"

His face was shadowed from the moonlight, but Hannah could hear the concern in his voice.

"Adam, I need to talk to you."

Adam stuck the pitchfork into the hay and came toward her, taking her hands when he reached her. They were rough and calloused. A farmer's hands, cold in the night air.

"Is there something wrong? Is that why you brave a dark, windy night to find me?"

Hannah took a deep breath, resisting the urge to step into his strong embrace. How many times had he banished her fears through the years? But this was different.

"Liesbet told one of those teamsters about our signal and they've been using it to meet. I saw the cloth and thought it was from you. I found them together in the clearing behind the barn. I'm afraid for her."

Adam leaned against the fence rail and pulled her toward him. Moonlight threw shadows, turning his familiar face into a landscape of sharp angles. The cattle in the pen snuffled as they tossed through the scattered hay with their noses.

"Tell me about it."

As Hannah told him about the conversation in the clearing, his hands tensed and his handsome face grew hard.

"And I don't know if she's only playing with this man or not," Hannah finished. "You know how Liesbet can be."

Adam sighed. “*Ja*, I know how she can be. Does your father know anything about this?”

“That’s just the problem. Liesbet said she’d tell Mamm we were courting if I told Daed about George.”

“Why is it a problem if she told your mother we were courting?”

Hannah pulled her hands away from his and tucked them into her shawl. “Because we aren’t, and Mamm wouldn’t like it if we were.”

Adam stood straight, his hands on her shoulders. “You think she wouldn’t like it because I’m Mennonite and you’re Amish.”

“*Ja*. You know that’s important to her, and to Daed too. I don’t know what Mamm would do if she thought they were losing me to the Mennonites.”

Adam grinned. “That’s not a bad thing, is it? Our churches are so similar, there’s no reason to keep us separate.”

“But there is, Adam.” Hannah stepped away from him. “You know there is. But if Mamm thought she was losing both Liesbet and me . . . What can I do? Liesbet says she’s going to marry this man.”

“Liesbet has always been like one of these leaves, blowing in the wind. Do you really think she’s going to follow this path very long?”

Hannah shuddered, thinking of the way George had pulled Liesbet close as she had kissed him.

“What if she’s already followed it too far? What if he takes her away before she decides she wants something different?”

“Do you think that might happen?”

Hannah nodded. Adam would know how to fix this mess. She had always relied on him to help.

“There’s little we can do, but I’ll try to keep a watch. Maybe I can stop him before he tries to visit her again.”

“He said he was going to be away for a while. He told Liesbet he was on his way to Philadelphia.”

“So the time to watch will be when he comes back. I’ll keep my eyes open for any strangers around.” Adam reached out and lifted her chin. “Don’t worry, Hannah. Everything will be all right.”

Would it be all right? Would Liesbet come to her senses?

“Come now, I’ll walk you home. Maybe we’ll catch a glimpse of that owl that lives in your barn.”

Hannah let Adam lead her on the path back home, casting glances up into the tree branches as they went. She had never seen an owl in Daed’s barn, but she watched for one just the same. It was better than dwelling on Liesbet.