

❖ JOURNEY TO PLEASANT PRAIRIE • 2 ❖

MATTIE'S PLEDGE

A NOVEL



Jan Drexler


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Jan Drexler, *Mattie's Pledge*
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16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my great-grandmother,
Bessie Ellen Schrock Sherck,
in whose eyes I saw Mattie's dreams.
Thank you for your faithfulness to God
and our family.

Soli Deo Gloria

Shepherd your people with your staff,
the flock of your inheritance,
who dwell alone in a forest
in the midst of a garden land;
let them graze in Bashan and Gilead
as in the days of old.
As in the days when you came out of the land
of Egypt,
I will show them marvelous things.

Micah 7:14–15

1

BROTHERS VALLEY, PENNSYLVANIA

APRIL 1843

“Mattie.”

Mattie Schrock ignored her sister, intent on the flutter of wings she spied through the branches of the tree, pulling her attention from wringing the water out of *Daed*'s shirt. She leaned as far toward the edge of the covered porch as she could, her toes clinging to the worn wooden planks. The bird wouldn't hold still. What kind was it?

“It's your turn to hang the laundry. I have to help *Mamm* get dinner ready.” Naomi shoved the basket of wet clothes toward the porch steps with her foot.

Mattie gave up on identifying the bird. Hanging laundry wasn't her favorite chore, even though it meant she was able to be in the yard instead of in the hot kitchen. She picked up the heavy basket and rested it on her hip as she took the bag of clothes pegs from the hook next to the porch steps. “It's your turn next time, then.”

Naomi pulled the stopper from the washtub and let the

water drain onto the flower bed in the yard below the porch. "I'd rather hang clothes than work inside today. The weather is so lovely and warm after the days of rain we've had."

Mattie stopped with one foot on the bottom step. "Why did you insist I take my turn, then? You can hang the laundry if you want to."

"*Ne.*" Naomi shook her head and wiped out the empty tub with a rag. "Fair is fair. It's your turn." She gave Mattie a smile. "I know how much you like to be outside."

She hung the washtub on the wall and turned to the rinse tub. Naomi was tall and slender, the opposite of Mattie's own short stockiness. Her hair, which had turned to a soft brown during the winter months, was beginning to lighten to its summer blond where it peeked out from under her *kapp*. Naomi worked with a spare efficiency that wasted no motions. She hung the rinse tub on the wall next to its mate, draped the rag over its hook, and started toward the back door, but stopped when she saw Mattie.

"You haven't even begun yet. What are you doing, standing there? Daydreaming again?"

"You'll be a wonderful wife someday."

Naomi turned her face away. "Are you sure God's plan isn't for me to remain single? A *maidle* caring for Mamm and Daed in their old age?"

Mattie pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. She shouldn't have said anything. "There is someone for you. Someone wonderful."

"You're kind to say so. But don't worry about me." Naomi fingered the door latch. "I'll be content, no matter what happens." She slipped inside the house.

Mattie shifted the heavy basket on her hip and crossed the

yard to the line strung between the porch roof and the big oak tree. Naomi had never had a beau. The boys who vied for Mattie's attention never noticed Naomi except to enjoy her pies. They never teased her to join their games or asked her to go for a buggy ride on a spring evening. She didn't mention it, but Mattie knew the slights bothered her. She had heard her sister crying in the middle of the night when Naomi thought no one would hear, especially after Mattie had been for a buggy ride with Andrew Bontrager. There must be someone for Naomi.

Lowering the basket to the ground, Mattie picked up the first shirt, shook it to release the wrinkles, then pegged it to the line.

If the boys ignored her, she wouldn't be as calm as Naomi. At eighteen years old, Naomi should be planning her wedding. She should be filling her wedding chest with quilts and bedding, but Naomi kept herself busy helping Mamm or their sister Annie, or one of their sisters-in-law. She never took time to plan for her own future. She never made anything for herself.

Mattie stopped, a peg halfway onto the line, an apron forgotten in her hands. Why not make something for Naomi's wedding chest herself? She pushed the peg onto the line with a firm shove. Because she could never sit still enough to finish any needlework. Her own quilt was barely started.

As she finished hanging the apron and reached for a dress wadded in the basket, an idea swirled through her mind. She could finish that quilt for Naomi. That would show her sister she had faith that there would be a husband for her, that she wouldn't remain a maide forever.

As she hung the last few items of laundry, Mattie tried

to remember where the pieces for her quilt might be. Not in her own chest. She had packed it yesterday for their coming move to Indiana.

At that thought, she looked toward the west. Even though the surrounding hills blocked her view, she could see the western mountains in her imagination. Any day now the folks from the Conestoga in Lancaster County would arrive in Brothers Valley, and then they would leave on their journey.

Now she remembered. The quilt had been packed. It was in the barrel, the one with the blue lid, where she had packed her winter shawl and heavy comforter. Daed had already taken it to the barn, but if she looked for it now, she could start working on it this afternoon. Naomi needn't know it was for her, she would think Mattie was continuing to sew her own neglected quilt.

Mattie took the basket and bag of clothes pegs back to the porch and hung them in their places. If only she could slip away to the barn before Mamm saw her. With her sister Annie, her husband, and their family coming to share dinner, Mamm would want Mattie's help. But she could find her quilt and be back before she was needed.

Running across the yard to the barn, Mattie stopped inside the big open door, catching her breath while she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior. Daed stood on the far side of the center bay, silhouetted against the open door on the other end. Christopher, Annie's husband, stood facing him. Neither of them noticed Mattie.

"We're staying here."

Daed moved to the workbench and dropped a hammer on the wooden surface with a thump. When Mattie saw the expression on his face as he turned back to Christopher, she

knew she should make herself scarce. She slid behind some boards standing against the wall next to the door.

“You can’t stay here. Our family is going west in a few days. You and my daughter are coming with us.”

Mattie peeked out between two of the boards. Eavesdropping was almost as great a sin as . . . as . . . Well, bad enough. She should leave or make her presence known. But she had to find out what was going on. Christopher held himself stiffly, his entire five and a half feet quivered as Daed stepped toward him, a frown on his face as he looked down on his son-in-law.

“We’re staying.” Christopher squared his shoulders. “I’m not taking my family to the wilderness. It’s too dangerous.”

“That isn’t your only reason though, is it? I saw you talking with Peter Blank last Sunday. You’re still in favor of building the meetinghouse.”

“I am. I think it’s time we let go of the past and move on toward the future. We no longer need to live like our ancestors, afraid of being arrested every time we meet. And hosting the church is too hard for some of the folks. A meetinghouse is the best solution.”

“And the Mennonites have meetinghouses.” Daed’s sarcastic words cut the air.

“I’m not talking about becoming Mennonite. I’m Amish, and that won’t change. My family will stay Amish, but we don’t need to move to Indiana to do it.”

Daed bowed his head, his shoulders sagging. “Annie agrees to this?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t make a decision like this unless my wife agreed.” Christopher scuffed his foot in the dust on the barn floor. “It isn’t easy for either Annie or me, this separation. But we both know you and I would come to an

impasse sooner or later. I believe with all my heart that we as Amish need to progress or die. Change is coming, Eli. You need to face that, not run away from it.”

Daed’s head shot up, his dark eyes lit with fire. “I’m not running. Indiana holds new opportunities for us. For all of us.” His expression softened as his voice dropped. “Christopher, come with us. We want you and Annie close. We want to watch your Levi and little Katie grow up.”

“Our minds are made up and talking won’t change them.” Christopher took a step back. “I’ll help you load the wagons tomorrow.”

“Send us on our way?” Daed turned back to the harness he had been mending, his voice again holding a bitter edge. “We don’t need your help. You’ve made your choice.”

Mattie wiped her eyes with the hem of her apron. Christopher hesitated for a few seconds, but when Daed didn’t turn from his work, he left the barn.

Wiping her eyes again, Mattie started to follow him, but a sound from the workbench made her turn back. Daed leaned on his elbows, his face buried in his hands, his shoulders shaking as a quiet, sobbing groan escaped. Mattie slipped out the door.

She ran for the swimming hole, a spot where the willows and sycamores grew thick at a bend in the creek. The water in the wide elbow was deep and shaded. Cool on hot summer days, and secluded on this spring morning. She climbed her favorite sycamore, the one leaning toward the opposite bank, to a large branch hanging over the water. The old rope swing, dark brown and fraying, swayed in the gentle breeze.

Mattie settled herself on the wide branch and looked up

through the new spring leaves, just beginning to reach toward their length, but still a soft green. The leaves fluttered in the intermittent zephyrs, pale green alternating with the perfect blue sky. She wiped her eyes again.

She had seen this coming. Had wondered if Annie would ever be able to leave her home and her friends. But now that the time was here . . . why would Annie give up the chance to go west? The family had been talking about this move for months, with Christopher and Annie part of every discussion. Nearly every Sunday afternoon through the entire winter, the families had gathered together. Her older brothers, Isaac and Noah, with their wives and children, had stayed far into the evening many times as they talked over the best routes to Indiana, deciding what tools and furnishings they should take with them, what to leave behind, and how many wagons were needed for the four families. They had all listened as Daed told and retold the tale of his trip to Iowa and Indiana last summer. Christopher and Annie had been part of that planning . . . until the last few weeks.

Mattie leaned against the tree's trunk. The last few weeks, Christopher had sat silent while Daed and her brothers talked. Annie had volunteered to care for the little ones while Mamm and the rest of them had planned how much food to take and how to store it. Mattie blinked her eyes, vainly trying to keep the tears back. They must have decided they weren't going west weeks ago but hadn't told anyone.

A burning sensation rose in Mattie's breast, constricting her throat. If Annie hadn't married Christopher, this wouldn't be happening. If it wasn't for him, Annie would come west with them. She would walk behind the wagon with her sisters just as they had done when they came to

Brothers Valley from the Conestoga seven years ago. They would play games as they walked, and make up stories—

Mattie drove the thoughts away. She couldn't change Christopher's mind, and it was no use blaming him for making a decision he thought was best for his family.

But, oh! If only he had decided to come with them. What did Amish have to do with new ways and meetinghouses anyway?

Swinging one foot, Mattie stroked the sycamore's smooth trunk. When summer came, the branches of the surrounding willows would brush the ground, mingling with the meadow grass or catching in the creek's current, streaming green ribbons in the shaded water. Annie would be here to see it, but by then Mattie and Naomi would be in Indiana. In the wilderness without their sister.

"Hey, Mattie!" Henry, her fourteen-year-old brother, scrambled up the tree and straddled the limb next to her. "What are you doing up here?"

"I'm thinking."

Henry stood up and walked along the limb, holding on to the fragile twigs over his head for balance.

"You thinking about going west? When do you think the Lancaster folks will get here?"

"Any day now, Daed said. He expected them last week."

Henry started bouncing on the limb, making it sway up and down.

"If you fall in the water, Mamm will skin you, for sure. You know she doesn't want to do any more laundry before we leave."

"*Ja, ja, ja*, I know." He walked toward her again and lay down along the branch, his chin in his hands. Mattie looked

toward the sky so she wouldn't have to watch him try to keep his balance on the still swaying branch.

Henry sat up. "Are there willow trees in Indiana? Do you think we'll have a swimming hole like this one?"

"Of course there are willow trees. We'll have to wait and see about the swimming hole, though."

He picked at the bark. "Mamm doesn't want to go, does she?"

"She agrees with Daed that we should." But when she heard about Christopher and Annie's decision, that might change. "You want to go, don't you?"

Henry looked at her then, his bright blue eyes shining beneath his hat brim. "Ja, I do. I know you do too. I've seen you staring out to the west as if you could see Indiana from here."

"Not only Indiana." She leaned back and closed her eyes. "I can see beyond the big river to the mountains."

"Of course you can. They're right there." The branch swayed as he gestured.

"Ne, not those mountains. The ones farther west." She leaned over to catch Henry's gaze. "I've heard they have snow on the tops all year around."

"You're not joking? Do you think you'll ever see them?"

She shrugged. "Why not? All we have to do is keep moving west."

He grinned at her and she matched his expression. They would always keep moving west.

Mamm's voice floated through the air from the direction of the house.

"*Ach*, Mattie, I forgot. I was to come fetch you. Mamm wants your help."

Mattie started down the tree. “You forgot, but I’ll be the one in trouble.” She reached the ground and headed toward the house. “And you had better go to the barn to see if Daed needs your help. There is a lot to do before we leave.”

She left him still sitting in the tree.

Mamm was at the table with her back to the door when Mattie walked in. Annie sat on the opposite side, holding little Katie, her baby. Two-year-old Levi was in Mamm’s lap. Naomi, sitting next to Annie, looked up as Mattie came near, her eyes red from crying.

Annie had told them the news.

Without a word, Mattie slid onto the bench next to Mamm and handed her a clean handkerchief from the waistband of her apron. Levi looked from Mamm to Annie and back again.

Mattie took a cookie from the jar on the table and handed it to her nephew. “Here, Levi. Have a cookie.”

She set him on her own lap as Mamm sniffed back her tears.

Annie reached across the table toward her mother. “I’m sorry. If there was any way for us to go with you, you know I would. But this is our home.”

Mamm nodded, controlling her tears. “I know. But we will miss you.” She looked at her oldest daughter then. “Perhaps sometime you might follow us?”

Annie watched their hands, entwined in the table’s center. “Who knows what the future holds? Perhaps God will call us to go west someday.”

The front door opened. Christopher took one step into the room, his normally pleasant face grim. “Annie, we must go home.”

Mamm hiccupped. “You were going to stay . . . it’s dinner-time.”

Christopher shook his head. “We won’t eat here today.” He held out one hand. “Levi, come home with Daed.”

Mattie lowered the little boy to the floor and he ran to Christopher. Annie slowly let go of Mamm’s hand and rose. She didn’t look back as Christopher closed the door behind them.

Naomi rose from the table, motioning for Mattie to follow her out the back door.

When they reached the porch, Mattie whispered, “We can’t leave Mamm alone, can we?”

Her sister took her hand. “Right now Mamm needs to cry. When she’s done, she’ll be back to her usual self, but she won’t let herself cry while we’re in there.”

Naomi was right. “How do you know things like that? You always know what someone needs and I never do. I wouldn’t have thought that she wants to be alone.”

“I saw it on her face. She didn’t want to cry in front of us.”

She sat on the top step and Mattie sat beside her, leaning her elbows on her knees and resting her chin in her hands. “How long should we wait?”

“For a while. Dinner is in the oven and will be done soon. Mamm should feel better by then.”

“I never really thought Annie wouldn’t go west with us.”

“She needs to stay with her husband.”

“Is that what it’s like when you get married? Whatever your husband decides, you have to do?”

Naomi brushed some flour off her apron. “Annie said she agreed with Christopher.”

“But you saw how miserable she is. And Mamm doesn’t

want to go west. She agreed because Daed wants to. If she had her way, she would never leave Brothers Valley.”

Naomi scooted down to the next step and leaned back with her elbows propped behind her. “The Good Book says that when two people marry, they become one flesh. I suppose married people have to agree on things, or else they’d be torn apart.”

“But would you agree with some man if he wanted to do something awful like take you away from your family?”

“First of all, I wouldn’t marry ‘some man.’ If I ever get married, it will be to the man who loves me.” Naomi crossed her legs at the knee and bounced one foot in the air. “And second, he would be my family, not you.” She bounced her foot again.

Mattie felt a little sick. “You would choose him over me?”

Naomi looked up at her, smiling. “Of course, even though I would hope I will never have to make that choice. But you will do the same thing when you marry Ephraim or Andrew, or whoever wins your heart.”

“Never.” Mattie shook her head. “If he doesn’t do what I want, then I’ll head west to Oregon or somewhere without him.”

Naomi grinned. “You just wait until you fall in love, like Annie did. Nothing will be as important as being with your husband.”

Mattie didn’t answer, but watched a male robin chase another away from the oak tree. Andrew Bontrager would never win her heart. Only one boy had ever come close to doing that, but when he arrived from the Conestoga, he probably wouldn’t even remember her.