

Sisters by the Sea

*4 Short Romances Set in the
Sarasota, Florida, Amish Community*

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BRUNSTETTER

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*The
Seashell
Cake*



WANDA E. BRUNSTETTER



Prologue

Shipshewana, Indiana

“Are you sure you really want to do this?” Leora Lambright’s mother asked as they huddled together outside of Yoder’s Shopping Center, waiting for the Pioneer Trails charter bus to arrive. “It’s not too late to change your mind.”

Leora shivered against the cold winter wind blowing against her face and gave a quick nod of her head. At least there were no snowflakes tumbling down in a flurry today like there had been a few days ago. “The doctor said I should try living in a warm, sunny climate,” she responded. “And since I’ve paid for my bus ticket and put money down for the rent on a house in Pinecraft, I can’t back out now. Besides, the only way to know if I’ll feel better in Florida is to spend an entire winter there.”

“I suppose you’re right, but you will surely be missed.” Mom slipped her arm around Leora’s waist. “Our home won’t be the same without you.”

“I shall miss all of you too. Maybe you and Dad, or my three sisters, can come visit me in Sarasota sometime soon.”

“Since we all have jobs, we’ll need to wait and see how it goes.”

Soon the bus pulled in, and once everyone’s luggage had been

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loaded, the group of forty-five people who would be heading south with Leora began to board. She turned to her mother and gave her a tearful hug. "I'll call and let you know as soon as I arrive."

"*Jah*, please do." Mom dabbed at a few tears that had spilled from her eyes. "We will all be praying that you have a safe trip."

"*Danki*." With a determined set of her jaw, Leora hoisted her purse and carry-on satchel over her shoulder and boarded the bus. After taking her seat next to an elderly Amish woman from their family's church district, Leora watched out the window until the bus pulled out of the parking lot and she could no longer see her mother waving goodbye. Leora felt a tingling sensation within her chest. While she was about to embark on a new adventure and felt eager to see what the future held for her in sunny Sarasota, Leora couldn't help wondering if her decision to leave Indiana was the right one.

She leaned firmly against the back of the seat cushion and closed her eyes. *Guess I'll know the answer to that question soon enough.*



Chapter 1

The village of Pinecraft in Sarasota, Florida

ONE YEAR LATER

The sun's warmth felt welcoming as Leora lounged in a reclining chair on the lanai at the back of her long-term rental. The small, two-bedroom cottage was located on Kruppa Avenue in the village of Pinecraft, a community where Amish and Mennonite people came to vacation or stay during the winter months. A few folks, like the widow who lived in the house next door, resided in Pinecraft full-time.

Leora inhaled the sweet aroma drifting on the light breeze. It came from the lovely red flowering hibiscus planted close to the screened-in lanai.

She reached for her glass of iced tea and took a slow sip. The cool liquid felt refreshing as it trickled down her parched throat. This was Leora's day off from the bakery inside Der Dutchman Restaurant. Since Leora had been previously employed at Das Dutchman Essenhaus bakery in Middlebury, Indiana, she had no problem securing a position at the restaurant here. Leora liked her job, but she also looked forward to her days off, when she could

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relax at the house, ride her bike along the Legacy Trail, or catch the Scat bus for a trip to Lido or Siesta Keys Beach.

Some days Leora went with her friend Karen Schrock, who had come from Ohio to Sarasota a few months ago and stayed because she liked it here. Karen worked as a cashier at Der Dutchman. Leora and Karen enjoyed doing many of the same things—shopping, collecting shells at the beach, biking, and getting together to sing and play musical instruments with other friends. Karen had invited Leora to go shopping with her today, but Leora declined, saying she didn't need anything, and had decided to stay home and relax on her day off.

Leora yawned and repositioned the black scarf pinned to the back of her head. She rarely wore her stiff, white, cone-shaped, pleated-at-the-back covering unless she was at work, attending church, or going to some public place where she felt it was important to look her best. It was easier and more convenient to wear a scarf for most other activities.

It felt good to rest and do nothing. If the sunshine began to feel too hot, she would go inside, lie on the couch, and read the novel she'd picked up last week and hadn't had a chance to start. There was also the option of sitting out on the shaded front porch, but that would probably lead to visiting with people walking by who wanted to stop and talk awhile. Leora wasn't in the mood for conversation. She got enough of that during work hours at the bakery and at the frequent social events that took place at Pinecraft Park.

Leora's primary goal these days was to live as peacefully as possible. She had tried, without much success, to convince herself that she could be happy remaining single and didn't need to be married in order to feel fulfilled. But when she was honest with herself, she admitted that many times when she saw couples together on

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the beach, out shopping, or here in Pinecraft, she couldn't help feeling a bit envious. If she continued to live in sunny Florida, Leora would probably never get married, have children, and live the kind of life she used to dream about. *But at least that would be better than living someplace where I wouldn't be able to live a happy, fulfilled life*, she told herself.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax the tight muscles in her shoulders that hadn't been there a few moments ago. Thinking about her situation was no doubt the cause of the stress she now felt.

Leora's thoughts took her back to the day she was diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder, better known as SAD. This condition caused a person to feel sad or even deeply depressed throughout the dark, cold winter months. Additional symptoms included low energy, trouble coping, sleeping too much, losing interest in things one normally enjoyed, difficulty concentrating, and overeating due to certain food cravings. Leora remembered feeling hopeless, worthless, and guilty for not being able to function normally during the dark days of late fall, winter, and sometimes even early spring if the weather remained dreary. She'd always thought it was strange how she had been able to function like the rest of her family for just a few months, and never understood why she'd always dreaded the months when there was less sunlight and hadn't felt well once they arrived.

"What's the cause of this disorder?" Leora had asked her doctor back home after he'd given her his diagnosis.

"The lower level of sun in the fall and winter may disrupt your body's internal clock and lead to the symptoms you've been experiencing," Dr. Smithers had responded. "Also, reduced sunlight can cause a drop in a brain chemical called serotonin that may trigger depression. In addition, the change in the seasons can disrupt the balance of your body's level of melatonin, which plays a role

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in sleep patterns and mood.”

“Is there anything I can do to manage my symptoms?” she’d questioned.

“Full spectrum lights inside your home could help, but since you don’t use electricity, and your source of light is either battery operated or gas lanterns, it might not be a strong enough source of light for you. You can also surround yourself with healing colors, such as green, pink and red.” He had patted Leora’s hand and looked at her with sincerity. “Personally, my advice for you would be to relocate to a sunny place like Florida or one of the other southern states.”

One of her neighbor’s dogs began barking, and Leora’s eyes snapped open. She sat up straight. The answer for her SAD was definitely here in Sarasota, because she felt much better than she had while living back home in Middlebury. The only problem was she missed her family and close friends. Even though she had invited all of them to visit her in Sarasota, so far no one had been able to come.

Before Leora’s diagnosis, she’d believed that she wasn’t pretty or interesting enough to attract a man. But after learning that she suffered with SAD, Leora had rationalized that she’d probably never been able to hold a boyfriend because of the depression hovering over her head like a dark cloud half the year. It made sense now, because Leora hadn’t been a happy person when she’d lived where the weather was dreary and cold.

Leora had met a few single Amish men over the past year, but none lived in Sarasota full-time. They would come and go during the winter months, and most were either married or had steady girlfriends.

I must learn to be content to live here and find enjoyable and meaningful things to do on my own or with a friend, Leora reminded

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herself. *It's the only way I'll ever be truly happy.*

She looked up, shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun. *Lord, help me to be satisfied, and please give my life some special meaning.*



While working at a table behind a glass enclosure inside the bakery the following day, Leora had a hard time concentrating on her task. Yesterday's nap on the lanai had left her with a painful sunburn on her arms, legs, and face, but she had no one to blame but herself. She shouldn't have lain there as long as she did, and she couldn't allow the burning pain to stop her from doing her best work today.

Leora refocused, determined to put her full attention on adding the final touches to a wedding cake someone had ordered two days ago. She'd frosted all three layers of the cake with a pale blue frosting, and each layer was to be decorated with edible seashells. The candy shells weren't hard to make, and the molds she had used were shaped like different types of shells. Leora's favorites resembled a large starfish, some two-inch scallops, and a small Florida sand dollar. The nice thing about making the sugar seashells was that they could be done up ahead of time. Once hardened and removed from the mold, they would stay fresh at room temperature for up to a week. The ones she would put on this wedding cake had been made two days ago.

Leora pursed her lips as she took a step back and studied her creation. *If I were getting married, I'd want a lovely seashell cake like this one. The theme of the cake goes well with the life I live here in Florida, where I can go to the beach and look for shells on my days off from work.*

Her brows furrowed. *It's sad to think about, but as long as I choose to remain here in Sarasota, there will be no wedding cake for me, with or without seashells. Even if I moved back to Indiana, where I'd have to deal with SAD and the gray winter days again, it's doubtful that any*

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man would choose me. After all, who would want a wife who struggles with depression when the seasons change and then feels hopeless and guilty? Every family that came into the restaurant and walked past or came up to the checkout counter at the bakery was a reminder that Leora was a single Amish woman who most likely would never have a husband. It was hard to admit that during the years she'd lived in Indiana, she had never had a serious boyfriend.

A young mother, holding a baby, stepped up to the glass enclosure. "That is absolutely beautiful." The woman pointed to the seashell cake. "I wish I could have had something like that at my wedding reception two years ago." She smiled at Leora. "You're very talented to have created something so extraordinary."

"Thank you." Leora's warm cheeks grew hotter. She'd never been sure how to respond when receiving a compliment. She had been taught at an early age to be humble and not brag. Of course, Leora wasn't bragging right now; she just needed to learn how to accept a compliment graciously.

"You must enjoy cake decorating, because you certainly have a knack for it." The young woman shifted her infant so her other arm was carrying the weight of the child.

Oh, how she longed to have a child of her own. Leora pushed away the sudden feeling of jealousy. "How old is your baby?" she asked.

"She's one month today."

"What is her name?"

"Abigail. It was the name of my husband's grandmother."

"It's a beautiful name, and so is she." Leora could hardly take her eyes off the child.

"Guess I'd better move on," the woman said. "If I stand here much longer, I'll be tempted to order a cake, pie, or some doughnuts." She gave a light laugh. "I gained too much weight when I was

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carrying Abigail, so now I'm watching my sugar and carb intake."

Leora smiled. "It was nice talking with you. I hope you have a good rest of the day."

"You too."

Leora watched the woman walk away and then reminded herself to resume work on the cake. It wouldn't do to get behind on this, because she had a few other cakes to decorate yet today.

Leora's friend Karen stepped up to her and held out a credit card. "Did you by any chance see who laid this card on the counter over there?" She gestured to the section where doughnuts and other pastries were sold. "There are no customers over there now, but I found it a few seconds ago."

Leora shook her head. "My attention's been on decorating the seashell cake. Oh, and I visited for a bit with a young woman holding a baby. She seemed interested in the cake I was working on, but I'm sure I would have noticed if she'd laid a credit card down."

"Hmm. . ." Karen held the card up close to Leora and pointed. "If someone by the name of John Miller comes looking for it, would you please send him over to my checkout counter?"

Leora glanced at the card and nodded. "Sure thing. John Miller. I'll try to remember that name."



Chapter 2

John Miller took a seat in one of the wooden outdoor rocking chairs on the front porch of the Der Dutchman restaurant. With wallet in hand, he began thumbing through the separations, searching desperately for his credit card. *That's really strange. I thought I'd put it in here after paying for my doughnuts.* John rubbed his sweaty palm on his pant leg and took a few deep breaths in an effort to calm himself. The last thing he needed was for someone to get ahold of his card and start charging things. After John had eaten breakfast in the restaurant this morning, he'd gone over to the bakery section, eager to try some of the chocolate-covered doughnuts that were on sale today. Maybe in his eagerness he'd dropped the card.

He glanced at the box of pastries in his lap and frowned. The loss of his credit card had snatched John's appetite for doughnuts or anything else. *I need to go back inside,* he told himself, rising from the chair. *Maybe I left it on the checkout counter or lost the card on the floor. If so, someone may have picked it up.* If that should be the case, John hoped the person hadn't walked out of the restaurant with his card in their wallet.

When John entered the building, he turned to the right and headed straight for the bakery counter. As luck would have it, there

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were at least ten people in line ahead of him. He glanced around the floor where he stood but saw no sign of his credit card. He figured if he had dropped it, the card could have been somewhere between here and the counter.

He flexed his fingers repeatedly, then reached up with his free hand to rub the back of his neck. If there was one thing John disliked, it was waiting. Although he'd always been patient when it came to business matters, he'd never liked having to wait in line at the supermarket or any other place where there was a checkout counter.

John resisted the temptation to tap his foot as he gripped the box of doughnuts. He strained to see around the people in front of him, hoping for a glimpse of the counter where he'd paid for the treat. No such luck. There were too many people bobbing their heads this way and that as they spoke to those who were with them or told their children to stop asking for things.

John glanced to his left, where a sign that read **CAKES** had been suspended from the ceiling near a glass display case. He craned his head a bit and noticed a pretty Amish woman behind a table decorating a cake. He figured it must be a tedious job and took a lot of skill with a steady hand, not to mention patience. *Maybe once I'm able to talk to the woman at the cash register, I'll walk over there and see what kind of cake that Amish woman is working on. From where I stand, it looks like it's gonna be a nice one.*

John stood rigidly in line for several more minutes until the people in front of him finally dispersed and it became his turn. "Hello. My name is John Miller. I was here a while ago and bought some chocolate doughnuts," he said to the blond-haired Amish woman behind the cash register. "I paid with my credit card, but when I stepped outside, I realized that it wasn't in my wallet. I couldn't figure out what had happened to it, so I came back here,

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hoping I may have laid it on the counter and forgotten to put it back in my wallet.” He placed the box of doughnuts on the counter, thinking the cashier might remember who he was.

She smiled and gave a nod. “Yes, John, I remember you, and I have the credit card you left on the counter. I was hoping you would come back for it.”

He released a huge sigh when she handed him the card. “Thank you so much. I’m real glad you kept it here for me. I probably should have paid for the doughnuts with cash, but I use the card whenever I can because I acquire train points with it.”

“Did you come here by train?”

“Just as far as Tampa, since passenger trains don’t stop in Sarasota. When I arrived at the station in Tampa, a driver I’d hired was waiting to bring me here.”

“Where are you from?” she asked.

“Clare, Michigan.”

“You’re a ways from home then. Did your family come with you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not married. It was actually my folks’ idea that I come spend a few months here because I. . .” John stopped talking when he looked back and realized that another line had formed behind him. He slipped the credit card in his wallet, picked up the box of doughnuts, and said, “Thanks again,” before walking away. With no thought of the cake he had wanted to look at, John headed out of the restaurant and hurried across the street when the light indicated it was safe for pedestrians to walk. John’s appetite for something sweet returned as quickly as it had disappeared. Now the only thing on his mind was getting back to the house he’d rented in Pinecraft. He looked forward to sitting down with a glass of cold milk and one or two of those chocolate-covered doughnuts.

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“John Miller came in, and I gave him his card,” Karen said when she approached Leora before heading to a table in the restaurant for her lunch break.

Leora pulled her attention away from the cake she’d been putting last-minute details on. “Oh, you mean the man who lost his credit card?”

“Jah, and needless to say, he seemed quite relieved.”

“I can imagine. I’d be relieved too if I’d lost my card and someone had found it.”

“John seemed like a nice man. He’s from Michigan, and he’s not married.”

“Were you hoping he might ask you out?” Leora gave her friend’s arm a little poke.

Karen’s cheeks reddened. “Of course not, silly. You know I’ve been seeing Ken Yoder. John looked to be about your age, though, so I was thinking maybe you might be interested in him.”

Leora blinked rapidly, and her mouth slackened. “Jah, right. I don’t even know the man, and I doubt he would be interested in someone like me, even if he were to come into the bakery again.”

“Oh, he’ll be back in, all right. That fellow has a thing for chocolate doughnuts, which I’m sure is why he’d bought a dozen of them.”

“Be that as it may, even if he came to the bakery counter every single day, it’s not likely he’d come over here by the cakes or take an interest in me.”

“You never know.” Karen grinned. “I didn’t think Ken would be interested in me, either, but as you know, we’ve been going out regularly for the past month.”

“Well, go enjoy your lunch,” Leora said without commenting on her friend’s last statement.

“What about you? Isn’t it about time for your lunch break?”

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“Not for another thirty minutes.” Leora pointed to the seashell cake. “In the meantime, I need to finish up with this.”

Karen gave a nod. “It sure is beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it. If I were ever to get married, I’d want my wedding cake to look just like this one.” Leora’s posture slackened a bit. “But that’s never going to happen.”

“Don’t be so sure. You never know what God has planned for your life.”

Leora gave a brief shrug. There was no point in talking about this or getting her hopes up about the possibility of getting married. She reminded herself once more to be content.



John entered the small house he had rented for the next two months, and set his box of doughnuts on the kitchen table. He’d arrived in Pinecraft yesterday afternoon and eaten supper at Yoder’s Restaurant, located a few blocks from his rental on Estrada Street. Der Dutchman was a little farther from his place, but John hadn’t minded the walk there. This afternoon he planned to rent a bike from one of several places right here in the village of Pinecraft. It would be a lot easier to get around, and he could go more places peddling a bicycle than on foot. Besides, he’d heard about the Legacy Trail that ran from Sarasota all the way to Venice, and he was eager to do some exploring. Perhaps he would stay local today and begin his adventures tomorrow.

“But not right now,” John said aloud. “I’m gonna have one of those tasty-looking doughnuts and sit outside for a while to enjoy the warmth of the sun.”



At four o’clock that afternoon, John left the bike shop on Kruppa Avenue, satisfied that he’d made a good choice with the ten-speed

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bicycle he had chosen to rent. There'd been many other choices, including three-wheelers and e-bikes, but he'd picked what he thought would work best for him. John figured the best part of riding a bike was the exercise it provided while pedaling. An electric bicycle might get him places sooner—some going as fast as thirty miles per hour, but he couldn't think of anywhere he needed to be that required getting there quickly. Besides, riding an electric bike had nothing to do with exercise and everything to do with speed. If John was going to see the sights in Sarasota during the time he would be here, he preferred to do it at a leisurely pace so he could enjoy some interesting scenery along the way.

Halfway up the street, John caught sight of an Amish woman walking at a brisk pace. He slowed his bike and took a second look. *Could that be the same woman I saw decorating a cake at Der Dutchman bakery this morning?* John had wanted to walk over to the cake section in the bakery and take a look, but after getting his credit card back, he'd forgotten all about his curiosity over what the cake she'd been decorating looked like.

John applied the brake and sat watching the petite woman as she approached a white house with maroon trim and slowed her steps. He was tempted to go across the street and ask if she worked at the bakery, but that would be too bold, and it wasn't the kind of thing John would normally do. He'd always been kind of shy around women he didn't know—especially if they had a pretty face. *Do I go on over there or keep riding in the direction of Estrada Street?* John asked himself. *If I stopped to talk to her and she's not the same woman who works at the bakery, I'd feel pretty foolish.* He clenched his handlebars and argued with himself. *Do I or don't I? And if I did go over there, what exactly would I say? Hello, my name's John Miller, and I was wondering if it was you I saw decorating a cake at the bakery this morning.*

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Then another thought popped into John's head. *What if she's married and her husband came out of the house and saw me talking to her? It probably wouldn't go over too well—especially if he was the jealous type.*

A horn tooted from behind, and John nearly jumped off his bicycle seat. *Guess that's what I get for stoppin' in the middle of the road.* He moved his bike to one side and glanced across the street again, in time to see the Amish woman go into a house. John wasn't about to go over there and knock on her door, so he started pedaling again and soon turned off Kruppa Avenue. *Guess if I'm really that curious about whether she was the same person I saw decorating a cake, I'd better plan another trip to Der Dutchman. In fact, I think I'll go there for breakfast again tomorrow and stop over at the bakery after I finish eating.*