

The  
*Prayer*  
JARS  
Trilogy



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JARS  
Trilogy

3 AMISH ROMANCES FROM A  
*New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WANDA E.  
BRUNSTETTER



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Printed in the United States of America.

The  
Hope  
JAR  
L



# *Dedication*

To Dr. Wilkinson and Dr. Spates, who, through their wisdom  
and caring attitudes, offer their patients hope.

*Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him,  
upon them that hope in his mercy.*

PSALM 33:18



# Prologue

*Newark, New Jersey*

Tears streamed down Sara Murray's face as she sat on the living-room floor, going through another box of her mother's things. Mama had passed away two weeks ago after a short three-month battle with colon cancer. By the time she'd been diagnosed and treatment had begun, things were more advanced than anyone had suspected. It shook Sara to the core how quickly it all happened. Her mother never complained of any pain she might have had. When she started feeling under the weather, she made an appointment with the doctor, figuring it was only a virus.

The agony of losing her mother was raw, and the hurt so deep Sara felt as if she were drowning in a sea of tears. She couldn't help feeling bitter. At forty-three, Mama was too young to die. And Sara, who had just turned twenty-four, was too young to lose her mother.

The task of sorting through everything in the boxes was difficult to endure, but many of the items brought back happy memories. Sara felt grateful her stepfather had let her go through Mama's personal things, saying she could take whatever she wanted.

Among the items Sara found first was a pretty scarf she had given Mama on her birthday last year. Sara had no idea then that it would be her mother's final birthday celebration.

She lifted the silky blue scarf, with little designs of black scattered throughout, and stretched the material out, remembering how pretty her mother looked wearing it around her neck. Even though Mama had several other scarves, for some reason she loved

this one the most and seldom wore the other ones. She found so many different ways to wear the scarf and matched it with many of the outfits she wore, sometimes adding a pretty pin to hold the lovely item in place.

Inhaling deeply and pressing the silkiness against her face, Sara breathed in the fragrance of her mother's lily-scented perfume. If she closed her eyes, it almost seemed as if Mama was sitting right there beside her. Did her mother suspect when Sara gave her the scarf that it would be her last birthday? There were so many unanswered questions. *Was Mama partial to the blue-and-black scarf because I gave it to her?*

Gulping in air and swallowing past the lump in her throat, Sara couldn't hold back her tears any more than she could all the others she had shed since her mother's death. Watching Mama slip away so fast had been hard, but the absence of her presence was like nothing she'd ever dealt with before.

"Oh Mama," Sara whispered, feeling more alone than ever. "I miss you so much. Why did you have to die?" She looked upward. "If there is a God, why did You take my mother?"

Making it through the viewing and funeral service had seemed almost surreal—she felt nothing. Going through her mother's things, however, brought back the agony of her loss tenfold.

After several minutes, Sara's sobbing lessened, and she pulled herself together, hiccupping a few times. Then she tied the scarf loosely around her neck.

"Score one for Dean Murray," Sara muttered, blowing her nose into a tissue she pulled from her shirt pocket. At least Dean realized Sara could never part with some of her mother's belongings, like this simple but lovely scarf.

For the first six years of Sara's life, it had been just her and Mama. Then Dean entered the picture, and everything changed. He and Mama got married, and two years later Sara ended up with a little brother. She'd never felt close to Dean, and when a baby came along, things got worse. Kenny was the apple of his daddy's eye and could do no wrong. Even now, Dean gave in to

his son's every whim.

Sara bit her lip, drawing blood, as she reflected on the many times she'd questioned Mama about her biological father. *Who was he, where did he live, and how come Mama refused to talk about him?* Instead of providing answers to Sara's questions, her mother would be evasive and change the subject. Now that Mama was dead, it was doubtful that Sara would ever know the truth of her heritage or find out who her real father was.

Sara pulled another box across the room and took a seat on the couch. She still hadn't found the Bible Mama told her about before she died and didn't know if it was in any of the boxes Dean had filled with his wife's personal items. For all Sara knew, the Bible Mama spoke of had been thrown out. If Sara understood her mother's dying words right, there was a letter inside the Bible that she'd written to Sara.

*But it doesn't make sense. If Mama wanted me to know something, why didn't she tell me in person, instead of writing a letter?*

Sara reached into the box and pulled out two photo albums, filled with pictures of her when she was a baby. Some of the photos had Mama in them too. She looked so pretty with her long auburn hair.

*Not like mine.* Sara touched her long wavy hair. *I wonder if my father's hair was also blond.*

After flipping through the albums, she noticed an envelope with more photos inside. These were several recent pictures, some from last year. Shuffling through a few of them, Sara stopped at one in particular that had been taken on her mother's birthday. It was funny how a single photo could take you back to the exact moment it had been snapped.

Sara smiled, looking at her mother, posing like a model with the new blue-and-black scarf around her neck. She remembered her own words exactly, asking Mama to *"pose pretty for the camera,"* right after she opened the gift bag with the scarf tucked neatly inside.

Sara wiped her nose as she continued to look at other photos.

Most of the pictures had the date they were taken, embedded right into the photo. On some of the others, her mother had written the dates on the back. “I’ll have to buy more albums, so I can arrange these other pictures in order.” Sara swiped at a few more tears trickling down her cheeks. Then she returned to the box and took out a small, velvet-lined container. Nothing but costume jewelry in there, so she set it aside. Underneath that were the scarves Mama used to wear regularly before receiving the one from Sara.

Sara had hoped Dean would have given her Mama’s wedding ring. What was he planning to do with it anyway? Perhaps he was saving it to give to his son’s future wife someday.

She swallowed against the thickening in her throat. If she weren’t in the middle of taking business classes at her local community college, she’d consider leaving town. With Mama gone, why should she stay?

Sara thought about her part-time job at a local dentist’s office. She enjoyed working there when she wasn’t in school, but being a receptionist wasn’t something she wanted to do for the rest of her life.

Sara pulled the other miscellaneous scarves out of the box and gasped. Hiding underneath was a Bible. With trembling fingers, she lifted it out and held it against her chest. Why had she never seen this before?

Sara began thumbing through the pages, until she spotted an envelope tucked between the books of Matthew and Mark. She tore it open and read her mother’s letter out loud.

*“Dear Sara,*

*If you are reading this letter, it’s because I am gone. There aren’t enough words to say how much you mean to me. And with what you are about to read, please know I was never ashamed of you. The actions I chose to take when I was old enough to know better are where my guilt lies. You, my sweet daughter, are*

*special. Don't ever forget that.*

*After all the years you have asked about your heritage and I've refused to reveal anything, I now want you to know the truth. My maiden name was Lapp. I changed it after I left home when I was eighteen.*

*My parents, Willis and Mary Ruth, live in Strasburg, Pennsylvania, and here is their address. Hopefully, someday you'll get the chance to meet them. If you do, please tell my mom and dad that I love them and always have. Tell them I'm sorry for all the things I said and did to hurt my family before I ran away from home all those years ago.*

*Please let your grandparents know I was too ashamed to tell them about you. I didn't know what they would think of me, being unmarried and pregnant.*

*I am telling you this now because you have the right to get to know them, and they you. I hope and pray someday you will make peace with Dean and your brother. While my husband may not have been the perfect father figure for you, he has been a good provider, and did the best he could.*

*All my love,  
Mama"*

Sara nearly choked on the sob rising in her throat. *Oh Mama, why couldn't you have told me all this sooner? If you really wanted me to know my grandparents, then why'd you wait till now? We could have visited them together.*

She read her mother's letter several more times before setting it aside. While Mama had written her parents' address on the back of the letter, there was no phone number included. Surely they must have a phone.

As Sara held the letter close to her heart, she made a decision.

She would write to Willis and Mary Ruth Lapp, saying she'd like to come in June, but it might not be until July 5th or after because she had summer classes to finish. If they wanted to see her, she would pay them a visit, and maybe make the trip by bus as far as Philadelphia. Perhaps then she would learn the identity of her real father.

# Chapter 1

*One week later  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

Michelle Taylor stared at the contents of her wallet and groaned. She barely had enough money to buy groceries this week, much less pay the rent that was due five days ago. She'd lost her job at a local coffee shop a month ago and hadn't been able to find another position. What little money she had saved went to pay last month's rent. Soon Mr. Henson would be hounding her for June's rent, and if she didn't come through, he'd probably throw her out in the street, like he had the last tenant.

Michelle looked around her shabby studio apartment. It came fully furnished but didn't include more than the basics—a few dishes and cooking utensils, a small kitchen table with two chairs, a well-used sofa, and a bed that pulled down from the wall. In the cramped kitchen area, peeling linoleum held little appeal, nor did the water-stained ceiling. The vinyl on the wall near the kitchen table had been ripped, and the chipped cabinet doors where she kept her canned goods hung askew. The rust-stained sink and crooked blinds on the window completed the gloomy picture in this room, not to mention the hum of the old refrigerator that just about drove her batty.

Then there was the pathetic bathroom. The toilet ran unless she shook the handle a couple of times. Chipped grout, blackened in places with sickening mold, made the faded tile behind the tub/shower combination anything but pleasing. Hard water stains covered the shower door, and some of the tiles on the floor had begun to buckle. The sink faucet dripped constantly, even though

Michelle had tried several times to fix it—a job her landlord should have taken care of. There was nothing high class about this dwelling, but at least it gave Michelle a roof over her head—same as it did for the rest of the building’s occupants. No one in this building was high class, most certainly not Michelle.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, she moved from the kitchen area and sank to the outdated, black, imitation-leather sofa. Leaning her head back, and using her fingertips, she massaged her throbbing forehead. *What I should do is get out of Philly and make a new start somewhere else. Guess I could go back to Ohio and see if Al and Sandy will take me in again. Course, it’s been so long they might have moved, or at the very least, taken in more foster kids, so they wouldn’t have room for an unwanted guest.*

Michelle hadn’t seen her foster parents since she graduated from high school and went out on her own six years ago. She hadn’t called or even sent a postcard to let them know where she was or how she was doing. “They probably wouldn’t care anyhow,” she muttered. “Truth be told, Sandy and Al were probably glad to get rid of me.”

Michelle squeezed her eyes shut, wincing as her headache worsened. *Shoulda kept my grades up in school. I may have had a chance at a college scholarship and might be workin’ at a decent job by now. Guess this is what I get for being a know-it-all and running off the minute I got out of high school.*

When Michelle left Columbus, she’d gone from town to town, taking whatever menial jobs she could find. When things went bad, or she ran low on money, she moved on, always searching—always hoping—wishing she could put down permanent roots. All Michelle had ever wanted was to feel loved and accepted—to feel like she truly belonged. Of course, it was only wishful thinking. At the rate things were going, she’d never have a place she could call “home” and mean it. It was doubtful Michelle would ever know what the love of a caring family was all about.

Her head jerked when someone pounded on the door. *Oh great. I bet that’s Mr. Henson, coming for the rent I don’t have. If I*

*don't answer, he'll think I'm not here and go away.* She sat perfectly still and didn't make a sound.

The pounding continued. "Michelle! Come on, sweetie, I know you're in there, so open this door."

Relieved that it wasn't Mr. Henson after all, she called, "Coming, Jerry."

Michelle jumped up and hurried across the room. Jerry had been kind of edgy when he came to see her last night, and she didn't want him to make a scene outside her door. A few times before when she'd refused to let him in because he'd been drinking too much, he'd become loud and boisterous. After some of the other tenants complained about the noise, the grumpy landlord warned her that she would have to leave if it happened again.

Another loud knock on the door, and Michelle jerked it open. "Said I was coming. Didn't you hear me through the paper-thin door?"

Jerry's eyelids lowered as he stepped inside and slammed the door shut. "Yeah, I heard ya." He reached out and pulled her close.

Michelle smelled the rotten-egg scent of beer on his breath as soon as he kissed her, and she nearly gagged. Michelle had never acquired a taste for alcohol or appreciated the smell of it. The same thing held true for cigarette smoke. It wasn't that she thought she was too good for those things. They just made her feel sick.

"How'd your day go?" Jerry held Michelle so close she could barely breathe. "Did ya find another job yet?"

"No, I did not. Nobody seems to be hiring right now." Michelle pulled on her shirt collar. "And if I don't find something soon, I'll be kicked out of this apartment building for not paying the rent." She didn't let on that Jerry's yelling outside her door could also get her kicked out. He wouldn't think twice about threatening the landlord.

Jerry released his hold on her and sauntered across the room to the nearly empty refrigerator. "Ya got any beer?"

"No, and I hardly have any food either. If my luck doesn't change soon, I could end up living on the streets with all the other

homeless people in this town.”

Jerry raked his fingers through the ends of his curly brown hair. It looked like he hadn't washed it in several days. “You ain't gonna end up on the streets, sweetie, 'cause I want ya to move in with me. I told you that last night, remember?”

Michelle did remember. How could she forget? After she'd declined his offer, they'd had a big argument that ended with Jerry grabbing her so tight, she'd been left with bruises on both of her wrists.

“Michelle, did ya hear what I said?” Eyes narrowing, he got right in her face.

She nodded. “I'm just thinking, is all.”

“Well, don't think too long. Just pack up your things and let's go. You'll be glad to say goodbye to this place.”

“I told you last night that I'm thinking about leaving town—at least for a while. I may go back to Columbus to see my foster parents.”

Jerry's brown eyes darkened as his nostrils flared. “And I said I don't want you to go anywhere but with me.” His features softened a bit. “I'd miss you, baby. And you'd miss me too. Ya know you would.”

Michelle twisted a strand of her long auburn hair around one finger. If she stayed in Philly and moved in with Jerry, he'd want more than she was ready to give him. They'd known each other less than a month, and even though Michelle was attracted to Jerry's good looks, his possessive nature worried her. Almost from the first night they'd met in a pool hall across town, he'd acted as if he owned Michelle. What worried her the most about Jerry, however, was his temper. In her early childhood years, she been the brunt of her parents' anger, until child services intervened and put Michelle and her brothers, Ernie and Jack, in foster care. Unfortunately, they had not all gone to the same home.

If a person could choose their parents, Michelle would certainly not have picked Herb and Ginny Taylor. Dad abused Mom physically and emotionally, and they both abused their kids. Michelle

could still see her father standing over her with his belt raised, an angry scowl on his face over something he'd accused her of doing. He hadn't aimed for any particular spot. The belt connected wherever it landed, on her legs, arms, and back. He'd treated the boys just as harshly, often smacking them around until bruises or angry welts appeared.

Their mother was no better. She often pulled Michelle's hair and lashed out in anger. It was usually not because of anything Michelle had done wrong, but rather because Mom was mad at her husband.

One time, when Michelle had defended Ernie for something he'd been unjustly accused of, Mom screamed at Michelle, "Shut your big mouth!" Then she'd grabbed Michelle around the neck and tried to choke her. Fortunately, little Jack started bawling really loud, and Mom came to her senses. She'd never apologized though—just made a few threats and sent Michelle to her room.

Michelle blinked when Jerry waved his hand in front of her face. "Hey, snap out of it. You're spacing out on me, babe. Now go pack up your things and let's get outa here before that money-hungry landlord of yours comes to pay you a visit."

Looking him steadily in the eyes, Michelle thrust out her chin, then vigorously shook her head. "I am not moving in with you, Jerry. So please stop asking."

He drew closer so that they were nose to nose. "You're my girl, and you'd better do as I say."

Michelle couldn't mistake his tone of agitation, and a familiar fear bubbled in her soul. She took a step back, biting the inside of her cheek. "I—I appreciate the offer, Jerry, but as I said before, I'm not ready to move in with you." She spoke slowly and kept her voice low, hoping it would calm him.

"Well, ya wanna know what I think, sugar? I think you don't know what ya want."

"Yes I do, Jerry, and it. . .it's not you." Michelle didn't know where her courage came from, but she felt a little braver.

"What do you mean, it's not me? We've been together almost

every night since we first met.” His words slurred as he grabbed Michelle’s shoulders and gave her a cruel shake.

“Stop it! You’re hurting me.” She pushed him back.

He sneered at her. “Ya think this hurts? If you leave me, Michelle, you’ll hurt even more. You know you love me, babe.”

Michelle swallowed against the bile rising in her throat. She wanted Jerry to leave but feared his reaction if she ordered him to go.

“Come here and give me some love.” Jerry grabbed her again, and before she could react, he kissed her neck roughly, while holding her arms tightly behind her back. His lips moved from Michelle’s neck to her mouth, and then he pushed her down on the couch. “You’re mine. And don’t you ever forget it.”

Michelle fought against Jerry’s brute strength, and when he wouldn’t let her up, she bit his arm.

“Why, you little—” He cursed and slapped Michelle’s face so hard her head jerked back.

She cried out and somehow managed to wiggle out from under him and off the couch. “If you don’t leave right now, I’ll scream at the top of my lungs for someone to call the cops. And they will too. You can count on it.”

Jerry leapt off the couch and, panting heavily, gave her another hard slap, right where he’d hit her before. Whirling around, he stomped across the room and out the door, slamming it behind him.

Gasping for breath, Michelle ran to the door and bolted it shut. She had to get out of here—not just because she had no money to pay the rent, but to escape the man she’d foolishly gotten involved with.

She dashed to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Her hand immediately went to the red mark quite visible on her face. “Ouch. I do not deserve this kind of treatment—not from Jerry or anyone.”

Wincing, Michelle ran some cool water on a washcloth and dabbed it on the red, stinging skin.

Today was not the first time Jerry had physically abused her,

and if she stayed in Philadelphia and kept seeing him, Michelle knew it wouldn't be the last.



Michelle awoke with a pounding headache. After Jerry left last night she'd had a hard time getting to sleep. Was he right? Should she stay and move in with him? Would that be the sensible thing to do? It would certainly take care of her financial problems.

Michelle shook her head. *What am I thinking? He's a jerk. I need to get away from him now. If I don't, I could end up in an abusive relationship for the rest of my life.*

She pulled herself out of bed and plodded across the room. Staring out the window at the depressing scene, Michelle weighed her options. She was tired of the unexciting view that greeted her every day. Seeing all the buildings surrounding her apartment made her feel closed in. And what little bit of sky she could actually see was dismal, just like her mood. She could either stay here in Philly and keep searching for another job, or get out of town and start over someplace else. One thing was sure: she had to break things off with Jerry. He was a loser and, short of a miracle, he would never treat her with love and respect.

While brushing her teeth, Michelle glanced in the cracked mirror. At least there weren't any marks left where she'd been slapped, and Jerry hadn't loosened any of her teeth. Dad had done that once to Mom, and they'd been too poor to go to the dentist.

Shaking her negative thoughts aside, Michelle got dressed and went to the kitchen to fix breakfast. She'd no more than taken out a bowl for cold cereal when a knock sounded on the door.

"Hey babe, let me in. I have somethin' for you."

Michelle groaned inwardly. Jerry was back. She figured if she didn't open the door, he'd keep knocking and wake the whole apartment complex, including her landlord.

She opened the door a crack, but kept the chain bolted. "What do you want, Jerry?"

"Came to say I'm sorry for last night." He held a pink carnation

in his hand. “I wanna start over, darlin’. I promise never to hit you again.”

*Yeah, right.* Michelle did not have to think about his offer very long. She didn’t trust him not to hit her again. She’d had enough abuse when she was growing up. After hearing the same old assurances from her parents that they were sorry and it wouldn’t happen again, Michelle knew good and well that Jerry would never keep the promise he’d just made.

“Sorry, Jerry, I’m not interested in starting over.” Michelle shut the door in his face.

“You’ll change your mind when you’ve had a chance to think things over,” he called through the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow, and we can talk about this again.”

“You can come back if you want, but I won’t be here,” Michelle mumbled under her breath, as she heard his footsteps fading away. She lifted a hand to her still-tender cheek. “You’ll never do this to me again. Don’t know where I’m headed, but I’m gettin’ out of here tomorrow, one way or the other.”