

THE WAY TO A MAN'S HEART

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HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ellis, Mary

The way to a man's heart / Mary Ellis.

p. cm.—(The Miller Family series ; bk. 3)

ISBN 978-0-7369-2734-5 (pbk.)

1. Amish—Fiction. 2. Holmes County (Ohio)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3626.E36W38 2010

813'.6—dc22

2009053684

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Printed in the United States of America

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 / RDM-NI/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



April

As Leah untied the gelding and climbed into the buggy, she caught the heady scent of honeysuckle—her favorite flower and one of the few that didn't cause a fit of sneezing. She inhaled deeply to savor the fragrance of the perfect spring day. The cloudless blue sky, plenty of sunshine, and not even a trace of humidity added to her good mood. Eighteen-year-old Leah Miller was a successful businesswoman—people came from all around the county to buy her pies. They could purchase a slice in the basement cafeteria of the auction barn or a whole pie in the ground floor grocery store.

For the past four years she had tweaked her recipes until every one of them was a crowd-pleaser. The cafeteria manager had her baking popular standbys such as Dutch Apple, peach, and coconut cream while still inventing new concoctions to try out on the clientele. Maybe the red current pie and the pineapple cream didn't exactly have folk begging for seconds, but Leah knew she had found her calling in life. Her sister, Emma, and Aunt Hannah had their smelly, wool-producing sheep, and *mamm* enjoyed sewing on her good days, but Leah's place was in the kitchen. Ten bushels of beets to blanch and can, along with twenty baskets of apples to peel, core, and mince into applesauce? No problem. She would make short work of the task, no matter how large.

And the farther she stayed away from dander-ridden critters or pollen-laden meadows the better. Now that her mother took new medications for her arthritis, the two of them could handle the household tasks—which was a good thing, as Emma had married James more than two years ago and moved to his family’s farm in Charm.

With her love of baking and the drive to succeed, it hadn’t taken long for Leah to replace her coffee can of cash with an account at the bank. With her own savings passbook, commercial-grade baking pans, and a reputation for the best-tasting pies in the Mount Hope auction barn, life was good. It was so satisfying she often had to remind herself not to grow too proud or bigheaded.

As Leah left the cafeteria with her payment tucked in her purse, she noticed that a “road closed” detour sign had been put up on the route she usually took home. The highway patrol often closed stretches of road when oversized farming machinery was being moved to new locations. But with weather as nice as this, she didn’t even lift an eyebrow. Slapping the reins against the horse’s back, she turned down the township road running diagonally from town that would eventually take her the roundabout way home. Leah was mentally listing the chores she needed to do before supper when the sound of heavy construction grabbed her attention.

“Whoa,” she called to Jack. As she focused on the commotion she began to cough and sneeze. Bulldozers had raised a thick cloud of dust in a partially paved parking lot. Backhoes were loading debris into dump trucks, while workers in hard hats scurried around picking up tools and loading sawhorses into pickups. They appeared to have finished for the day and were cleaning up the site.

“The old train cars,” she murmured to the family buggy horse. The gelding picked up his ears but offered no comment. Leah was also struck speechless. She stared at the once ramshackle passenger car and rusty caboose she’d admired nearly four years ago. Leah had entertained such lofty dreams back then but had soon forgotten her impractical notions. She had been so busy with household chores and

pie baking that she'd forgotten about the abandoned train cars at the edge of town.

But someone else had recognized potential among the knee-high weeds and broken bottles. A person with vision—and deep pockets—had turned the rundown relic into a vision of bright enamel paint, new wooden shutters, and flower boxes of red geraniums and white petunias. The window glass had been replaced and lacy curtains fluttered in the breeze. A trellis of climbing morning glories flanked the entryway, while a neon-lit sign proclaimed the obvious: Diner.

It was as though they had read my mind...but I certainly would've picked a more imaginative name.

A snort from Jack broke her concentration. He wanted the bucket of oats waiting at home, but Leah needed to see more of the work in progress. She parked at the edge of the property and tied the reins to a fencepost. As she stared at the restaurant, anticipation coursed through her veins as if the establishment were hers. After the last workers left the lot, honking horns and hollering goodbyes, Leah inched closer until she stood in front of the shiny front door. Unfortunately, the train cars had been elevated with concrete piers, making peeking into windows impossible.

She noticed only two vehicles remained in the parking lot as she crept around to the back of the train. No fancy shutters or pretty flowers decorated this side, but a large shipping container had been left underneath one window. Without a moment's hesitation, Leah climbed onto the crate and peered into the passenger car, willing herself not to sneeze from the dust.

Two women in long pastel dresses and small white prayer *kapps* stood facing each other. Leah knew from their style of dress that they were Mennonite. Both looked to be in their early thirties and neither woman was smiling.

"No, April," said the taller of the two. "I told you yesterday I couldn't stay late today. Paul wants his supper on time for a change, and I won't

have him watching the kids after school. That's my job." She lifted her chin defiantly.

"But, May, we're supposed to open in three days. I can't unpack and wash everything by myself. I still need to write up my food order and start shopping. How can I bring supplies into such chaos?" Her hand gestured at the overflowing boxes of dishes and glassware on the floor. Desperation to the point of hysteria edged her words. "You promised to help me when I signed the lease."

May released a sigh commensurate with bearing the weight of the world. "I have helped you every single day but the Lord's day. My house is a mess, the laundry sits in piles, I still don't have all my garden seeds planted, and Paul is tired of his dinner being late."

"Paul's tired?" April wailed. "I haven't slept more than four hours a night since the remodeling began. My vegetable patch is still buried beneath a groundcover of weeds and last year's leaves. And my husband barely speaks to me." Her voice rose as shrill as a hawk's cry.

Leah knew better than to eavesdrop on their argument, but if she climbed down now she might be discovered. The women had moved closer to the open window as they faced off like circling barnyard roosters. She tried not to breathe deeply as dust settled in the parking lot.

"This was your bright idea, not mine!" May snapped. "I said I would lend a hand and I have, but I made no lifetime commitment to your pipe dream. I doubt very much that Amish and Mennonite people will be flocking here in droves. Most folk pack a cooler when they come to town on business to save money. And if you price your menu too cheaply, you'll lose every cent of the money Dad loaned for start-up capital."

The shorter woman crossed her arms over her wrinkled dress. "Then I would think you'd be more willing to protect his investment."

"I have painted and caulked, scraped and sanded. I've sewn curtains and donated hours of my time. I helped you lift and carry in those heavy booths till my back nearly broke. And I've encouraged

you, April, despite my opinion you were biting off more than you could chew." A hint of sympathy crept into her voice.

Time seemed to suspend as Leah felt a wave of heat radiating from the diner's interior.

"I know you have and I am truly grateful. If I live to be a hundred years old, I'll still be in your debt, but can't you stay a few more weeks till I'm up and running? Maybe until the word spreads that I'm open for business?" April placed a tentative hand on her sister's arm.

Even Leah, knowing nothing about these women beyond this conversation, knew asking for a few more "weeks" was a bad idea.

Any compassion in May's face drained away. As though plucking a piece of lint from her skirt, she removed April's hand. "You will never change, not as long as people keep enabling you. I will stay a couple more days to help you open, but that's it. After that, you'll not get another minute of my time. You must sink or swim on your own. And if you go belly-up, maybe Dad will stop bankrolling your hair-brained schemes and throwing away his money." She looked as though she might say more, but at that moment Leah's luck ran out.

Without warning the slat-board packing crate gave way with a splintering crash. Leah tried to grab the windowsill but she toppled backward, landing on her backside in the weeds without an ounce of dignity.

"Oh, great." May's voice carried through the open window. "Sounds like a family of rats has moved in before your first customer arrives. I'm going home!" The sound of her words faded until the front door slammed with finality.

As Leah clumsily rose to her feet and brushed off her clothes, she heard a squeaky screen being raised above her head. "Are you okay? What are you doing out there?" A woman's head appeared in the opening.

Two honest, direct questions, yet Leah was stymied. "Ah, well," she stammered and then opted for the truth. "I spotted this rundown train years ago and noticed something going on today. I was curious

so I decided to peek inside, not knowing anybody was still here.” She shook the remaining dead leaves from her skirt. “I thought everyone had gone home. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to spy on you.” Shame brought a rush of color into her face.

The woman’s perplexed expression changed into a grin. “No harm done. My sister and I argue all the time. Business as usual. Come inside and have a look. See if you like what I’ve done.” She glanced down at the broken crate. “Only don’t trip over anything. I’m not insured yet.” She lowered the screen and closed the window.

Leah had no choice but to walk around the train, feeling sheepish.

In a moment the front door was flung open. “Come in. Don’t be shy. I’m April Lambright and this is my diner. Well, it’s mine along with the bank and my landlord, but the business is all mine.” Her dazzling smile turned her rather plain features pretty.

Leah stepped inside to cluttered disarray. Booths had been installed, but only half the tables had been set on their pedestals. Boxes, crates, and shopping bags were everywhere, while the light fixtures hung at odd angles on their electrical cords. An eight-burner commercial stove blocked the doorway to the caboose. Piles of construction debris made walking anywhere hazardous. But Leah Miller fell in love with the place. A new terra-cotta tile floor had been installed, the walls were painted sunny yellow, and an old-fashioned counter lined one side of the train car with bright red upholstered stools. When the restoration was complete, it would look modern and yet nostalgic at the same time.

“Oh, my goodness,” she whispered in awe.

“Is that a good ‘oh, my goodness’ or a bad?” April asked, studying her curiously. “And do you have a name, young lady?”

Leah snapped back from her perusal. “Definitely a good, ma’am. And I’m Leah Miller from Winesburg. Pleased to meet you.”

“Since I spotted your buggy parked outside, I didn’t suppose you were from Cincinnati.” She laughed with good humor. “Are you Old Order?”

Leah felt her cheeks flush. “*Jah*, I’m Old Order. My *daed* is a deacon in our district.” She bent down to stack some spilled canned goods. “I always thought this place would make a great restaurant. When I was fourteen, I wanted to buy it myself.” She met April’s gaze, waiting to be laughed at. That was the reaction she’d usually received.

However, the woman merely nodded. “Do you like to cook? And bake? Most Amish gals do. I’m Mennonite if you haven’t figured that out. And that woman who stormed out of here is my sister May.”

“I love cooking! I bake most of the pies and pastries for the cafeteria in Mount Hope. They order at least a dozen every week.” Leah hoped that didn’t sound too prideful, but it was the truth.

April’s eyes grew round as saucers. “*You* bake those pies? Even the Chocolate Mousse Cream and the Dutch Apple-Walnut?” She stared at Leah as though waiting for a denial.

“Yes, ma’am. I made up both of those recipes. Have you tried them?”

“Many times, and my skirts fit tighter because of you, but stop calling me ma’am. I’m April. Ma’am makes me feel ancient, and I’m only twenty-eight. How old are you, Leah Miller?”

“Eighteen,” she answered as a dozen ideas darted through her head like minnows in a shallow stream. Even though the interior of the diner was growing oppressively hot and her scalp itched beneath her *kapp*, Leah stared at the restaurant owner with fascination.

April seemed to be pondering a conundrum because her forehead scrunched into creases and folds. “As you probably overheard, May has been my reluctant assistant, and she’s putting in her resignation after opening day.” She shook her head sorrowfully. “Can’t say I blame her. If I had known how much work and how expensive it would be to turn this dump into a diner, I never would have signed the lease and borrowed so much money. She’s right—I bit off more than I can chew.” She lowered herself to a step stool and cradled her chin with her hands. “I can’t get this place shipshape by myself, and I already paid for a newspaper ad advertising my grand opening.”

Leah spoke without hesitation. "I would be happy to help you set things up until you can find a replacement. I'll check with my mother, but I'm sure she can spare me for a few days."

April jumped to her feet. "That is wonderful! But what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Why don't I hire you to replace my sister? I know lots of Amish girls work before they get married. Believe me, May's pies can't hold a candle to yours." She blushed and then said, "But please don't ever repeat that."

"Hire me to do what? Clean up the place at closing time?" Leah thought she might faint on the spot.

Maybe because of the train's stuffy interior or all the dusty boxes, but Leah suddenly felt dizzy and lightheaded. The room began to tilt to the left. "April, could we step outside? It's hard to breathe with the windows closed."

"Of course. You look white as snow." April grabbed Leah's arm and led her down the steps.

Outside, Leah inhaled and exhaled several deep breaths. "Oh, that's better."

"I'd like to hire you as my assistant," April continued. "To do whatever needs doing—cooking, manning the lunch counter, and cleaning up when we're done. We would split duties down the middle." Her smile was so wide it revealed a gold-capped back molar.

In the fresh air and sunshine, Leah's head cleared as her excitement grew with leaps and bounds. "*Jah*, I'd love to work here very much! It would be my dream come true, but I can't accept the offer until I talk to my parents."

The owner shrugged. "No problem. If you decide to join me, let me know either tomorrow or the day after. Then we can set up a schedule for you."

"I won't work on the Sabbath," Leah said.

"Of course not. We're closed on Sundays."

"And no Mondays, because my *mamm* can't manage the laundry without me because of her arthritis."

"We'll be closed that day too, since not many people come to town on Mondays. Anyway, I have my own chores at home with a husband and kids to look after." April rocked back on her heels, deep in thought. "How about you work Wednesdays through Saturdays here at the diner? Then you'll be off on Sunday and Monday. I can manage Tuesdays here by myself—all the action is in Farmerstown at the livestock sale. On Tuesdays, I'll pay you to stay home baking the bread, pies, cakes, and cookies we'll need for the week. We will open at seven for breakfast and close after lunch—no supper. Our people usually start for home by three o'clock, and the *Englischers* can eat at the big tourist spot up the road."

Leah felt as though she might levitate off the floor. Impetuously, she threw her arms around April and squeezed, not considering proper boss/employee behavior. "*Danki*, that sounds perfect! I'll be back as soon as my parents give their permission." She released the hug.

April patted Leah's shoulder, laughing. "My, goodness. You're certainly more enthusiastic than my sister has been."

"April and May? What happened to June?" Leah asked.

"She lives in Baltic with her husband and five children. We have a brother named August too. We assume Mom spent too much time staring at the wall calendar while carrying us."

Leah wrapped her arms around herself. She knew she was going to like this woman. "We don't have a phone, so if it's all right with you, I'll just show up if they say I can." She took a step backward, eager to be on her way home.

April offered her hand to shake. "Just showing up sounds fine with me, Leah. I still remember that slice of Dutch Apple-Walnut pie I tasted, and that must have been more than a year ago. I'm glad you were nosy enough to peek in my window. Today is my lucky day."

Blushing, Leah shook the outstretched hand and murmured a

quick goodbye. She ran to her buggy and almost broke the reins trying to get them off the post. She couldn't wait to put the task of asking her parents behind her.

It was a good thing Jack knew all possible routes home because Leah's mind was already swimming with favorite recipes, lists of ingredients, and how to approach her father with the opportunity of a lifetime.



Matthew Miller thought there was nothing quite like the first warm day in April, with sunshine so bright it hurt your eyes, a cool breeze tickling the back of your neck, and birds singing from the tree-tops to bring music to your ears. Clover in the pasture was coming up thick and green for his favorite friends. Black flies would soon hatch to annoy man and beast alike, but today there wasn't a single thing to swat at. Matthew could certainly get used to days like these after the overcast skies of March. His teacher had once read a poem to the class about spring, but never being much of a bookworm he'd forgotten all but the pleasant memory. At nineteen, Matthew was living exactly the life he had planned.

His sixteen-year-old *bruder*, Henry, had finished school and possessed few aspirations other than farming. Henry loved to plow and disk even the hardest soil. He would plant seeds during downpours, round up cattle in a blizzard, and could pick sweet corn until his fingers seemed worn down to the knuckles. After chores he would curl up in the hammock with a glass of cider and a book about pirates or Civil War generals whenever Pa wasn't looking. That boy loved to read.

Matthew's vocation and great joy in life was four-legged and bushy-tailed, with long dark eyelashes and grass-stained teeth. From miniature ponies to Belgian draft horses, he loved anything equine. He'd once seen Clydesdales in a TV beer commercial at the home of their

English neighbors. He had been so mesmerized that Mr. Lee copied the commercial into a black machine, and Matthew had watched it over and over that summer as he helped Mr. Lee paint his house.

Now he didn't have to sneak around watching somebody's TV to see all the different breeds. His job at Macintosh Farms gave him access to the Arabians, saddlebreds, and Tennessee walkers of rich *Englischers*. He worked with racing quarter horses; Kentucky-born thoroughbreds; and standardbreds, the harness-racing trotters. Amish folk often bought this breed for their buggies once their racetrack days were finished. Four years ago Mr. Macintosh had hired Matthew on the spot after a short demonstration of his handling and bareback riding. Mr. Mac said he had the "gift"—an ability to get inside a horse's head and get it to do your bidding without breaking its spirit. Matthew didn't know much about that. He just knew the day he was promoted from exercise boy to assistant trainer had been the happiest day of his life.

And it would likely remain his happiest day forever because he couldn't seem to summon enough courage to take Martha Hostetler home from a Sunday singing. His big sister said if he weren't careful he would end up an old man with females named Quicksilver, Quiche, and Juniper for his sole company. Emma was probably right, but what girl would want to court someone with freckles and spiky red hair?

At least he now did more important things at work than muck out stalls, clean water troughs, and measure grain into feed buckets. He trained horses on the lunge rope, exercised some around the track, and assisted with foalings. It was such joy to watch God's hand at work. So wobbly and weak at birth, the colt would quickly gain a thousand pounds of strength and energy within the first two years. He used to fantasize about becoming a jockey and riding a thoroughbred in a real, all-out race. But because he weighed one hundred seventy pounds, some owners didn't want him astride even for training.

“Hey, Matty!” A voice pierced his reverie. “Stop daydreaming and give me a hand.”

“I’ll finish filling the stanchions and be right there,” Matthew called to Jeff Andrews, the trainer he apprenticed under.

At least the guy no longer referred to him as “Amish Boy.” It had been a long road to earn his respect. Andrews had few friends at Macintosh Farms but many admirers. He knew his stuff. But when Matthew changed a few balky riding horses into mounts tame enough for kids, Andrews had dropped the moniker and started calling him Matty. *Now if he would just stop knocking my hat off*, Matthew thought as he worked.

Such behavior only happened when Mr. Mac wasn’t nearby. The stable owner respected Amish people and tolerated no foul language, beer drinking, or rowdy behavior anywhere on his property. Jeff Andrews was slowly coming around, so Matthew secured the gate behind him and hurried to catch up. The trainer had headed into the quarter horse barn, one of his special places.

“What should I do?” he asked when he reached Andrews’ side.

“The couple that owns the yearling in stall twelve is driving up from Columbus tomorrow to see how things are progressing.” Jeff spoke softly and not with his usual loud bluster. “Things are going right fine, but that colt might have pulled a muscle yesterday in the ring. Nothing to worry about, but I don’t want them getting upset.” He lifted the latch and they entered the stall. The yearling picked up his head to study them. “The guy’s wife is a bit high-strung. You know how women can get worked up over even a fly bite.”

Matthew nodded his head in agreement. “*Jah*, my sister Emma is like that. She wants to call the vet each time one of her sheep has a runny nose.”

Jeff met his eye. “And your family lets her? That can get mighty expensive.” He gently scratched the colt behind his ears to settle him down.

“Nah, my pa sends for Aunt Hannah, who comes over with a stack

of sheep books. They'll keep reading until they figure out what's wrong and how to fix it. We almost never need to call Dr. Longo."

Jeff nodded sagely. "Always best not to get too emotional. I like horses plenty, but this is business. I imagine it's the same way with sheep and cows." The colt licked the trainer's hand. His pink tongue looked comically too large for his mouth. "Women become attached. They want to treat every critter like a new puppy."

"That's for sure." Matthew said, but in reality, other than Emma with her sheep, he knew little about females with animals. His *mamm* and younger sister stayed as far away from them as possible. Leah's eyes grew puffy and her nose plugged up if she even walked into the barn.

"Okay, now. You keep rubbing his ears to keep him quiet. I want to tape up these forelegs to make sure he ain't limping when those Columbus people get here. That and a good night's sleep will make him good as new."

Matthew readily obliged. This quarter horse was one of his favorites. He'd just started learning about bloodlines, but this colt's ancestry must be impressive judging by his characteristics. While he stroked the neck, the trainer wrapped the legs—not too tight to impede circulation, and not too loose to be easily shaken off.

"There, that oughta do it." Jeff stood and brushed wood shavings off his palms. "Thanks for your help, boy." He offered Matt a rare smile and slapped him on the shoulder. "Why don't you go find Mr. Mac and tell him we're ready for the owners' visit?"

"Sure thing." Matthew closed the stall door behind him and strode toward the front entrance of the long barn. He'd almost reached the doorway when he remembered the new leather gloves he'd set on the ledge. His *daed* always warned he would never save money if he didn't stop losing things. Turning around, he walked back to the stall quietly, hoping Jeff wouldn't witness his forgetfulness. *No sense giving him something else to tease about now that we're starting to get along.*

As Matthew picked up his gloves, he spotted Andrews down on

his knees beside the colt. He was murmuring gentle words to keep the horse calm. Why hadn't Jeff finished his ministrations while he was there to help? With growing unease, Matthew watched the trainer pull a hypodermic needle from his pocket, remove the cap, and inject a syringe of fluid into the colt's flank.

Andrews wasn't supposed to administer medications. He wasn't a vet or even a licensed technician. Rich folk tended to be nervous about their animals just like that Columbus wife. With an odd feeling, Matthew crept back from the stall until he could turn around and then he hurried from the barn. He went looking for Mr. Macintosh as his uneasy feeling swelled into something downright troubling.



Julia knew something was up the moment she spotted their buggy racing up the lane. Leah never drove fast; she didn't trust horses enough to let them go faster than a trot. Drying her hands on a towel, Julia hurried onto the porch with a mother's growing anxiety whenever something wasn't normal with a *kinner*.

"Whoa!" Leah hollered. Driveway stones scattered in all directions.

Simon walked out of the barn, frowning at the gravel displaced into the lawn. "What's the big hurry, daughter? You hear about Mason jars on sale over in Walnut Creek?" He grabbed hold of Jack's bridle as Leah jumped down from the buggy.

"Better than that, *daed*!" she exclaimed. "Wait until you hear."

Even from the porch Julia could see that Leah's cheeks were flushed with excitement. This was the daughter who seldom worked herself up about anything, unlike Emma, who could be laughing one minute and sobbing the next.

"Henry!" Simon bellowed. "Come rub down this horse and then turn him out in the pasture. Your *schwestern* has news that apparently can't wait till supper."

Henry appeared with his usual calm demeanor, took the reins,

and began releasing the horse from the traces. He offered his older sister only a casual glance.

Leah marched toward the house. "*Mamm!* I'm so glad you're home. I have great news to tell."

"Where else would I be?" Julia asked, lowering herself onto the porch swing. "It's practically suppertime." She patted the seat beside her.

"I'm too excited to sit," Leah said, shaking her head. "Hurry, *daed!*"

Simon stared at her as he lumbered up the steps, breathing heavily. "Were you stung by a hornet? What's the matter with you?"

"No hornet bites today. Remember that old train car on the railroad siding at the edge of town? Emma and I saw it years ago. This Mennonite lady—her name's April—tried my apple pie once and said she'd never tasted better. She's opening up a diner mainly for Plain folk, but her sister doesn't have time to help and so she quit. April let me inside to take a look around. It's beautiful." Leah finally paused to take a breath as she paced from one end of the porch to the other.

Julia and Simon stared at their child in utter confusion. She was looking back at them as though all this should make perfect sense.

Leah slapped her forehead. "I left out the most important part—she offered *me* a job! She wants me to take her sister's place." It would be impossible for her to look happier.

Her parents remained silent.

"That is, if you say it's all right," she added quickly. "It would only be four days a week. Well, five, but only four days away from home." Apprehension began to replace enthusiasm as her news failed to generate the anticipated reaction.

"Sit down, Leah," Julia demanded. "Stop prancing around and tell us the whole story from the beginning."

"Oh, boy, what are we in for now?" Simon muttered, lowering himself to the steps.

Leah complied, and after two deep breaths she gave her parents a

full account of her trip to Mount Hope to deliver pies. When she had finished, covering every possible objection with a practical solution, Julia and Simon had no choice but to give her their blessing.

After all, how much trouble could a girl get into four mornings a week in a small town like Winesburg?