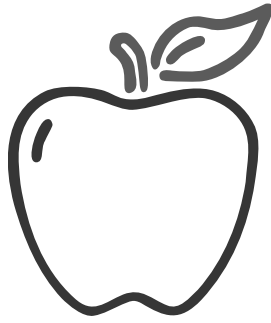


# LATE HARVEST



## Also by Hadley Hoover

### The Dutch Stories

*Rough Terrain* [2001]

*Unguarded Edge* [2004]

### The California Stories

*Rogue Wave* [2004]

*Prevailing Winds* [2003]

*Miles Apart* [2001]

### The Prairie Rose Trilogy

*Uncharted Territory* [2001]

*Hidden Crossing* [2002]

*Storm Path* [2002]

# LATE HARVEST



Hadley Hoover

## **Late Harvest**

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*Late Harvest* is a work of fiction. Names, characters and their conversations or personalities, institutions or geographical places, and incidents contained herein are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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## **Dedication**

To Kendall:  
always and ever  
the best part of my life.

To Kahler/Methodist-Kahler School of Nursing nurses  
around the globe:  
Even though the winged caps are "retired,"  
you will always soar.

To the memory of those nurses who gave their lives  
in service to our country  
through the US Cadet Nurse Corps.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Between 1918 and 1970, 3,827 nurses received diplomas from the Kahler School of Nursing (later renamed the Methodist-Kahler School of Nursing) in Rochester, Minnesota. However, the heroine you will meet on the pages of *Late Harvest* is not pictured in the 1948 commencement issue of the school's yearbook, *The Link*. Nor would any nursing students from 1945-1948 remember working, studying or rooming with her.

That is because Sanna de Boer is a figment of my imagination.

In an attempt to create a realistic sense of Sanna's education and years in Rochester, I spent delightful hours meeting and talking with several graduates of the Kahler/Methodist-Kahler School of Nursing. They opened their hearts and shared stories and pictures, answered countless questions on the phone and in e-mails, and guided me in portraying what a typical nursing student encountered. I listened and took voluminous notes, but sometimes I had to jiggle the facts in *their* stories to fit *my* story, thus any inaccuracies herein are my own.

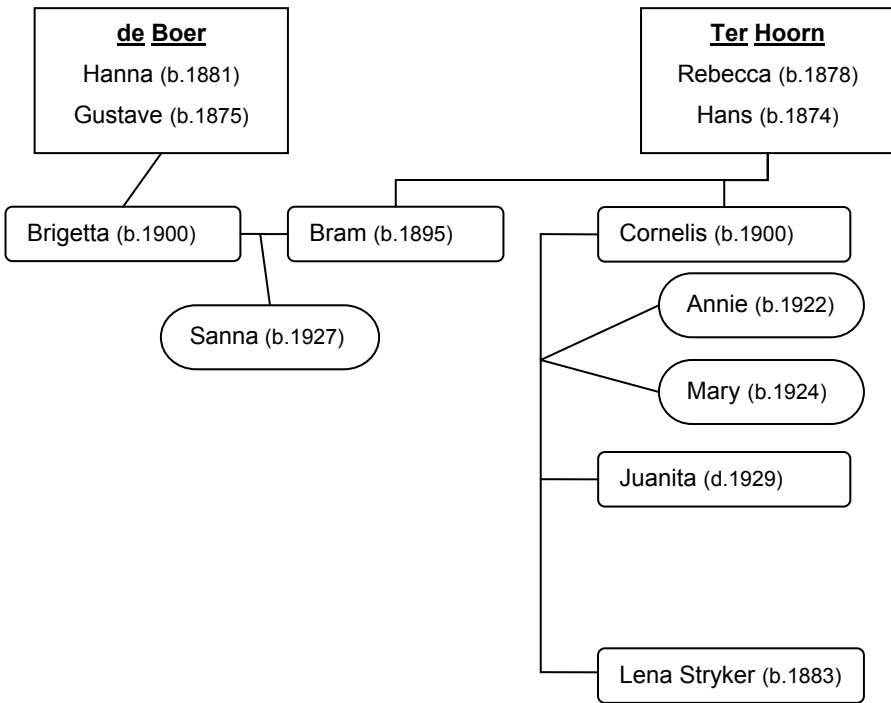
Interested readers can obtain additional (and completely factual!) information about the Kahler/Methodist-Kahler School of Nursing via their website at: [www.mayo.edu/alumni/mksnaa](http://www.mayo.edu/alumni/mksnaa).

Many thanks to these fascinating women who dusted off memories and dug out memorabilia to make their years of nurses' training come alive for me. They exhibit that special *something* that truly marks a Kahler-trained nurse ...

Adelaide Flom (1934)  
Delores "Dee" Verbick Kepp (1946)  
Betty McGoon Klampe (1946)  
Florine Baumgard Murray (1958)  
Harriet Grein Rudd (1957)  
Charlotte Boelter Sprague (1946)  
Elizabeth "Betty" Bolstad Talmo (1946)  
Carol Ann Wallace (1955)  
Lois Anderson Wendorf (1945)  
Dorothy "Dottie" Jauss Zazubek (1946)

# Family Relationships

According to Gustave de Boer's Family Bible



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# 1944

## *Sanna*

These past few weeks, spending time with Muriel Dykstra is like trying to keep a gorilla happy on the other end of a seesaw—everything is mostly about the gorilla. Today, I finished work and found *my* gorilla—oops; pardon my grumpy mood ... I mean my best friend—perched on the step outside Doc Draayer's office, looking bright-eyed and eager for fun.

With an exaggerated bow and rolling hand gestures, Muriel trilled, "Ladies and gentlemen! I present Iowa's own Clara Barton: Sanna de Boer!"

"Hello, Muriel." Guess which of us has more drama in her little finger than a three-ring circus, and who would rather crawl in a hole than draw attention to herself? I glanced around, hoping no one had witnessed Muriel's silly little side-show or overheard her ridiculous *Clara Barton* comment.

I'm hardly Miss Barton. During my first three years of high school, I ran errands and cleaned for Doc, proving to be a good worker, quick learner, and unflappable under pressure. So, this past summer when one of his two nurses joined the army, Doc increased my responsibilities, hours, and pay. I now assist the capable, kind, and over-worked though uncomplaining Miss Edith Vande Kirk RN in whatever ways she deems appropriate.

Doc's office is a stimulating place for a high school senior to spend after-school hours and Saturday afternoons. Variety is almost guaranteed, a bit of chaos is not infrequent, and time wears roller skates inside those walls. On a day like today when anything that *could* go wrong *did*, my head throbbed from the protests of wailing babies and my feet begged for mercy. That's why I wasn't too excited to find Muriel waiting for me. But there she was.

"I'd about given up on you *ever* coming through that door, Sanna," Muriel complained, though she was careful not to let her face match her voice. Her vanity requires a cheerful expression at all times—quoting her now: *to prevent wrinkles from permanently etching the delicate skin*



*around my eyes and lips.* If she's right, I will look like old Mrs. Aalbertson before I am twenty since Mama says my face roams the whole gamut of emotions.

Even though I'm very familiar with Muriel's personality quirks, it is still disconcerting to *hear* fussing but *see* smiles shape each word: "Here I am waiting to take a nice long walk and you're wasting the last bit of sunshine on some dreadfully boring task! Between school and work, you've been cooped up inside for most of this gorgeous autumn day, and we have *so* much to talk about."

*You mean you do,* I thought, peeved she didn't notice I barely had enough energy to pedal my bicycle the mile home to the farm. *And she expects me to jump up-and-down about going on a walk, for Pete's sake,* I stewed.

But Muriel was right on one count. It had been at least three days since we had seen each other and that's a lifetime in a true friendship. I could have suggested catching up over cokes at the drug store counter, but Muriel doesn't change her mind easily so I saved my breath.

I am accustomed to Muriel always operating at top speed so I didn't question how she, after working all day at her uncle's café, had energy in reserve while I longed for a good soak in a hot bathtub. Instead, I stifled a yawn and linked arms with the first friend I made five years ago when Papa brought our family of three back to live in Dutchville.

We had moved "back home," as Mama calls it, from Minnesota where Papa was the Steward at the Rochester State Hospital for longer than I'd been alive—a necessary move because Papa didn't want me "marrying anyone who isn't Dutch." At thirteen, I found Papa's worries about my life-mate very romantic. Since I would have been the only seventh grader in country school, my parents enrolled me in town. I spent weeks enthralled with the boys—*he's Dutch—and so is he ... and that one ... and oh-be-still-my-heart: there's another one*—until I realized Dutchville was, well, one-hundred-percent *Dutch*, and boys were, well, *boys*.

Back then, Muriel and I connected on the basis of two commonalities: neither of us had siblings, and we both considered *Little Women* the best book ever written. To our youthful thinking, those two details seemed enough to seal our destiny as forever-friends and, amazingly enough, they did. Even though Muriel graduated last year and joined the working class while I'm still plugging away toward graduation in seven months, we are inseparable, though different in so many ways.

Sauntering the familiar streets, I grudgingly admitted it would have been a shame to miss the fresh autumn air. Before long, I forgot about my feet and, for the moment, the war that had killed or wounded so many. War was a common topic in Doc's waiting room and after hearing snatches of sad and worried conversations, I dreaded the evening news, but found it impossible not to listen to the faceless voices telling the day's story of more deaths and destruction. I often wondered if there were seventeen-year-old girls in Germany or the Philippines or Japan who, like yours-truly, were secretly happy their boyfriends had been sent home wounded. Wounds can heal; death is forever.

Muriel babbled away while I blissfully inhaled the heady fragrance of burning leaves and strangely mingled aromas of suppers floating out from kitchen windows left open to the late afternoon sun. Bare garden plots showed their musty undercoats of spaded dirt, awaiting winter's more modest snowy blanket. I laughed outright when an apple fell off its tree, startling a crow grubbing on the ground into raucous scolding. Oblivious to all I enjoyed, Muriel chattered like the bushy-tailed, stuffed-cheek squirrels busily burying acorns for future consumption, there being no rationing of acorns such as we humans endure on sugar, tea, coffee, butter, and meat.

She talked; I side-stepped wooly-worms inching their way across our paths, and wondered if their furry coats indicated a hard winter ahead, as Grand-dad believed, or just their usual October attire. I added appropriate exclamations when Muriel paused for breath, but only gave her my full attention when she spun in front of me, arms flung in the air, and declared histrionically, "I tell you, Sanna, I *never* would have dreamed the work it takes to put on the Christmas play if I weren't the director this year!"

"So you've said ..." I tempered mild sarcasm with a smile, but it blew right past her like the vivid leaves fluttering to the ground around us. I parked my chin on my index finger, faking deep concentration. "Hmm, let's see ... why, *yes*, I do believe it has been the subject of every conversation we've had since the mayor selected you!"

"Oh, shush!" She slapped me playfully and went right on talking about lighting, and make-up, and whether off-stage prompters were really necessary until I wanted to stick my fingers in my ears and yodel to muffle her voice.

For a whole month I have listened to Muriel worry about casting the actors, and debate which costumes to reuse and which "simply



*must*—war-time restrictions, or not—be replaced," and fuss about community citizens who truly *could* sing but wouldn't participate and those who *couldn't* but doggedly insisted they would. I even bit my tongue when she bemoaned how this year's Baby Jesus is too chunky to fit nicely into the manger.

In Muriel's world, the war was an inconvenience more than a crisis. Since President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill or Douglas MacArthur weren't trying out for parts in her Christmas play, she really didn't give a hoot about their speeches. More than once I have asked myself, *Just why is Muriel my friend?* But our friendship has many miles on it, so I'm as reluctant to cast it aside as Grand-dad is to relinquish the horse-drawn plow behind his barn.

Last Saturday, Muriel and I were trying out new hairdos in my bedroom and daydreaming about the lingerie that will top our Christmas wish-lists when the war ends. It had been a rare afternoon with hardly a mention of anything regarding The Play.

Suddenly she shrieked, "The *scenery!* I completely forgot to tell you about the *horrible* disaster with the scenery!" She promptly lost interest in my chignon. All my blissful feelings slipped away like the curls now tumbling around my neck as she launched into a convoluted account of lumber and nails, talking faster than I could blink.

Reliving that episode, I halted our walk abruptly. I ceased marveling at the birds flying in V-formation and commenced feeling quite grumpy. "Please, *please*, could we talk about something besides the play? You wanted to go for a walk, but have you seen a single thing? Have you noticed the children jumping in piles of leaves? No! Tell me: how many squirrels are playing chase in that big tree across the street? Can you name three people we saw putting up their storm windows? You can't, can you? Newsflash, Muriel: the world does *not* revolve around your precious play!" By the end of this outburst, I'm embarrassed to admit, my voice had shot into the first-soprano range.

Muriel's eyes twinkled as if I had just told the funniest joke. "I guess I *do* go on and on about everything, don't I?" she agreed amiably. "But we've been friends since we were *children*. If a girl can't talk to her best friend, who can she turn to?" She squeezed my arm affectionately. "Besides, you have such good ideas and are such a help in figuring the way out of nasty dilemmas."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I saw right through her ploys.

"Now," Muriel chirped, unfazed by my tirade, "do you have any thoughts on what can we do about the set? The lumber's been delivered, but if we don't get started building it pretty soon, the paint will still stink the night of the program. I do *not* want to be remembered as the director of the play the year everyone in the audience got sick from paint fumes!"

"What's this '*we*' business? Neither you nor I ever built anything bigger than a birdhouse in our lives! Oh, good grief—you already have lumber?" Her unexpected silence in response made me groan. "Tell me—*please* tell me you didn't just collect a bunch of boards without a plan in mind."

"Well ... I *might* have put the cart before the horse." She ignored my moaning and continued blithely, "When the stage crew showed up the night I *thought* we would begin building the set, all they did was stand around and stare at the boards and say, 'What do you want us to do, Muriel?' like I was supposed to know!"

"You *are* the director, Muriel, and folks expect the director to—"

She brushed my unsympathetic words away like a pesky fly. "All I know is I want a modern town scene that can change, lickety-split, into a Bible-times village scene. But those fellows expect me to tell them which board to nail up where. *I don't know!*" she wailed. "Men are supposed to be smart about such things. I can handle costumes and props and music and the script, but *scenery?*" She fluttered her hands nervously. "And now there's a *huge* pile of splintery boards dumped right where everyone will trip over it, and *no one* to figure out what to do!"

My pent-up frustration surged like lava from a volcano—not that I've ever seen one except in *National Geographic*, but my words burned hot, impossible to restrain so I let them spew. "Oh, Muriel, you are such a goose. I can't believe how you agonize over something you already have—perfectly good scenery—and could use as-is! Why does every single thing have to be such a big deal with you?" I flung her arm aside and picked up my pace. Her footsteps hesitated for a moment, but then her little size-five scamper caught up to my size-eight stomp.

"Don't be angry, Sanna! You're right," she said contritely, "but I'm in a real pickle here, don't you see? What's a play without appropriate scenery? Everyone will be so disappointed because the other years' set won't match this year's script!"

I didn't answer for half a block—*Let her stew!* One of those ideas Muriel claims I have popped into my mind. I smiled and felt the tension



seep from my body as I thought about my favorite carpenter: Derek VanHousen. Derek has been my best guy since ninth grade. He graduated two years ago and promptly joined the army, which nearly broke my heart. Letters kept our fledgling love alive, and the private matters we discussed took on new importance the day he limped off the train, having served just over one year when a bullet to an already frost-bitten foot sent him home on crutches.

Derek doesn't sit around, wallowing in self-pity. Within the first week, he had fliers hanging around town, advertising his services as a carpenter: "GROUND-LEVEL UNTIL I HEAL, BUT THEN THE SKY'S THE LIMIT!" they proclaimed. Immediately citizens whose husbands, brothers and sons were off fighting for democracy booked Derek with enough projects to keep him busy long after our boys in uniform return home.

Now Muriel needed help and, once again, I had what seemed a good idea, though whether or not Derek would agree remained to be seen. His carpentry earned him a living, and the annual Christmas program was strictly a volunteer-run operation. "Maybe I could ask Derek to advise you ..." I said haltingly. The next thing I knew, Muriel whirled me around and swung us into an impromptu jig, right in front of Mrs. Aalbertson's house—the one person in town who watches me like a hawk. Sure enough, a peep-hole appeared between lacy panels curtaining her front window. Count on it: come Sunday, she'll fill my parents' ears with her latest objection: *"Really, Bram and Brigetta, I think the Dominie's granddaughter should seek friendship with more subdued girls than that flighty Muriel Dykstra. I never saw such carrying on ... whooping and dancing in the streets."*

Tugging Muriel around the corner where a dormant lilac bush hid us from Mrs. Busy-body's view, I pulled her up nose-to-nose and ordered, "Settle down! I didn't say he would build the whole thing. If you treat him nicely, he *may* decide to help you draw plans and show you how to figure measurements. Why you gathered lumber without knowing what you're doing is beyond me," I ended sternly, releasing her with an impatient shove.

"Oh, Sanna, don't scold! I *knew* you could help me; I can always count on you!" She bit her bottom lip for a moment, causing me to think that maybe, just maybe, from now on she would be a model of decorum and wisdom. But she spoiled that fantasy when she parked her hands on her hips and demanded, "What's Derek's favorite cookie? I will bake a big batch to soften him up!" She beamed as if a plate of cookies cleared the slate of her offenses.

"Derek doesn't need *softening*, Muriel. He's already the nicest fellow I know. Just don't ... oh, just be less ..." I took my cues from Mrs. Aalbertson's imagined voice droning in my head, "less *flighty* and more organized. Make notes and sketch out your ideas to remind you of everything you have in mind. You simply cannot bother him more than once." She hiked her shoulders up and managed to look cute even under my worst harangue. I sighed, almost ready to admit defeat, but felt it necessary to warn her, "He needs to earn a living, and this is doing you a huge favor—for free."

Eyes wide and innocent, Muriel nodded solemnly. "I will try to be more like you and less like me." But she broke the mood when she doubled up laughing. "Don't look so serious! Of course, I won't waste his time. Trust me!"

I sniffed. *Yeah, right: trust you to do whatever you want to get whatever you want whenever you want it.*

"Just ask the hard-working Mr. VanHousen," she trilled his name, "to devote a moment of his precious time so the capricious Muriel Dykstra," again, the sing-song lilt carried her name and apt description past her rosebud lips, "can present her case." She tossed her head prettily—a much-practiced skill. "My cookies and I will take care of the rest! So tell me: what kind of cookies?" she persisted.

"Snickerdoodles," I divulged against my better judgment, secretly glad Muriel's mother would likely nip those plans in the bud because of how many sugar-ration coupons the recipe would deplete. "I will ask him, but he could refuse, you know. He's very busy." Already, I wished I had kept my mouth shut. Derek tolerates Muriel because she is my friend, but he would *never* choose to spend an evening with her if I didn't arrange double-dates that included Muriel and a changing cast of fellows, even with the war on. It was a private joke between Derek and me that we might soon have to go outside Sioux County to find someone willing to fill out a four-some since most local males consider Muriel more fluff than substance.

Unaware of my thoughts, Muriel continued cheerfully, "Ask him to come to my house tomorrow evening. No, I have a better idea! Turn left at the next corner ..." Shoulder-to-shoulder, she herded me like a wandering sheep. "I saw Derek earlier—he's fixing Henry Van Aken's leaky roof. We just *happen* to be in the neighborhood, so you go ask him right now. I will wait by the street and ..."



I stiffened and dug in my heels. "No! Derek's working. Besides, I'm nervous enough about *anyone* with one bad foot being up on a roof, let alone Derek. I would feel dreadful if he fell because I diverted his attention! I will see him tonight when he comes to get me for choir practice and that will be soon enough."

Prudently Muriel backed off and flashed a brilliant smile. "Perfect."

That evening, Derek and I had so much to talk about—my finishing the supply inventory list for Doc and Miss Edith, an accomplishment earning me their high praise; Derek winning the bid to repair the town square windmill—that we had almost reached the church before I remembered my promise to Muriel. "Derek, you absolutely, positively don't have to say yes, but Muriel is having trouble with the scenery for the Christmas play and I ..."

"What do you mean, trouble?" he interrupted. "That scenery is built like a fort! It has been used for years without problems."

"She calls it 'ramshackle' and says she has a different idea this year but can't explain it well enough for the volunteers to build or rebuild."

"Not surprising. Most people who volunteer do so because it will be more fun than work. Trust me: building a new set equals a lot of work."

He had a point, but I had a promise to keep: "Mmm, I suggested that *maybe* you could meet with her to hear her ideas and then make a simple blueprint to help the fellows build what she needs. She, uh, already has the lumber ..." hearing a disgusted rumble emanating from Derek's chest, I waggled the bribe before the one fellow I liked better than anyone unrelated to me, "and she'll bake snickerdoodles if you'll just meet with her."

"Snickerdoodles, hmm? That Muriel drives a hard bargain." Derek rolled his eyes but his chuckle, as he pulled into an open spot in front of the church, set my heart at ease. "Okay, because my sweet girl, who is better than all the cookies in the world," he tweaked my cheek, "asks me to help her goofy friend and, I admit, because that friend promises snickerdoodles," he smacked his lips in exaggerated anticipation, "tell Muriel I will meet with her some time."

Blushing over *my sweet girl* and not inclined to dispute the *goofy friend* comment, I prodded, "How about tomorrow night?"

"Huh? You must be kidding! You want me to waste a Friday night on Muriel? Not this fellow! Besides, you and I have a date for Wim and Beth's engagement party tomorrow night."

"We do, but Muriel simply *must* get going on this or she'll drive me crazy! As it is, she talks about nothing but *The Play*. Please-please-please?" I clasped my hands as if in fervent prayer, mimicking Muriel's embellished gesture of pleading. "If you work quickly, we can still go to the party." For good measure, I batted my eyelashes a few times—another Muriel specialty.

Derek grinned at my antics. "Okay. Tomorrow night it is, then. We'll do something fun Saturday night. Just the two of us. Tell Muriel I will see her at seven o'clock, and to be prepared so I don't leave my best girl waiting."

After choir practice, I called Muriel with the news. "Guess what, Muriel? Derek will meet with you tomorrow night. Now, promise me you'll be extra nice to him. Remember, he's doing you a *huge* favor. And don't be asking him to *build* anything—he does carpentry all day long. You're just getting advice from him. And it's going to be a one-time meeting, so be—"

I had to hold the telephone away from my ear, as did several listening on the party-line, I'm sure, when she squealed. "Oh, I *will*, I mean, I won't ... oh, whatever! You're an absolute *dear!*" Muriel's gushing remarks overflowed the banks of her happiness while I gave way to a sinking feeling of impending doom. She didn't mention snickerdoodles again and I didn't remind her.

By the time seven o'clock rolled around the next evening, I had churned up debris from the bottom of my deep, emotional ocean. I had survived an essay test in American Literature—I say *survived* because that's how it felt when I discovered I had been so distracted by *life* that three times in a four-page essay I used the wrong verb tense, and when I noticed my fifth and twelfth paragraphs contradicted themselves, I felt nauseous. Luckily, I caught the mistakes because I hate to ruin an A in my favorite class just because of worries, regrets, and panic over how Muriel could annoy Derek even more than usual with her erratic behavior and unpredictable flights of fancy.

I bobbed around the house like a rowboat loosened from its moorings by a stiff wind, bumping against unsettling thoughts and unfamiliar emotions and feeling waterlogged by all-too-familiar qualms

about my friend's ability to irritate any male she ensnared. *I have steered Derek right into quicksand!* I desperately needed a lifeline and latched on to my parents who sat at the kitchen table.

My father—the calm, steady Bram de Boer, highly respected in our part of the world for his innovative ways with all things green-and-growing, especially tulips—was reading aloud from seed catalogs. I adore Papa and am secretly pleased to resemble him in certain respects. We are both tall and lanky, and we smile more frequently than we ever laugh outright. And we enjoy contemplative activities: such as gardening and reading. Our one concession to public displays of emotion comes with music: we sing together every chance we get, often as a family. In character, I'm more reserved, like Papa, but also like him, I admire Mama's *aliveness*.

My mother—the tender-hearted, caring, fun-loving Brigetta, daughter of the esteemed pastor of the Dutchville Reformed Church—was knitting wool socks to go in Christmas boxes to soldiers freezing their toes off in Europe. Day's end had brought a chill to the air and my parents were soaking up the toasty warmth that Mama's weekly baking left behind. My love for Mama carries with it a sense of wonder and awe. She's a veritable rainbow of traits: vivacious, approachable, beautiful, effervescent—and mischievous. Her antics produce more smiles from Papa and me than a circus.

My parents obviously love each other. Muriel finds this fascinating since she rarely sees her parents embrace, whereas I never know when I'll come upon mine smooching or whispering sweet-nothings. At such times their personalities seem to blend, their passion heating up until Papa's rich buttery self melts into Mama's sparkling persona, stirred into one molten stream of golden love by a single touch.

If that sounds more lyrical than my usual style, I wrote those words in a poem that earned me an A+ from a difficult-to-please teacher so it *is* my words—just evidence that some of Muriel has rubbed off on me, I guess. Anyway, when I see Mama and Papa living out their love, I feel secure, and seeing them busy at everyday things like reading and knitting gives me a feeling of all's right with the world, regardless of wars.

"Hey," Papa looked up from his catalog, "where's your date, Buttercup? Aren't you going to some party with Derek tonight?"

"We'll go to Wim and Beth's party when Derek and Muriel finish talking about scen-er-y." I tossed off the word in a three-note tone,

accompanied by eye-rolling. "Muriel needed Derek's expert opinion, so he's at her house now eating snickerdoodles and probably about ready to strangle her if she is rambling *on* and *on* and *on*, as she is prone to do."

I caught Mama's grin, though she quickly switched to what I teasingly call her attempt at a disapproving-mother-hen look. "Now, Sanna, that's not the most charitable thing to say about your best friend, but how nice of Derek to help her out. If anyone can make sense of Muriel's thoughts, it's Derek."

"I guess." I flopped down on a chair, feeling more like a pouting child than the maturing young lady who looks back at me in my dressing-table mirror. "I'm going crazy watching the clock, and I can't concentrate enough to do any homework. Does anyone want to play dominoes?"

"Bring 'em on! Your mother deserves a break, if not from hearing me compare merits of tulip bulbs, then surely from knitting and purling," Papa said, setting his catalog aside.

Hot chocolate and dominoes and my parents' rollicking humor helped settle my restlessness. When the clock struck eight, Papa offered to drive me to the engagement party, with Mama staying home to direct Derek. Luckily, I nixed that idea because Derek never showed up at our house. But I had fun with Mama and Papa. Once they get going, they are really a stitch and we all laughed over truly silly things until our sides ached. When I crawled into bed, I fell asleep before I reached the "Amen" in my evening prayers.

"Buttercup, wake up!" Mama's voice knocked on my dreams like a woodpecker.

Disoriented, I jerked straight up in bed and fumbled for my clock: *Seven o'clock?* "Yikes, I overslept!" I flung back the covers, thrusting my feet into the chilly air in search of my slippers.

"You're fine; it's Saturday, and The Grands don't expect you yet," Mama assured me, though her words only made me wonder which week of the month it was. Second-and-fourth Saturdays, my mornings began across the yard at my grandparent's house for breakfast. Breaking through my muddled thoughts, Mama continued, "... Derek is on the telephone for you."

I whipped my robe off the bedpost. "Coming!" I called, an unnecessary response since my pounding footsteps drowned out my words and relayed the same message.

"Good morning!" Two words became a happy chorus as I slid my back along the wall and assumed my usual talking-on-the-telephone posture: knees pulled close to my chest, receiver lodged between ear and shoulder. "Up awfully early, aren't you?" My words bumped like knuckles on a wash-board since I was still getting settled in.

"We working men don't have the luxury of lazing around in our beds like you delicate women. If the sun's up, I'm up—you know that," he drawled.

I twisted a strand of hair around one finger and taunted, "If I know it, why did you have to call and tell me?"

"Oooo ... did I disturb someone's beauty sleep?" he said in mock solicitousness. We joked around for several minutes and then he said, "I'm heading off to work and may not see you today. I didn't call last night because it was awfully late when I finally got away from Miss Wood." We had learned long ago to create code names, based on the context of the conversation, to keep the party-line snoopers guessing.

*How late was it?* popped into my mind, but I bit my tongue—after all, any amount of time he devoted to Muriel was like a wrapped gift to little-ol'-beggar me. "That's okay; I had a nice evening with Mama and Papa. We played dominoes."

"Glad you had fun. But here's the thing: I need to beg off on our date tonight, and wanted to call so you wouldn't spend time getting all prettied up for nothing—even though you're the most stunning gal this side of the rainbow, no matter what."

Derek knew how to send a tingle through my body. "My goodness, Papa's bees could get trapped in all this syrupy talk! Good thing you're not here or you'd be stung, for sure!" I giggled and examined the nails on my left hand. *Time for a manicure.* "What's happening tonight?"

He sighed, expelling air in a noisy puff against my ear. "Oh, you know Miss Wood. She tried hard, but couldn't quite get her act together, so I told her we should just meet tonight to look at what's on hand and then decide what could be used as-is, what could be incorporated into her ideas, and what needs to start from scratch."

"I see." I frowned at my right hand before hiding my nails in a fist—a fist that ached to pound *Miss Wood* for stealing my guy two nights in a row. I sat up straight. "If all you're doing is looking at musty old, uh, *stuff*, why don't I come along? Then we can come back to my house and

play games. Mama and Papa may join us because they seem to like you for some reason, but then ..." I dangled the rest of the evening like a shiny bauble.

*It worked!* He clucked his tongue appreciatively. "Now *there's* a grand idea. I will pick you up. I'm meeting Miss Wood about seven, so be ready a little before and it's a date!"

"Some date—looking at *stuff* and listening to Miss Wood, uh, *babble!*" I felt the need to fuss a bit, even though there certainly wasn't much wrong with the way things were turning out.

With Derek's answering chuckle tickling my ear, I hung up and bounded up the stairs. I dressed quickly and headed back down, humming "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah ..." with an occasional dance-shuffle tossed in. The oh-so-attentive, talented, and *ob-so* easy-on-the-eyes Mr. VanHousen—even when he's messing with our plans for an evening—does that to me.

"Everything okay with Derek?" Mama asked, turning from the stove to smile at me. Red-cheeked from the heat and bright-eyed after a good night's sleep, she looked so pretty I could see why Papa is still wild about her, even after all the years they have been married.

"No complaints here!" I kissed her cheek and spun away to music ringing in my head.

"He usually doesn't call so early, but you're certainly in a good mood for a gal who had to spend Friday night with her parents!"

"Oh, Derek's working all day, but tonight we'll meet Muriel to look over the scenery stored in the Town Hall and see what can be salvaged and then I invited him here for games. Hopefully we can make quick work of the *Muriel* portion of the evening. Well, I'm off to see Grand-dad and Grandma-Becca. After their foot-soaks, I'm going to trim his hair, so I will be gone a little longer than usual. But when I get home, I will clean the upstairs, okay?"

Mama and I divide the household responsibilities. I've always had chores, but as I've gotten older, I try to give Mama a break from the drudgery and plain hard work of running a house. Even though Muriel does little to help out around her house besides bake, she thinks that after I graduate we should share the apartment over her uncle's café—an idea she calls "the perfect chance to spread our wings." Well, my wings flutter just fine under Papa's roof. Muriel and I are best friends, but I

have a feeling living together could ruin *that*—especially since I'd end up doing the messy jobs. Even if Muriel scrubbed floors like a trooper, the reality is I'm neat and organized and she's, well, a bit of a slouch about everything but her personal appearance—right there, a recipe for disaster. *So, I will live at home and help Mama until I ...* Even *thinking* about marrying Derek makes me shiver with inexpressible delight, and I felt all goose-bumpy as I skimmed across the yard.



Twelve hours later, Derek announced his arrival at the end of our driveway with his coded horn-toot. I flung my hairbrush aside, skipped down the steps and grabbed my jacket off the hook just as he knocked on the back door. My smile curved like the moon above our apple tree as I slipped my hand into his and matched our strides. Muriel thinks Derek is too short for me, well, actually she thinks I am too tall for him—a difference, apparently, that I fail to appreciate. Right now, I liked that our legs are close enough in length that we can keep step without altering our usual gait.

"Let's get this over and ... *yikes!*" I jumped, grabbing Derek's sleeve when a shadow moved inside his car. "Something's *alive* in ..." Before I could finish, he opened the door and I blurted out, "Muriel!" It's not that I have never seen Muriel in Derek's car—heavens, no—but each time, *I* was the one inside the car greeting *her* because Derek always picks me up first—I'm his girl. That was the first jolt.

Muriel fussed with her clothing, getting it all smoothed out as if a wrinkle-free skirt mattered for an evening in the Town Hall basement. She never once glanced my way, even after I yelped her name: jolt number two.

I whipped around, searching Derek's face for an explanation. The shadows did not hide his discomfiture: chalk up another jolt. After three shocks in rapid succession, I inhaled so sharply that my lungs burned. Exhaling, my breath sounded like a deflating accordion's last bleats.

I have not known jealousy over Derek's actions since we started dating, but I didn't need an introduction to the green-eyed monster taking up residence in my heart. Common sense told me I had nothing to worry about, but common sense wasn't speaking a language I understood.

Muriel found her voice at last and twittered, "Hi, Sanna—get in quickly! You're letting all the heat out and Derek had the car all nice and

warm for me." She shivered convincingly, complete with chattering teeth, shoulders hunched around her neck. As I slid in beside her, I sniffed. The air smelled strongly of Muriel's favorite perfume. *Perfume, for looking at boards?* Every nerve in my body quivered like a violin string in full reverberation.

In silence—mine from bewilderment and shock, hers either from nervousness or a sudden infusion of guilt—we watched Derek's long-limbed form slice through the headlights' glare. He opened the driver's door and settled in behind the wheel.

In reaching for the gear shift, he bumped against Muriel's knees, eliciting her coy admonition, "Watch out, there, soldier! I'm not that kind of girl!" Her laughter rippled like a wind-chime. I was speechless at her cheekiness. Derek laughed uneasily and backed up, turning the car toward town.

I have never entertained so many disparate emotions at one time: confusion, frustration, anger, nervousness, hatred, fear. The combination curdled in my stomach like vinegar added to milk. I leaned my head against the chilly car window and clamped my lips, staring numbly at the road ahead. If I had shut my eyes I surely would have lost my supper.

It is truly amazing how many thoughts one can produce on a mile-long ride. *Who planned this? Why didn't Muriel hop out of the car and let me sit next to Derek? Why didn't he let me slide in under the wheel from his side, which would have pushed Muriel over where she belongs? How can ...? What's going on? And when ...? Why am I willing to imagine the worst about my friends?*

I hated my suspicions, but found no reason to release them. Nor could I erase the unsettling feeling I had created the whole mess by suggesting that Derek help Muriel.

Muriel's voice bobbed along the turbid river of my discontent as she launched into a cheerful account. Hearing the details of her conniving did nothing to calm my fury: "I was *all* set to walk over to the Town Hall when I thought, it's *dark* and *chilly* and if Derek is picking up Sanna, he might as well pick me up, too! So, I called him and you're right, Sanna, Derek is *such* a nice guy! He not only picked me up, but he *assured* my parents I won't walk home alone. I could *tell* they were impressed!"

It all sounded so logical. Why shouldn't Derek give Muriel a ride? But logic didn't act guilty; logic would look me in the face. Logic shouldn't leave me feeling as chilled as a swimmer's first dive into the Floyd River on a hot day.