

An Amish Flower Farm

Mindy Steele

“Look at me, Adam.” She raised her voice and moonlight revealed tears daring an escape. He had to stop this now. He *had* looked at her; for weeks he had looked at her; for years, even. He wasn’t stupid. Right now, he had to do everything *but* look at her.

He started walking again. “I have looked at you, and that little strawberry kiss on your cheek isn’t ugly. It’s all in your head.” Adam did a mental slap to his forehead. “And vanity is a sin, Belinda,” he added, just to put the cherry on top of his current screw-up.

Belinda opened her mouth, and then quickly closed it again. “I know,” she whispered, and hung her head.

“I didn’t say that to hurt your feelings. I don’t understand how you could let something so small keep you from enjoying life.” She was hostage to a past that had marred her confidence. How could he convince her that what she saw as a fatal flaw didn’t matter to anyone but her?

“That’s what I do, isn’t it? Tabitha says such. I just have felt this way so long, I guess...”

“You let it become who you are,” he quickly added. “You are more than a little girl who got her feelings hurt because of a few harsh words.”

“But growing up hasn’t changed things. Not really. They still stare at me.”

“They do,” Adam agreed. “But the birthmark is *not* why they look at you.”

The strawberry moon grew overhead. They walked to a clearing and looked up. “Are we friends?”

Adam paused, letting the words soak through him. “*Jah*, Belinda, we are.”

“Good. Now it’s your turn.” She looked to the moon again.

“My turn at what?”

“I told you something private, something I don’t speak of outside of my family. It’s your turn. It’s what friends do.” She strolled up higher and found a place to plant her bare feet.

“That’s not part of our partnership,” he tried to argue, fisting the bouquet a little tighter.

“It *is* our friendship.” Her chin tilted upward, challenging him. “Or is your idea of friendship that I show my weakness, my vulnerability, while you get to remain unblemished?”

She had him stumped and trapped at the same time. Adam couldn’t risk opening up to her, but when those blue eyes danced in moonlight, he couldn’t resist either. She tapped her foot, crossed her arms, awaiting his answer.

Rolling his eyes, he let out a deep groan. “Fine.” He sat down and stretched out his legs, knowing she would follow. “What do you want to know?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Susanne, in the beginning? You made me think...”

“I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea.” He answered too quickly. “I needed help. I didn’t want you to think I was trying to get to know you, you know, like that.” Honesty was not always the best method between friends.

“Like a potential girlfriend,” she quipped. “You think me desperate, that I’d hound you if I knew you were single? You’re not the first man to knock on my door.” Her sharp words slapped him.

“Everyone else was getting the wrong idea about us, our partnership. I didn’t want you to, as well.” He flinched. “Wait. Who’s been knocking on your door?”

“That’s none of your business. And I’m not some silly *maedel* needing attention from a grumpy man who doesn’t even know how to talk without growling.” She got to her feet again.

“*Nee*, starved for attention, you are not,” he agreed, and hurried to his feet. “I mean that as a compliment, Bee. You are nothing like the others, and that’s a good thing. If circumstances were different...” His words brought her to a halt.

“We would still be strangers,” she finished. She clearly saw him as nothing more than the grump next door. At least that’s what he thought until he noticed the slight tremble in her hands. Something she did when she tried being firm and bold, for neither came to her naturally.

“I’m glad we aren’t.” Adam offered an extended hand. “I’m glad we needed each other and became friends as a result.”

Belinda couldn’t stop staring at him, hand out, waiting. His brow lifted, encouraging her to trust him.

“Let’s go home before it gets too dark,” Belinda said, accepting his hand and his offer to walk her home. He told himself that he was grateful for her friendship—that he *had* to be, since it was all he could ever ask of her.

They walked in silence, neither letting go of the other’s hand. Home lights burned in the distance, a coyote called out and was joined by friends. But she didn’t look afraid. He wondered if that meant she felt safe with him guiding her home.

When they reached her porch, Belinda turned to look up at him. Adam let her hand go, tucking his safely inside his pocket.

“You confuse and surprise me both,” she announced.

“You’ve surprised me plenty,” he said, eyes holding hers. “I wish things could be different.” He cleared his throat. “Susanne was right.” He had nothing to offer her, nothing to offer any woman. So why did this woman make him want to drop to his knees and hand her his heart? He fought the urge back.

“What *maedel* wants a bee farmer?” He shrugged.

Belinda thought about that for a moment, then smiled. “One who doesn’t want a farmer who smells like he mucked stalls all day,” she quipped playfully. Adam laughed. She reached out. “My flowers,” she said, “before you squash the

stems, please. I like to put them on the table for Mammi to see first thing in the morn."

Adam handed over the mix of wild and tame blooms, his gaze narrowing on her. "Not a one limp or bruised," he assured. "It might surprise you, considering my behavior of late, but I do know how to handle delicate things." They held each other's gaze for longer than what seemed proper for friends who had declared no romantic interest.