

## Chapter One

*Seven Poplars, Kent County Delaware, Autumn*

Rebecca Yoder stole another secret glance at the new preacher before ducking behind an oak tree. Today had been delightful; she couldn't remember when she'd last enjoyed a barn raising so much. Leaning back against the sturdy trunk of the broad-leaved oak, she slipped off her black athletic shoes and wiggled her bare feet in the sweet-smelling clover. It may have been October, but fair weather often lingered late into autumn in Delaware, and the earth was still warm under her feet.

She and her friends, Mary Byler and Lilly Hershberger, had been busy since sunup, cooking, helping to mind the children and squeezing dozens and dozens of lemons to make lemonade for the work frolic. It seemed that half the Amish in the county, and more than a few from out of state, had come to help rebuild the new preacher Caleb Wittner's barn and everyone—from toddlers to white-haired elders—had been hungry.

As adult women, a great deal of the heavy work of feeding people fell to them. Rebecca didn't mind—she was happy to help—and work frolics were fun. A change from everyday farm chores was always welcome, and gatherings like these gave young people from different church districts an opportunity to meet and socialize. Getting to know eligible men was the first step in courtship, as the eventual goal of every Amish girl was finding a husband.

Not that she would be in the market for one for some time. Technically, at twenty-one, she was old enough to marry, but she liked her life as it was. Her older sisters had all found wonderful husbands, and she intended to take her time and choose the right man. Good men didn't exactly grow on trees and she wouldn't settle for just anyone. Marriage was for a lifetime and she didn't want to choose in haste. If she couldn't have someone who loved her in a romantic way, she'd remain single.

Rebecca yawned and rubbed at the back of her neck. This was the first chance that she, Mary and Lilly, all of courting age, had found to take a break. Here, under the shade trees, they could take a few minutes to relax, talk and enjoy some of the delicious food they'd been serving to the men all afternoon. The fact that their chosen spot was slightly private while offering a perfect view of the young men pulling rotted siding off the old barn was a definite plus.

"I don't care how eligible Caleb Wittner is. I wouldn't want him." Balancing her plate of food, Mary folded her long legs gracefully under her as she lowered herself onto the grass. Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper as she leaned toward Rebecca. "Amish or not, I tell you, I wouldn't set foot in that man's house again, not even for double wages."

Lilly's curly head bobbed in agreement beneath her spotlessly starched prayer *kapp*. "Didn't I tell you? I warned you before you took the job, Mary. I learned the hard way. He's impossible to please, and that child of his..." Lilly rolled her dark eyes and raised both hands in mock horror, causing a round of mirth. Blond, round-faced Lilly had a sweet disposition and had been a loyal pal since the three of them had gone to school together as children, but Rebecca knew she was prone to exaggeration.

Actually, Lilly and she had been first graders when they'd met. Mary had been older, but that hadn't stopped her from taking the newcomers under her wing and helping them adjust to being away from their mothers all day. The friendship that had kindled around the school's potbellied woodstove had only grown stronger with each passing year. And since all of them had left their school days behind and become of courting age, not a week went by without the three of them attending a young

folks' singing, a trip to Spence's Auction, or some sort of frolic together. To cement the bond even more, Mary's brother Charley had married Rebecca's sister Miriam, which made kinship an added blessing. So tight was hers and Mary's friendship that Rebecca often worried how she'd stand it if she married out of the community and had to move away.

"Seriously." Rebecca nibbled at a stuffed egg and returned to the subject of Caleb Wittner's mischievous daughter. "She's a four-year-old. How bad could she be?"

"Oh, she's pretty awful." Mary chuckled as she tucked a stray lock of fine, honey-brown hair behind her ear. "Don't let those big, innocent eyes fool you. Turn your back on that girl and she's stuffing a dead mouse in your apron pocket and tying knots in your shoestrings."

"Together," Lilly added with a grimace. "She tied my church shoes together so tight I had to cut the laces to get them apart. And while I was trying to sort them out, she dumped a crock of honey on the sermon her father had been writing."

"I think you two are being uncharitable," Rebecca pronounced. She eyed one of Aunt Martha's famous pickled carrots on her plate. "And letting your imaginations run away with you." Her attempt at reining in her friends' criticism of Caleb and Amelia Wittner was spoiled by another giggle that she couldn't contain. Mary was terrified of mice. Rebecca could just picture Mary's face when she'd slipped a hand into her pocket and come up with a dead rodent.

"That's not the half of it," Mary went on. "Amelia's impossible, but her father..." She pursed her lips. "He's worse. Short-tempered. Never a kind word for me when I came to watch his daughter. Have you ever seen him smile? Even at church? It's a wonder his face doesn't freeze in winter. He—" Mary broke off abruptly and her face flushed. "I didn't mean..." She shook her head. "I wasn't mocking his scars."

"I didn't think you were," Rebecca assured her. The three of them fell silent for a minute or two, and even Rebecca, who hadn't been critical of the new preacher, felt a little guilty. Caleb had suffered a terrible burn in the fire that had killed his wife. One side of his face was perfectly acceptable, pleasant-looking even, but the other...And his left hand...She shivered. God's mercy had saved him and little Amelia, but had left Caleb a marked man. She swallowed the lump rising in her throat. Who could blame him if he was morose and sad?

"Ya." Lilly took a small bite of fried chicken and went on talking. "It's true that Caleb Wittner is a grouch. And it's not uncharitable to speak the truth about someone. He's nothing like our old Preacher Perry. I miss him."

"We all do." Rebecca sipped at her lemonade, wondering if she'd made it too tart for most people. She liked it as she liked most things—with a bit of a bite. "Preacher Perry always had a joke or a funny story for everyone. What is that English expression? His cup was always full?"

Perry's sudden heart attack and subsequent passing had been a shock to the whole community, but nothing like the surprise of having newcomer Caleb Wittner selected, within weeks of his arrival in Seven Poplars, to take his place as preacher. The position was for life, and his role as shepherd of their church would affect each and every one of them.

"You have to admit that Caleb and Amelia have certainly livened things up in the neighborhood," Rebecca added.

The coming of the new preacher was the most exciting thing that had happened in Seven Poplars since Grace—her secret half-sister—had appeared on their back porch in a rainstorm two years ago.

Without being obvious, she glanced back at the barn, hoping to catch another glimpse of her new neighbor. There were two men pulling a large piece of rotten sideboard down; one was Will Stutzman,

easy to recognize by his purple shirt, and the other was her brother-in-law, John Hartman, Grace's husband. Caleb Wittner was nowhere in sight. Disappointed, she finished the last few bites of her potato salad and rose to her feet. "We'd better get back and help clear away the desserts before someone comes looking for us."

Her friends stood up as well. "I wonder if there's any of your sister Anna's *apfelstrudel* left?" Lilly said. "I think I could make room for just one slice."

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More than two hours later, as the purple shadows of twilight settled over Caleb's farmstead, Rebecca returned to the trees near the barn to retrieve her shoes. Most of the families who'd come to work and visit had already packed up and gone home. Only a few of those who lived nearby, including her sisters Miriam and Ruth, and their husbands remained. Rebecca had been ready to go when she realized that she was still barefoot; she'd had to stop and think where and when she'd removed her sneakers.

"I remember where they are now," she said to her mother, Hannah, who was just climbing into their buggy. "You and Susanna go on home. I'll go fetch my shoes and see you there." Home was around the corner and across the street. She could just walk.

Mam and Susanna waved and their buggy rolled down the driveway, followed by her sisters and brothers-in-law behind them.

"You want us to wait?" Miriam called as Charley brought their wagon around to head down the driveway.

"I'm fine." Rebecca waved. "See you tomorrow!" As the sun set, she turned to go in search of her shoes.

The barn stood some distance from Caleb's home, which was a neat story-and-a-half 1920s-era brick house. English people had remodeled the house over the years, but left the big post and beam barn to slowly fall into disrepair. Although the roof and siding had deteriorated, the frame of the barn remained sound.

It was the potential of the barn and outbuildings that had drawn Caleb to the ten-acre property, according to Rebecca's brother-in-law Eli. Even though it was quickly getting dark, Rebecca had no problem finding her shoes. They were lying by the tree, exactly as she'd left them. She thrust her foot into the left one and was just lacing it up when she heard a pitiful meow. She glanced around. It sounded like a cat. . . No, not a cat, a kitten. Rebecca held her breath and listened, trying to locate the source of the distressed animal. She hadn't seen any cats on the property today. In fact, when she'd been serving at the first meal seating, she'd distinctly heard Caleb say that he didn't like cats.

That had been a strike against him. Rebecca had always liked cats better than dogs. Cats were... they were independent. They didn't give affection lightly, but once they'd decided that you were to be trusted, they could be a great source of company. And they kept a house free of mice. Rebecca had always believed cats to be smart, and there was nothing like a purring cat curled in her lap at the end of a long day to soothe her troubles and put her in the right mind for prayer.

*Meowl.* The plaintive cry of distress came again, louder than before. It was definitely a kitten; the sound was coming from the shadowy barn. As Rebecca stepped into her other shoe, she glanced in the direction of the house and yard, then back at the barn. Maybe the mother was out hunting and had left a nest of little ones in a safe spot. One of the kittens could have wandered away from the others and gotten lost.

*Mee-oo-wwwwlll.*

That settled it. There was no way that she could go home and abandon the little creature without investigation. Otherwise, she'd lie awake all night worrying if it was injured or in danger. Shoes tied, she strode across the leaf-strewn ground toward the barn.

Today hadn't been a proper barn raising because the men hadn't built a new barn; they'd stripped the old one to a shell. Tomorrow the men would return, accompanied by a volunteer group from the local Mennonite Church and other Amish men who hadn't been able to take a Friday off. They'd nail up new exterior siding and put on a roof. The Amish women would return at noon with a hearty lunch and supper for the workers.

Rebecca looked up at the barn that loomed skeleton-like in the semidarkness. She wasn't easily scared, but heavy shadows already lay deep in the structure's interior, and she wished she'd thought to come back for her shoes earlier.

She stepped over a pile of fresh lumber and listened again. This time it was easy to tell that a kitten was definitely crying and it was coming from above her head. Only one section of the old loft floor remained; the planks were unsound and full of holes. The rest was open space all the way to the roof, two stories above, divided by beams. Tomorrow, men would tear out the rest of the old floor, toss down the rotten wood to be burned, and hammer down new boards.

*Meow.*

Rebecca glanced dubiously at the wooden ladder leaning against the interior hall framing. Darkness had already settled over the interior of the barn. It was difficult to see more than a few feet, but she could see well enough to know that there was no solid floor above her. The sensible thing would be to leave and return in the morning. By then, the mother cat would probably have returned for her kitten and the problem would be solved. At the very least, Rebecca knew she should walk back to Caleb's house to get a flashlight.

But what if the kitten fell? Nine lives or not, the loft was a good fourteen feet from the concrete floor. The baby couldn't survive such trauma. And what if it got cold tonight? It was already much cooler than it had been this afternoon when the sun was shining. She didn't know if the kitten could survive a night without its mama. What she *did* know was that she didn't have the heart to abandon the kitten. Making up her mind, she started up the ladder.

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Caleb tucked his sleeping daughter into bed; it was early for bedtime, but she'd had a long day. He covered her with a light blanket, and placed her rag doll under her arm. He never picked it up without a lump of sadness tightening in his throat. Dinah had sewn the doll for Amelia before the child was born. It was small and soft and stuffed with quilt batting. Dinah's skillful fingers had placed every stitch with love and skill, and Baby, with her blank face and tangled hair, was Amelia's most cherished possession.

He paused to push a lock of dark hair off the child's forehead. Amelia had crawled up into the rocking chair and fallen asleep when Caleb was seeing the last of his neighbors off. He hadn't even had time to bathe her before carrying her upstairs to the small, whitewashed room across the hall from his own bedchamber. A mother would likely wake a drowsy child to wash her and put her in a clean nightgown before putting her to bed, but there was no mother.

It seemed to Caleb that a sleeping child ought to be left to sleep in peace. It was only natural that active *kinner* got dirty in the course of a busy day. Morning would be good enough for soap and water before breakfast.

"God keep you," he murmured, turning away from the bed. To the dog, standing in the doorway, he said, "Fritzy. *Bescher!*" Obediently, the black Standard Poodle dropped to a sitting position and

fixed his attention on Amelia.

Absently, Caleb's hand rose to stroke the gnarled side of his face where only a sparse and ragged beard grew. The burned flesh that had pained him so fiercely in the days after the fire had finally healed. Now, he had no feeling in the area at all.

Some said that he'd been lucky that his mouth hadn't been twisted, that his speech remained much as it had always been, but Caleb didn't agree. Luck would have been reaching his wife before the smoke had claimed her life. Luck would have been that Dinah and he and Amelia could have built a new home and continued their lives as before. A small voice whispered from the far corner of his consciousness that he asked too much of God, that the blessing had been that his daughter had come out of that inferno alive.

He did not blame God. The fire that had consumed their farmhouse had been an accident...a gust of wind...a spark from a lamp. It was never determined, but as Caleb saw it, the fault, if there was fault, had been his. He had not protected his family, and his precious wife had been lost to him and his beloved child.

"Watch over her," he ordered the dog. With Fritzy on duty, Caleb was free to check that his horse was safe, that the toolshed doors were locked and that all was secure.

Flat, green Delaware was a long way from the dry highlands of Idaho and the Old Order Amish community that he'd left behind. After the fire and the death of his wife, Caleb had tried to do as his bishop had urged. He'd tried to pick up his life and carry on for the sake of his child. He'd even gone so far as to consider, after a year, courting a plump widow with a kind face who belonged to his church. But the bitter memories of his past had haunted him, and he'd decided to try to pick up the pieces of his life somewhere new. In Idaho, there had been no family ties to hold him. Here, where his cousin Eli lived, things might be better. It had to be good for Amelia to grow up with relatives, and Eli's wife had six sisters. A woman's hand was what Amelia needed, he told himself.

Caleb left the kitchen and walked out into the yard. All was quiet. His house was far enough off the road that he wasn't bothered by the sounds of passing traffic. There were several sheds and a decent stable for the horse. The old barn, a survivor from earlier times than the house, stood farther back. Caleb was pleased with the work that had been done on it today. Alone, it would have taken him months. There were good people here, people that he instinctively knew he could trust. He prayed to God that this move to Delaware had been the right one for both him and Amelia.

He walked on a little farther, drawn by the sweet scent of new wood that lay stacked, ready and waiting for the following day. He stood for a moment in the semidarkness and gazed up at the exposed beams. He thought about the laughter and the camaraderie during their work today. Everyone had been kind to him and Amelia, trying to make them feel welcome. And he *had* felt welcome...but he hadn't felt as if he was a part of the community. He still felt like an outsider, looking in through a glass-paned window, hearing their laughter, but not feeling it. And he so *wanted* to feel laughter again.

Caleb was about to turn back to the house when he heard a thud and then a clatter from the barn. Something had fallen or been knocked over inside the building. Had some animal wandered in? Or did he have a curious intruder? "Who's there?" he called as he approached the open front wall.

"Just me," came a woman's voice from high above.

Caleb stepped inside and looked up to see a shadowy form swaying on a loft floor beam. A sense of panic went through him and he raised both hands. "Stop! Don't move!"

"I'm fine. I just—" Her foot slipped and she swayed precariously, arms outstretched, before recovering her balance.

Caleb gasped. "Stay where you are," he ordered. "I'm coming up."

"I'll be fine." She lowered herself down onto the beam until she was kneeling. "It's just hard to see. Do you have a flashlight?"

"What in the name of common sense are you doing in my loft, woman?" He ran for the ladder and climbed it at double speed. "Ne! Don't move."

"I don't need your help," she said, taking a sassy tone with him. Rising to her feet again, she began traversing the beam toward him.

"I told you to stay put!" Caleb had never been afraid of heights, but he was all too aware of the distance to the concrete floor and the possibility of serious injury or death if one or both of them fell. He stood cautiously, finding his balance, then stepped slowly toward her.

"Go back," she insisted. "I can do this."

"*Ya*, maybe you can," he answered gruffly. "Or maybe you can't, and I'll have to scrape you up off my barn floor with a shovel." He quickly closed the distance between them, reached out and swept her up in his arms.