

Chapter One

Kent County, Delaware...June

Dorcas Coblentz walked at a brisk pace, eager to reach Sara Yoder's farm. Today was going to be an exciting day; she could feel it. She just wished her mother hadn't insisted that she wear her church shoes to her new job. They were black leather oxfords, old-fashioned, heavy and exactly like the ones her *grossmama* wore. Dorcas understood the value of *Plain* shoes that would hold up to mud and rain, but these were more suited to a sixty-year-old woman than one less than half that age.

And they had rubbed a blister on the big toe of her left foot.

It didn't matter that they were the same size her *mam* had been buying for her since she was fourteen; this pair had never fit right. Dorcas had tried to explain the problem to her, but as long as she lived under her parents' roof, she would be allowed little choice in her own clothing. No one ever asked for her opinion on anything, and when she dared give it, she wasn't taken seriously. Martha and Reuben Coblentz believed that a girl's parents should make decisions for her until she moved into her husband's home. Then it was *his* responsibility to make those decisions. What was funny about that idea was that, as far as she could tell, it was her mother who made all the decisions in their house.

Dorcas sighed as she walked along the wooded path between her parents' property and Sara's. Dealing with her parents was becoming more and more frustrating. She should have been married years ago, like her pretty Yoder cousins. Then she would have had her own husband, household and children. It wasn't that she didn't love her parents or honor them, as the Bible told her she must. But every once in a while, Dorcas longed to have more independence. Almost as much as she longed for a beau.

That thought elicited another long sigh from Dorcas.

She'd just learned that chubby Barbara Beachy had a young man courting her, a man with his own horse and buggy. And Barbara was barely seventeen. Sunday, Barbara had confided in Dorcas that she should try prayer to find a husband. The thing was, Dorcas *had* been praying for one every night since she was fifteen. Maybe that was where she had made her mistake. Maybe it wasn't right to pray for a husband. Good health, rain, even patience—she could understand asking God for those things. But maybe bothering Him about a husband was irreverent. Maybe that's why she'd never had a boy ask her to a singing, or even offer her a ride home from a frolic.

Dorcas straightened her thin shoulders and walked a little faster. Now her right shoe was rubbing her heel, which took her mind off the left foot a little. She didn't want to be late on her first day at her new job. It was important to make a good impression on cousin Sara, who was new to Seven Poplars, and—her *mam* said—rich enough to set sausage, bacon and scrapple on her breakfast table every morning. Sara had offered to pay Dorcas well for her assistance in getting settled into her new house, and then, if things worked out, Dorcas would continue to help with cleaning and cooking on a regular basis.

Dorcas caught a flash of the hem of her dress and smiled to herself. Her shoes were awful, but at least she could be happy with her new dress. Her *mam* had paid cousin Johanna to sew it for her, and the material was the nicest that Dorcas had ever worn. It was the prettiest shade of lavender; she'd never had a lavender dress before. Her mother always chose dark colors for her. This morning, she had covered it with a full-length work apron. The fabric felt soft against her skin and made her smile every time she looked down at it.

Dorcas's own sewing wasn't that good. She supposed that she could have done a better job if their treadle machine didn't keep breaking the thread and grinding to a stop in the middle of a straight seam. Finances were tight in their home, and her *mam* said the old, worn-out sewing machine was the least of their worries. Dorcas was glad to have an opportunity to help her family by working for Sara. Her *dat* had promised that she could keep part of her wages, and it was exciting to think that, for the first time ever, she'd have money to spend as she chose.

Dorcas intended to work hard for Sara and prove that picking her, when she could have had any of a dozen unmarried girls in Seven Poplars, had been the best choice. Dorcas had been so eager to start that she'd hurried through oatmeal, stewed prunes and coffee this morning, not even taking time for toast and apple butter. And wanting to be there early, she decided to cut through the woods by the old logging road rather than walk down the blacktop from their farm to Sara's place.

There was no gate at the end of the woods road, just a four-foot high wire fence, overgrown in a morass of poison ivy, thorns and wild roses. There was an old wooden ladder, a stile, to get over it. Almost to the stile, Dorcas stopped and shifted her right foot inside her shoe. She was definitely working on a blister on her heel. She glanced up in indecision. It was another quarter of a mile to the farmhouse. How was that going to look to Sara if her new employee showed up for her first day of work limping like a foundered mare?

The clunky shoes just weren't going to do today.

Dorcas glanced around, hands on her hips. The path was used by plenty of the neighbors, but there was no one in sight. No one would ever know. She quickly untied her shoes, slipped out of them and removed her black stockings. Into the shoes the stockings went, then she put them behind a tree. They would be safe there, and she could retrieve them on her way home, without her mother being any the wiser.

With the grass delightfully cool beneath her feet, Dorcas gazed up at the fence. While the rungs on the stile were old and covered with moss, she knew she could easily climb them. Without any trouble, she scrambled up. She'd taken the first step on the far side, when suddenly wood cracked under one foot. As she started to fall, Dorcas threw out her arms and windmilled, in an attempt to catch her balance. It was too late. She tumbled sideways and somehow fell headfirst into the tangle of fencing, vines and briars.

"*Ach!*" she cried as she hit the ground.

One shoulder had slammed into the wooden fence post as she went down, and for an instant, the wind was knocked out of her. Dorcas lay caught in a snare of green briars and stared up dizzily at the bright blue sky. How did these things happen to her? She was a good girl who obeyed her parents and tried to follow the laws of God. Things like this were not supposed to happen—not on the first day of work at her very first job!

Dorcas's right knee and the palm of her left hand burned; she was sure she'd cut herself on something. Her knee felt as though the flesh had been gouged, and she felt a warm trickle of blood.

Her eyes welled up suddenly, as much from disappointment as pain. Today was *not* supposed to go like this. Today was a new start. She'd decided that this morning when she'd risen from her morning prayers.

But Dorcas wasn't a crier. She'd learned long ago that tears didn't do a body a bit of good. She shoved her dress over her bare legs and tried to sit up, but the briars scratched her arms and legs, seeming to pull her down. The harder she tried to get up, the more it hurt. She lay back for a second to think. How was she going to get out of the hedgerow without further injuring herself? Maybe if she could get her feet beneath her, she could wiggle her way out. Dorcas rolled to one side, only to find

that her skirt was snagged on a splinter of the fence post. She rolled onto her back and tried to free the material, but she couldn't work it loose. The only way she could get free, at this angle, would be to tear the dress off the post.

Her throat constricted. Now she *wanted* to cry. Her *mam* had warned her to wear her old burgundy-colored dress, but it was patched and scandalously short, sewn for her when she was younger and hadn't yet grown to such an unseemly height. She'd so badly wanted to wear the pretty new dress on her first day of work. Now she was paying the price for her vanity.

"*Was in der welt?*" It was a male voice.

Dorcas froze.

"Are you hurt?" He switched to English.

Dorcas tried wildly to think who it could be. He was Amish. She could tell that by his use of the *Deitsch* dialect. But she couldn't recognize this stranger's voice, which didn't make any sense. Seven Poplars was a small community; she knew everyone.

Heat flashed under the skin of her throat and cheeks. If she could have suddenly made herself invisible, she would have. Frantically, she drew her legs up, attempting to cover her bare shins. "I'm caught," she managed, her voice coming out in a squeak. "My dress..."

The sun was so bright that when she looked up, she could only make out the silhouette of the stranger as he leaned over her and closed his hands around her shoulders. "*Ne, maedle*, lie still."

His husky voice was rich and compassionate. She squinted in the sunshine. This was no lad, but neither did his tone have the weight and gravity of age—a young man, then. Which was even worse. She clamped her eyes shut, hoping the ground would swallow her up.

"Easy," he said. "I'm just going to—"

She felt the tension on her dress suddenly loosen.

"There you go."

At once, she tried to struggle to her feet, but she couldn't find anything solid to grab on to. Before she could protest, he had wrapped his arms around her and was lifting her out of the briars.

He cradled her against him, one arm under the backs of her knees, the other supporting her shoulders. "Best I get you to Sara and have her take a look at that knee. Might need stitches." Instead of putting her down, he turned and started to walk across the field toward Sara's.

Dorcas opened her eyes and looked into a broad, shaven face framed by shaggy, butter-blond hair that hung almost to his wide shoulders. He was the most attractive man, Amish or English, she had ever laid eyes on. She parted her lips, but words wouldn't come. He was too beautiful to be real, this man with merry, pewter-gray eyes and suntanned skin.

I must have hit the post with my head and knocked myself silly, she thought.

She was breathless again, but now it wasn't from the fall. Other than her father, she'd never been this close to a man. And this one was so large, so beautiful. And his smell. She didn't know a man could smell so good. A small part of her brain registered the thin, patched shirt with its frayed collar, as she took more of the details in. This dream man was even more poorly dressed than her father.

"I can...I should..." She pushed against his shoulders, thinking she should walk. She could

certainly walk.

“*Ne*, not on that knee. It may need stitches. If you try to walk, you could do yourself more harm.” He shifted her weight. “You’ll be more comfortable if you put your arms around my neck.”

“I...I,” she mumbled, but she did as he said. He kept walking. She knew that this was improper, but she couldn’t figure out what to do, what to say. The sun shone warm on her face; she could hear a mockingbird singing.

“You must be the little cousin Sara said was coming to help her today,” he said. “I’m Gideon, her hired man. Gideon Esch. I just arrived last night from Cashton.”

Little cousin? Gideon’s words sifted through her tumbled thoughts. Little? She was five foot eleven, a giant compared to most of the local women, and taller than three quarters of the men in her community. She almost giggled. No one had ever called her *little* before. But what came out was only, “*Vo?*” She’d never heard of Cashton.

“Wisconsin. My home.” He smiled down at her, and sunlight lit his face. His eyebrows were fair and neat, his face clean-shaven. *He wasn’t married.* Her heart pounded.

She didn’t know what to say. She had to say something, didn’t she? “The...stile...step broke,” she managed.

“I saw. Falling into that fence. You could have been seriously hurt.”

She nodded. Gulped. Maybe this was a dream...

“You don’t say much, do you?” He looked down at her in his arms and grinned. “Not like my sisters, eight of them. Talk, talk, talk, all the time, until a man can’t hear himself think. You know what I mean?”

Dorcas nodded again.

He grinned. “I like you, little cousin. Do you have a name?”

“Dorcas. Dorcas Coblentz.”

The gray eyes narrowed, and Gideon shook his head. “You don’t look like a Dorcas to me.”

What was she supposed to say to *that*? She’d never thought her name suited her, either, but it had never mattered. Dorcas was the name her parents had given her at birth.

He stopped walking to look down at her with a serious face. “I don’t suppose you have a middle name?”

She nodded. “Adelaide.”

“Better.” He grinned down at her. “Adelaide,” he repeated. “Addy. That’s what I’ll call you. You look a lot more like an Addy than you do a Dorcas.”

“Addy?” The syllables rolled off her tongue, not quite the same as the way Gideon said it with his Wisconsin *Deutsch* accent, but well enough. The idea settled over her as easily as warm maple syrup over blueberry pancakes. “Addy,” she repeated, and then she found herself smiling back at him. Addy was such a pretty name.

Dorcas wasn’t pretty. She had never been pretty. Her parents and grandmother had made that clear to her as a child. “Teach that one to cook,” her *grossmama* had declared on the morning of her first

day of school. “She’s as plain of face as you were, Martha, too tall for a girl and skinny as a broom handle. And that mouth...” Her grandmother had spread her hands hopelessly. “Be firm with Dorcas while she’s young, or I warn you, you’ll have an old maid on your hands, just like my sister Jezzy.”

“Almost there, Addy,” Gideon said, bringing her back to the present.

She opened her eyes, half expecting to find that it wasn’t a handsome young man carrying her across the field, but some shriveled-up old farmer with straw in his beard and hair growing out of his ears.

But there he was. Dorcas sighed with relief, as a smile bubbled up and spilled out of her wide mouth and spread across her face. *Gideon Esch*—a perfect name for any *Plain* girl’s secret wishing.

“Gideon Esch! *Was in der welt?*”

Dorcas turned her head to see Sara Yoder drop her basket of laundry at the clothesline.

She hurried toward them, apron flying. “How bad is she hurt?”

“The stile broke on the south fence line, and she fell into the hedgerow. She cut her knee on a nail, I think. She might need a tetanus shot,” Gideon told Sara.

“Had one this year,” Dorcas squeaked.

“I thought...it might not be *goot* for her to walk on it.”

Sara looked at Dorcas then at Gideon and then back at Dorcas again. Her dark eyes narrowed, and something passed over her caramel-colored face. A thought Dorcas couldn’t identify. Then Sara’s eyes snapped wide and she said sternly, “Dorcas, have you lost your mind? Unless you’ve got broken bones protruding from that knee, you’d best get out of Gideon’s arms this instant!”

Dorcas’s fantasy evaporated as she realized how inappropriate this must look to her new employer. She squeezed Gideon’s shoulders. “Put me down,” she urged. “Now!”

He let go of her, practically dropping her, then thought the better of it and caught her before she hit the ground. Holding her under her arms, he gingerly tilted her upright.

Dorcas took a single step, winced and looked down at her leg. Below the hem of her torn, blood-stained dress, a thin trickle of blood oozed down her shin. “It’s not so bad,” she said.

“I think it might need stitches,” Gideon protested.

Sara leaned over and carefully raised the hem of Dorcas’s dress high enough to examine her knee, but not so high as to expose too much leg to Gideon. “Don’t be silly,” she huffed. “A little soap and water, maybe a butterfly bandage, and that knee will be as good as new.” She stood up, lowering Dorcas’s dress hem. “Into the house with you. Come along.” She turned on her heels and started for the back door.

Dorcas hobbled after her. As they reached the porch, she glanced over her shoulder to see Gideon still standing there in his shabby, patched clothes and battered straw hat. Her cheeks burned, but beneath the flush of embarrassment, her skin still tingled with the excitement of Gideon’s touch.

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After supper that evening, Gideon sat in Sara’s kitchen and watched as she and Ellie cleared away the dishes and put the room in order. Although he was new to Sara’s, the familiar routine felt comforting. He liked this time of night at home, when supper was over and there was time to talk as

the day came to an end.

The house in Wisconsin where he had grown up had always buzzed with the female chatter of a bevy of sisters, both older and younger than he was. And his mother reigned over them all. Sara reminded him of his mother in a lot of ways. She wasn't stern, but she had a commanding way about her. And she was every bit the cook his mother was. Sara Yoder set a fine table, and the bountiful meal had included a fine sage sausage and the excellent cheddar cheese one of his sisters had tucked into his suitcase. Although coming to Delaware hadn't been his choice, it appeared as though his stay might not be unpleasant, after all.

Ellie, who was a *little person*, had set a stool at the sink and was washing dishes while Sara dried. They were an unusual pair, and would have stood out in any group of Amish women, but both were interesting and good company. How the two had come to live together, he didn't know yet, but he had already learned that diminutive Ellie was the new schoolteacher in Seven Poplars. The previous teacher, Sara's cousin Hannah Yoder, had recently wed and, like most Old Order Amish women, had chosen to stay at home with her husband rather than work full-time. Ellie would begin teaching in September.

Gideon's gaze shifted to Sara. He guessed she was between forty and fifty years of age. She wasn't that tall, about his mother's height, but that was where the physical resemblance ended. His mother's hair was as yellow-blond as his own, but Sara's was walnut-brown and so curly as to be almost crinkly, what he could see of it under her prayer *kapp*. Her skin was the color of his morning coffee, a chocolate with extra dollops of heavy cream. Sara was a puzzle: not black, not white, but an exotic mixture. She was unusual because most Amish were as pale as winter cream.

Ellie, in contrast, was in her early twenties, and although she was the shortest girl he'd ever known, barely four foot tall, she was quite attractive, with her neat little figure, blond hair and blue eyes. Ellie's freckled face was as fair as any of his sisters', and she was always smiling and laughing. He liked her. Not in the romantic way that a fella might like an unmarried girl, but in a brotherly way. Within the first few moments of meeting Sara and Ellie at the bus station in Dover, he had known that he and Ellie would be good friends.

Sara seemed more serious, though she certainly didn't seem unwilling to laugh. She had a take-charge attitude and a determined gleam in her dark eyes. Just the kind of woman one would expect to be a matchmaker. Though Sara was the *only* matchmaker he'd ever met.

Sara was the reason he was here in Seven Poplars, a thousand miles from home. Although he wasn't ready to settle down yet, his parents were eager for him to take a wife and start raising a household of little Esches. They'd been trying to match him up, unsuccessfully, with one local girl after another for years. Coming to Seven Poplars had been a way to escape his family's good intentions, yet he had quickly realized that it was a little bit like jumping out of the kettle into the fire.

Gideon had promised his mother and father that he would help Sara settle in to her new farm and, while he was there, let her look into finding him a suitable wife. What he hadn't told them was that just because the matchmaker might find him a girl, that didn't mean he would be willing to walk out with her.

Gideon simply wasn't certain that he was ready to marry; he still enjoyed being single too much. He loved women, young and old, tall and short, plump, thin, and in between. He liked to watch them as they walked and as they sat in service, heads nodding as gracefully as swans as the preacher delivered the sermon. And he never tired of hearing female laughter. He loved escorting girls to frolics and singings, and he even enjoyed the workdays when unmarried men and women would join forces to help someone in the Amish community.

He didn't believe, as many Amish men did, that females should keep to the house and minding of

children. Not at all. Having such a gaggle of sisters who helped with the family business had taught him that women could be just as clever and hardworking as men. Respect for the opposite sex, Gideon possessed aplenty. What he didn't have was a desire to give up his bachelor's fun and settle down with just one *fräulein*. And he highly doubted that any eager girl that Sara could dangle in front of him would cause him to change his mind.

He was thirty years old, and his parents had been making decisions for him since he was born. He had honored them as the Bible instructed. He loved them as they loved him, as they loved his sisters. He'd always been a dutiful son. He'd studied the craft his father expected him to follow, and he'd joined the church at twenty-one, as his family had urged. Every day, he tried to live the life his family and faith inspired. But he would not marry a bride someone else thought was right for him, and he wouldn't be rushed into matrimony until he was good and ready—which, if he had his druthers, would be five, maybe even ten years in the future.