

Starting
from
Scratch

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STARTING FROM SCRATCH

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To my cousin

Alex McBrien

ONE

*M*amm peered out my bedroom window as buggy wheels crunched to a halt in the barnyard.

“Ach, Evie.” She spoke over her shoulder. “Reuben and Marta are here. Two days early.”

I wasn’t packed yet, but I plastered on a smile and said, “*Wunderbaar*,” as if my whole world weren’t being turned upside down.

I flew to the window to see my brother’s boisterous family of five gathering boxes from their buggy and making their way up the porch steps to the back door.

Minutes later, Marta, my tall and angular sister-in-law, marched into my bedroom and gave me a one-armed embrace. “Almost finished packing?”

“Uh, not yet. We thought you were coming the day after tomorrow.”

Marta straightened my prayer *kapp* and tied the strings under my chin as if I were one of her daughters. “Well, now I can help ya, but you should have already started.” Marta’s gaze landed on my unmade bed. “Where’s your suitcase?” She shouted to her twin daughters. “*Kumm rei*, Nancy and Mary Lou. Help your *aendi* move out.”

“I’m the one who needs help,” *Mamm* said, I figured for my benefit. “Want to see the *daadi haus*, girls?” She called to them as she started down the stairs to the kitchen. My prudent mother had already thoroughly cleaned and moved my father’s and her clothing into the small

house attached to a corner of the larger home. My grandparents had resided there before their deaths.

“*Ach*, we packed our belongings yesterday and rose at dawn to get here.” Marta let out a weary yawn. “Our landlord was badgering us to leave or he’d charge us another month’s rent. And your *bruder* was determined we get here today. He’s so excited. But we should have called you first.”

My brother Reuben now owned the property and would run the farm so *Dat* could retire.

“Not a problem,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“You do want my help packing, don’t ya?” Marta asked. “Our *dochders* are dying to sleep in here tonight.”

“They could sleep with me.” I straightened my sheets, blanket, and the Lone Star quilt my grandmother made for me when I was a girl. “We can have a slumber party.”

“*Nee*, they need to turn in early. We all stayed up too late last night.” Her eyes squinted above her beaky nose. “I regret having to say this, but if you’d found yourself a *gut* husband, we wouldn’t be in this awkward predicament.”

Her words harpooned into my chest. “You may be right.” I recalled the sermon one of our ministers expounded in church last Sunday: Turn the other cheek. “Okay, I’ll get ready right now. I’m sure *Dat* won’t mind taking me today instead.”

“I hope you know I’m speaking the truth in love, Evie.” She gave me a quick, unexpected one-armed hug. “You may have made mistakes, but I never bought into those rumors.”

Ach. I didn’t want to rehash them. “*Denki*.”

Marta called down the stairway. “Reuben, will you please bring up an empty suitcase for your *schweschder*?” Then she sashayed over to my solid-colored dresses and black aprons hanging on hooks on the wall. Her long arms scooped up the clothes as if they were sheaves of harvested wheat. Before I could open my mouth to ask her to stop, she tossed them on the bed atop the quilt. I hoped my new bed

would be big enough to accommodate it. Well, of course it would. Yet I'd neglected to inquire how my future abode was furnished. I should have asked a myriad of questions before accepting the job working in the nursery. But my favorite cousin, Olivia, insisted I pounce on the job before someone else did. For some reason, she'd recently given up her position managing the café there, but she insisted the nursery was a good place to work.

As I gathered my toiletries, my mind spun like a windmill during a tempest. I'd planned to drive *Dat's* buggy to the nursery today to meet the owner and survey my new home, described as a cute cottage by Olivia. Sometimes she embellished her descriptions, but I'd be happy with a storage shed now that Marta was here.

Olivia told me the place had been recently vacated by an aged housekeeper who'd lived there until she moved to Indiana to reside with a niece. The dwelling was strictly Amish, meaning no electrical wires or telephone. Propane lights illuminated the interior, and a small refrigerator and gas stove provided cooking options. But I'd forgotten to ask if it had an indoor bathroom or an outhouse.

Reuben lumbered up the stairs and opened a suitcase on my bed. Marta gave him a look of appreciation—an outward show of affection was *verboden* in our Amish community. I figured she rarely showed him affection even in private. Yet they had three children, so who was I to look down on her? She and my brother shared a harmonious marriage, while I seemed doomed to be single the rest of my life.

A few minutes later I sat on the suitcase's lid while Marta fastened the metal latches with gusto. I'd known this day would come, so why was I discombobulated? For one thing, I'd hoped to leave with dignity and leisure, not feel as though I was being booted out of the house like a stray cat.

"There. Now you're all packed." Marta grabbed hold of the handle and lugged the suitcase down the stairs. Following her into the kitchen, I scanned the only home I'd ever known. I recalled an abundance of fond memories, sitting at the kitchen table with my parents

and brother, helping *Mamm* wash the dishes after meals. I hadn't wanted to live here forever, but I felt the weight of defeat. I'd expected to be married by now, with children of my own.

"Darling *dochter*, you don't have to leave us." *Dat* stepped toward me from the utility room. "We have that spare bedroom used for sewing." My father and I had always shared a special bond.

I wouldn't mention how difficult living with my sister-in-law would be, particularly if she kept reminding me of my past. Yet I had no right to complain after the embarrassment I'd caused the family by pining away for Jake Miller for seven years. Not to mention the troubling rumors about me. Even though I was innocent, at times I'd been tempted to confess guilt before our whole congregation just to put an end to the whispers.

"I'd better follow through as planned, *Dat*. I don't want to be labeled a quitter before I even start." Besides not wanting to live with Marta, I couldn't imagine myself in the cramped room that housed a treadle sewing machine and piles and piles of fabric. I'd amassed most of it while working at the fabric store in Intercourse. "You know it's full of material. Though that's my own fault for not resisting sales, plus my employee discount at Zook's. I'd assumed someday I'd need all that fabric to sew clothes for my own family."

He stared at the oval rag rug on the floor at his feet. "Did ya have to quit that job for some reason? Your boss was *Englisch*, but he's a fine man."

"I loved that job, but only women shop in there. I'm hoping to meet someone. Someday."

Dat winked. "*Yah*, I suppose not many single men come in for quilting fabric. But you could go to singings."

"At age twenty-nine, I'd be the oldest woman there." And not yet baptized.

"If only you hadn't gotten mixed up with that miscreant Jake Miller."

My jaw clenched at the sound of his name. “*Dat*, that’s ancient history. And he didn’t do it.”

“How do you know for sure? Were you there?” He wagged his callused finger. “Few acts are worse than arson. A terrible thing, burning down a farmer’s barn, even if it was ramshackle.”

“But I’m sure Jake is innocent.”

“Because he told you so? If he’s so upstanding, where is he? His parents need him. He’s their only son now.”

“I’m not exactly sure where he is.” That wasn’t entirely true. I knew he went to New York State when he left Lancaster County.

“Maybe that’s for the best.”

“*Yah*.” I might go looking for him if I knew where he was. A scandalous mistake.



Half an hour later, while *Dat* hitched up our mare, *Mamm* left the *daadi haus* and moved to my side. She took my hand.

“I notice you’re not bringing your hope chest, Evie. Does this mean you’ve given up on finding a husband?”

“*Mamm*—” I couldn’t bear to have this conversation yet again.

She must have sensed my discomfort. “No matter. We’ll keep it here.”

With *Mamm* on my heels, I dragged my bulky suitcase off the porch and down the back steps. *Dat* had already loaded the buggy with several cardboard boxes filled with items I might need: a pot, a pan, mismatched plates and flatware, and a coffee mug I’d picked up at rummage sales. He also put my boots into the buggy. He lifted my suitcase and wedged it in. I felt rushed, sure I was leaving something important behind.

Mamm placed a wicker basket of food items on the front seat. I noticed a tear at the corner of her eye and guessed her sadness

stemmed from the fact that she'd missed the opportunity to see me wed. She'd dreamed of hosting a huge wedding in our home, as was customary. Her guest list and menu had been planned for years, as well as her intention to plant copious amounts of celery. I'd let her and the whole family down.

"Wait!" Marta charged down the porch steps, carrying my quilt. "You forgot this." She shoved it in the back and shut the door. "Goodbye."

Without further farewells or well wishes, Marta flew to her family's buggy to gather more of their possessions and trotted an armful inside.

Minutes later, *Dat* steered the buggy out of the barnyard. The mare transported us past familiar farms, outbuildings, and fields soon to be dotted with the chartreuse of corn bursting through the spring soil. I spotted an Amish woman collecting her dry laundry, the rainbow of garments sorted by size and colors. Her youngsters danced around her playing keep-away with clothespins. The woman looked about my age. I felt like an over-the-hill has-been.

Coveting the scene, I remembered another minister expounding last year about overcoming envy—how it served to embitter a person and angered the Lord. I knew I should focus on my blessings.

An hour later, from way down the road, I spied the Yoder's Nursery sign. The name was inscribed in tall letters. I'd driven by the nursery many times, but I had never entered because my parents either ordered their seeds by mail or insisted we shop locally at an uncle's small establishment. And I steered clear of the barn across the road. My Jake had been accused of burning down the barn that stood there before. This new barn had been promptly built, but I couldn't bear to look at it. I was thankful *Dat* made no further mention of the appalling incident that still haunted me—the beginning of the end of my world.

As we neared the nursery's front driveway, I sat forward and gawked out the window. *Dat* piloted the buggy onto the gravel

parking lot large enough to accommodate fifty or more vehicles, although only a half-dozen automobiles were present today. Several horses and buggies were stationed at a railing. I canvassed a retail shop's exterior—a smallish structure made of gray stone—and four large-scale greenhouses. Behind them spread acres of deciduous and evergreen trees planted in neat rows.

Despite the marvelous surroundings, my stomach clenched. I felt like a child might on her first day of school in a different district where she knew no one.

Dat slowed us to a halt. “Look at all those fine Amish men working here.” He stroked his graying beard. “Most are single.”

“*Yah*, I see they’re clean-shaven. But they’re too young for me.”

“You look youthful for your age, Evie.”

“*Denki*, but you know age is not my only problem.”

“I thought that whole misunderstanding got cleared up. If the deacon and a minister thought you were guilty of any indiscretion, they would have stopped by to speak to us years ago.” He patted my knee. “Although your *mamm* and I prayed for you many a time, that you wouldn’t run off and do something foolish.”

“*Yah*, I know, but—”

“Now, now. Most everyone in the county has forgotten those rumors.”

“I wish that were true, but last month in the fabric store I noticed two women staring at me and whispering.”

“Is it possible you overreacted? Were they one of us or *Englisch* tourists?”

“Probably tourists, but—”

“There’s your answer. Are you not used to *Englischers* gawking at you by now?”

“*Denki, Dat.*” My father was the kindest man on earth.

“We’ve been taught that the Lord abhors malicious gossip. ‘Death and life are in the power of the tongue.’” He jiggled the reins and steered the mare away from the greenhouses toward the far end of

the parking lot. A three-story white house with black shutters framing the windows grabbed my attention. Even under the grayish sky the structure's brightness made me stare. Next to the house, a colossal maple tree spread mammoth limbs not yet bearing unfurling leaves.

"Is that the owner's house?"

"Sure is. And his new *Englisch* wife's." *Dat* turned to me, his eyes sympathetic. "They both married later in life. He's in his early forties and she's in her late thirties. They already have a child."

His heart was in the right place. He was trying to make me believe I could still bear children at my age. I'd let my parents down by not giving them grandchildren.

Dat seemed oblivious to my musings. "The owner did a fine job fixing up this old house. It was run-down when he purchased it."

"*Yah*, it's a beautiful home. But where's the cottage where I'll live?"

"Hold on." He brought the mare to a halt and waved an arm to an Amish worker, who strode over to us.

"Can you help?" *Dat* asked. "We wish to speak to the owner, Glenn Yoder."

"Glenn's out of town." The young man's gaze wandered over to me before returning to *Dat*. "And our manager, Stephen, is running an errand." He gave me another looking over. "Is this the new girl? We weren't expecting her yet."

He'd called me a girl? I sighed. I was ten years this lad's senior. But I was used to being called a girl by *Englisch* customers in the fabric store.

"*Yah*, this is my *dochter*." *Dat's* tone was friendly. "We're looking for the place where she'll live, if that's all right."

"Of course. Stephen said you could move right in. The cabin is around back of the big house. The Yoders' housekeeper is in the main house, and she has a key if it's locked."

"*Denki*." *Dat* clucked to the mare, and she rolled us forward, skirting the house.

"A cabin? Olivia said it was a cottage."

He fingered the reins. “What’s the difference?”

“Nothing, I suppose.” Men and women each saw the world from a different perspective, I reminded myself.

Not far from the house stood a sturdy cream-colored structure with a hunter-green door. A rocking chair rested on its narrow porch. In a couple of front windows, forest-green shades were rolled part-way down.

Dat hauled back on the reins and jumped out of the buggy. He tied the mare to a hitching post, mounted the porch’s three wooden steps, and strode to the front door.

I sat, paralyzed. I couldn’t recall ever being so anxious.

“Evie, you look like you saw a ghost. Are you okay?”

“Guess I’m a little *naerfich*.” To put it mildly.

“No need to be nervous.” He knocked, waited a moment, and then turned the knob. The door opened. “Guess they don’t keep it locked.”

I climbed out, landing hard. The earth beneath my feet seemed to undulate, but I steadied myself as I grabbed the handle of the wicker basket.

I walked up the steps. “Maybe you’d better go in first.” I motioned to *Dat*. “What if someone’s in there and just didn’t hear your knock?” I often pretended I was fearless, but I was barely strong enough to carry the basket.

Dat chuckled as he stepped inside. “Come on, *dochder*. It’s nice in here.”

I peeked around him to see a tidy room with a single bed against the far wall, and a small couch and a propane lamp—its tank housed in a wooden base—near a fireplace. I could tell a woman or two had spent time cleaning this cabin. The white porcelain sink under a paned window and the kitchen counter were spotless. On either side of the counter stood a gas stove and a small propane refrigerator. Through a partially opened door I saw a bathroom—a white-tiled cubicle with a shower and a sink with a mirror above it. Nice!

The walls were painted a buttermilky cream, and the varnished solid wood kitchen cabinets, trim, and bathroom door were honey-colored. The taupe linoleum floor begged for some throw rugs, but all in good time.

Dat hauled my suitcase inside, and then we brought in the rest of my belongings. I strolled over to the bed and pulled back the blanket to see clean white sheets. Good. I'd forgotten to bring my own linens. "My quilt will fit on this nicely."

"You're all set." He kissed my cheek. "I best be getting back to see how your *bruder* and his family are doing, not to mention helping your *mamm* get settled in the *daadi haus*."

"Leaving already?" I had a panicky feeling in the back of my throat. "If only the owner were here to greet me. I'd planned to come meet him in person before moving in."

"He'll no doubt be back soon and you'll have your chance."

"Wait. Are you sure this is all right?" My voice came out with a quaver, sounding so timid I barely recognized it.

"Glenn Yoder is a fine man, even if he broke his parents' hearts by not joining the Amish church. He married an *Englisch* woman older than you are. And like I said, she gave birth to their first child several months ago."

Maybe there was still hope for me.