

*An
Unexpected
Match*

GAYLE
ROPER



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON



In memory of Chuck, my hero.



Acknowledgments

MANY THANKS AND MUCH APPRECIATION TO THE FOLLOWING:

Irma Swartz for your insights and experience with Amish life.

Maggie Mills for sharing your Amish neighbors and stories.

Georgia Shaffer, Pat Johnson, Deb Strubel, and Nancy Meyer for years of listening to my stories. Critique groups don't get any better.

Vicki Junkins for being my first reader. I'm so glad you enjoyed the book!

Nick Harrison and all the fine folks at Harvest House Publishers. You are all wonderful!

Janet Kobobel Grant of Books & Such Literary Agency for taking such good care of me.

Chapter 1

Rachel Beiler unpinned her organdy *kapp* and laid it on the bureau in Maxine's spare bedroom. With a shaking hand she released the bun at the base of her head and brushed out her thick hair. The bristles bit into her scalp and scored their way through the rich brown mass.

So many Amish women had thin hair, a combination of genetics and the tight pulling of the hair to confine it. Rachel's was so heavy that sometimes it gave her a headache, all that weight pulling at the back of her head. Unbound, it fell well past her shoulders, the ends curling with a life of their own in spite of her ardent and lifelong wish for straight hair like her sisters.

The thought of leaving that curl falling free made her slightly dizzy.

Aaron had always found her curls disconcerting, un-Amish somehow. He made believe he didn't see the wildness in her hair because he feared it reflected a wildness in her. Not that he ever said so, but she knew.

It's falling free, Aaron. Unbound.

Of course if he had his way, she wouldn't be acting so forward. She'd be fighting to be the good wife he deserved for he was a good man, a kind man, an Amish man through and through. It was his cross to bear that he loved her.

I love him! True, but not as much as he loved her.

She put the brush on the bureau and took a deep breath. Loose hair didn't have to be a symbol of a loose life regardless of what Aaron

had thought or any of the rest of them. It didn't. But she couldn't rid herself of the fear that she was doing something terribly wrong, something sinful.

If people found out what she planned. . .

She ran her hands through her hair, pulling it tight above her face as a good Amish woman would wear it, as she'd always worn it. She dropped her hands, and the thick mane with the sun streaks burned in over the summer months fell free, a sign that she wasn't a good Amish woman after all.

She'd tried. *Gott* knew she'd tried! For all her twenty-six years she'd tried.

She sighed. She was different. That's all there was to it.

She gathered her hair at her nape and clasped it with the large black barrette Maxine had bought for her. Somehow that bit of confinement made her feel a bit more herself, a bit less a rebel.

Taking a deep breath, she unpinned her apron, then her dress, laying them neatly on the bed. It wouldn't do for them to be a mass of wrinkles when she put them back on. She stared at the denim skirt and white blouse that waited for her.

The blouse had a collar.

"Hurry, Rachel," Maxine called from the living room. "You don't want to be late for your first class."

No, she didn't. An education was the reason she was taking such terrifying risks.

She reached for the blouse and slipped it on. She fumbled with the buttons, her first buttons ever, and thought how much easier the straight pins were to manage. She slipped into the skirt, which fell to her knees. Her mother would find the length deplorable, but Rachel had worn her skirts even shorter during her *rumspringa*.

Aaron had liked her legs. She knew because she'd caught him looking.

She smoothed the skirt over her hips with sweaty palms, afraid to look in the mirror and see the reprobate she'd become without her husband's guiding hand.

But she couldn't stop herself from taking this frightening step. She had to find out what a college classroom was like. She had to be part of discussions and write papers and listen to lectures live, not on the computer. Since all these things were forbidden, it was as if she were going through her rumspringa all over again, only this time she was old enough to recognize her rebellion for what it was.

She stared at herself in the bedroom mirror. Did she check how she looked in *Englisch* clothes merely because she was curious about how she looked in them or because she wanted to be certain she looked good? She had to admit to both, and suddenly she felt vain. Worldly.

Her blouse might be buttoned to the neck, tucked carefully in the skirt, modest enough even by Amish standards, but her hair felt wild around her as curls peered over her shoulders. The humid late-August air made the tresses flowing down her back more untamed than when newly washed and she'd have to sit and dry her hair before the heat of the wood stove. The little wisps that always curled at her hairline looked extra messy, extra unruly.

Her stomach kicked and rolled. What did she think she was doing? She was risking everything. Everything! But the pull toward education and the excitement of learning drew her on as surely as her love for her family and the teachings of the *Gmay* pulled her back.

She froze for a moment, unable to draw a breath, knowing she was caught on the edge of a steep slide into—what? A fall from grace? A life of rebellion? A hidden shadow life? A freedom to choose what her life would be?

Maxine appeared in the doorway, all practical encouragement. “You look lovely, Rachel.”

Rachel blinked and managed a faint smile in return. Being told she was lovely wasn't something she was used to. Compliments, like *Englisch* clothing with its buttons, multiple styles, and varying patterns, made you proud. But there was no denying; compliments were nice—and reveling in them sinful, just like rebellion and pride. And education and knowledge.

“I'm terrified, Max.”

Maxine smiled. “Of course you are, dear. Everyone’s afraid her first day in a new school. Now let’s get going.” She turned and walked briskly to the door leading to the garage.

Max’s straightforward, unemotional attitude put the starch back in Rachel’s spine. She could do this. She wanted to do this. The risk was worth taking.

She picked up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. At least the strap and the weight felt normal. She’d been carrying her teaching materials back and forth in this bag for the past three years as she taught at her district’s Amish school. She grabbed her black sweater, the only garment that was familiar, because air conditioning often made her chilly since she was rarely in it.

Rachel closed her eyes. Would Gott punish her for her evil? She pressed her hand over her churning stomach and followed Max to the garage.

“Feel like you’re going to throw up?” Max paused before climbing into the passenger seat.

With her short dark hair and her kind hazel eyes, Max was Rachel’s anchor in this adventure. Rachel managed another tight smile for her. “Feel like it, yes. Do it, no.”

She took her place behind the wheel of the black Honda. She turned the key in the ignition, amazed as always that she was driving an automobile. She, the Amish woman who had a history of keeping all the rules because that was what you did no matter how you felt. Now she was only a week from getting her license. At least she was driving a black car. Somehow it didn’t feel as wrong as a white car or a red car would have. Like color minimized the sin.

Wouldn’t Johnny fall down laughing if he knew what she was doing? Her brother had made such a big thing out of learning to drive when he began his running around. When he bought his first broken-down car at sixteen, he drove it proudly to the farm and made believe he didn’t see the disapproval in *Datt’s* eyes. The little boys had climbed in and out, laughing the whole time, and Jonah, who just turned twenty and recently made his vows, had tried not to look intrigued.

If Rachel was counting correctly, Johnny was on his third junker now, and Jonah was twenty-eight and married with three kids.

Concentrating intensely, she backed the black car out of the garage into the rainy evening. She didn't want to look left toward the family farm. What if Mom was there? What if she had come up the road to see what Rachel was doing at Max's house? The fact that she'd never done such a thing before didn't matter. Nor did the fact that there was no way she knew where Rachel was. Rachel hadn't lived in their house since she and Aaron married. Still tonight would be the night she'd catch Rachel for sure.

But Mom wasn't walking up the road in the rain, and Rachel pushed on the accelerator, setting herself on this new, exciting, and forbidden path.

The wipers flicked back and forth, back and forth, their rhythm setting off a line: I'm going (wipers left) to college (wipers right). I'm going...to college. I'm going...to college.

What am I doing? I'm going to college!

Aaron, don't be mad!

"Do you have your lights on?" Max asked.

"What? Oh, no." Rachel reached out and twisted the lights on.

Max made a humming noise. "I know it's not dark out yet, but the law says that when the wipers are on, the lights should be on too."

"I know. I forgot. What if it's raining next week when I take my test and I forget my lights? I'll fail."

"You won't fail." Max's voice held an assurance that Rachel did not share.

"This playing at being Englisch is hard, Max! There's so much to remember!"

"Like your turn signal as you approach the turn?"

Rachel flipped the signal on. "I'll never manage it all."

"You will if this is what you want." Again that calm, practical voice. "How many years have you wanted to do just what you're doing tonight?"

"Always." In fact, Rachel couldn't remember a time when she didn't

want to learn more. There was a world out there full of people and places, thoughts and ideas. When her schooling stopped with eighth grade and she was expected to be satisfied helping her mother around the house and with her younger brothers and sisters, she came as close to being depressed as someone with her personality could.

At the corner she turned left, away from Honey Brook and all she knew, toward Lyndale and Wexford College. “My heart’s pounding so fast I can barely breathe.”

“We can still turn back,” Max said. “In fact, you can turn back any time you want.”

Rachel gave a jerky nod, her knuckles white as she gripped the wheel. “I don’t want to leave, you know, but they’re going to make me if they find out. They’re going to make me choose. Why can’t they understand that all I want is the chance to learn? To study? I want to stay Plain. I like being Amish. It’s what I know. It’s where I’m comfortable. I just want to learn things too.”

Max didn’t comment, and Rachel wasn’t surprised. There was nothing to say that could counter centuries of tradition and the *Ordnung*. The rules were firm, as immutable as the Ten Commandments, and they said education made you proud and was therefore wrong.

Rachel drove on and the two women settled into an understanding silence. A half hour later, the exit sign for her turnoff appeared and Rachel put on her turn signal. Moments later, she drove onto the campus, past the daunting sign that read Wexford College: A Christian Institution of Higher Education. The fall semester began this week, and young men and women in jeans and shorts, tees and sleeveless blouses, walked in groups, laughing and talking. Belonging.

She was here whether she belonged or not. Her stomach felt hollow and her mind alive with possibilities.

When she drove up to the classroom building, there were already several cars parked in the lot, commuting students like her. She pulled into a slot, put the gearshift in park, and turned to Max. “Do I look as frightened as I feel?”

“You can do this.” Max smiled her encouragement.

Rachel made an uncertain sound as she watched a girl in jeans and a T-shirt climb out of a car and hurry to the building, her flip-flops splashing in the puddles as she ran. She looked so—English! So at ease.

“You can do this,” Max repeated. “But just in case, I’ll wait right here for fifteen minutes. If you feel you need to leave, you just come out.”

Somehow that eased the coil of tension knotting her chest.

A little red Smart car zipped past them and into a parking spot. A girl who looked about sixteen—she had to be at least that old to be driving, didn’t she?—climbed out and opened an umbrella printed with red roses. Huddling under its cover, she hurried to the building, backpack bumping her as she ran.

“They’re all so young!”

“Trust me,” Max said. “There will be some gray heads in there.”

“If you say.” Taking a deep breath, Rachel grabbed her backpack and opened the door. Damp air rushed in.

“If class ends early, just call,” Max said. “I’ll come right away.”

Again, Max’s calm voice steadied Rachel, who nodded and stepped into the rain. It splashed on her black shoes and beat on the open black umbrella she clutched. She began walking, her skin prickling and her mouth dry.

Daniel couldn’t have felt any more afraid when he faced the lions.

Her step hitched when she saw a parallel between herself and that great man of God. He’d broken the law by choice because he wanted to worship God, and King Darius punished him by sending him to the lions’ den. She was breaking the Ordnung, and she was doing it by choice, so she was breaking the law just as Daniel had.

But—and it was a big but—she wasn’t doing it for faith. She wanted an education. No lions would tear her apart for her choice, but if she were discovered, her life would be torn apart just as painfully. And she couldn’t expect God to send an angel to protect her when her motivation was so selfish.

She squared her shoulders, reached out, and pulled the door to the building open.