

# A NOBLE GROOM

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To my dad, the German farmer

For all the fields you planted,  
weeds you pulled, and lives you touched.  
Even though you're in heaven,  
your crops are flourishing.



## Chapter

# 1



FALL, 1880

FORESTVILLE, MICHIGAN

Hans had stolen all the egg money—again.

Annalisa Werner’s chapped fingers trembled against the frayed edge of the apron she’d turned into a basket. The burden of walnuts stretched the thin linen so that it seemed to groan in protest.

Her husband had gone too far this time.

“I can’t bear another day of his foolishness.” In the quietness of the thick grove, her native *Deutsch* tongue echoed harshly. And yet the words were only a whisper compared to the clamoring inside her aching heart.

Ahead, Gretchen cocked her head, a gentle breeze teasing her silky blond hair. “Mama?” The two-year-old peered up at Annalisa with her trusting baby eyes.

“*Ach, liebchen.*” Annalisa forced a smile to her tired lips. “Did you find another nut for Mama?”

The little girl held out a faded green fuzzy ball.

“You are a big helper to Mama.” Annalisa took the fleshy fruit and added it to the pile in her apron. “Now can you find another?”

They would need every nut they could gather if they were to survive the harsh Michigan winter that would soon be upon them—especially since Hans had found the crock she’d hidden in the darkest corner under the bed in their small log cabin.

She shook her head, and the long braid down her back swished with all the anger that had been tightening her body since she’d learned of her husband’s latest gambling trip.

“Who’s the *dummkopf* now? Who?”

She was the *dummkopf*, that’s who. She should have known better.

She thought she’d finally found a good hiding place, somewhere she could keep their pittance of earnings safe from his wasteful ways. Besides, after gambling and drinking away much of their profit from the recent harvest, she’d hoped he’d learned his lesson.

And yet, when she’d returned from town a short while ago and pulled out the crock to add the money she’d earned from selling eggs and butter, she’d discovered that everything she’d saved over the summer was gone.

He hadn’t left a cent.

Just like the last time.

*Ja*, she was the *dummkopf*.

Dry leaves crunched under the thick calluses of her bare feet as she followed Gretchen’s dawdling footsteps. How would she be able to give her sweet little girl a better future if she couldn’t keep Hans from using up their savings?

A buried cry of distress scraped at Annalisa’s chest and pushed for release.

If only she didn’t need a husband . . .

“More, Mama.” Gretchen picked up another walnut. Its brownish-green flesh was gnawed away, revealing a rotten, empty cavern.

“That one is no good.” Annalisa shook her head. “Some wild creature has already eaten the nut.”

The October sunshine ducked through the fluttering cascade of dying leaves overhead and touched Gretchen’s hair, turning it the same soft gold as the butter Annalisa had churned early that morning.

“You have the same color hair as Rapunzel.” This time she gave her daughter a real smile, one that contained all the love that filled every crevice of her soul.

Gretchen dropped the nut and lifted her beaming face. “Story?”

Annalisa combed the loose strands of the little girl’s hair off her forehead, seeing in her daughter a miniature reflection of herself—from the smattering of freckles across her nose to the wide lilac eyes to the golden hair.

Her daughter was like her in almost every way, even in her longing for fanciful stories of princesses, knights in shining armor, and true love. The difference was Gretchen hadn’t learned yet—like she had—that fairy tales were only dreams and that there was no such thing as a *happily ever after*.

“*Nein*, liebchen. No story. Not now.” Annalisa straightened and pushed down the sudden uncomfortable wave of nausea. “Tonight. At bedtime. I’ll tell you the story about the princess who tended the geese.”

Gretchen clasped her hands together and smiled. “I like ‘The Goose Girl.’”

“I can’t think of a story you don’t like.” Annalisa tweaked the girl’s nose gently. Then she took a deep breath and caught the smokiness of burning brush.

The smoke didn't alarm her. In fact, the billows of black clouds rising to the south of the cornfield brought nothing more than a rush of renewed anger.

At least now she knew where to find Hans—if she wanted to.

Similar to many of their immigrant friends on the adjoining farms, Hans had been spending part of his workdays clearing more land so they would have additional acreage available for planting in the spring. But of the forty acres he'd purchased on loan four years ago, he hadn't cleared as much as their neighbors.

If only he hadn't been so busy running off to Saxonia Hall every chance he had. If only he thought about how his wastefulness would lead to another sparse and hungry winter for her and Gretchen.

Maybe she should march over to where he was working and confront him about taking the money. She'd given up her dreams of a fairy-tale life long ago, but that didn't mean Gretchen had to suffer, did it?

Annalisa's fingers tightened again on the tattered edge of her apron.

Did she dare try to talk to him about her concerns? If she didn't, how would they be able to keep their farm? How would they survive?

"Come with Mama." With one hand Annalisa clutched the apron full of walnuts, and with the other she reached for Gretchen, trying to keep from trembling. "Give Mama your hand and we'll take a walk."

Gretchen's chubby fingers slid into hers. "Go to river?"

"Maybe later." As much as she'd grown to despise the river that ran through the property and all the problems it had caused with E. B. Ward and with Hans's gambling, she couldn't deny the delight it brought to Gretchen. The river's edge was always

a restful spot, a cool retreat for her sore feet, and a place where she could escape her troubles, even if only for a moment.

“Nein, first we must go speak with your papa.” Annalisa started forward but slowed her steps to match those of the little girl. Gretchen was barefoot like her, and although the skin on their feet was thick and toughened after a summer without shoes, Annalisa chose her path carefully over the sharp twigs and through the crackling leaves that had already fallen.

“Soon we must get you shoes,” she said, not knowing how they would afford a new pair now. Hans had never provided them with essentials such as shoes. To Hans, getting the horse shod took priority over buying shoes for a mere daughter. He would only tell her a horse was more valuable to the farm than a girl.

At the edge of the clearing she stopped and took another deep breath of the smoky air. She exhaled, but a dizzying wave of nausea swept over her again.

“Ach.” She swallowed hard, fighting against the unsettling sensation, focusing on the field ahead.

They’d raised three acres of corn, which was one crop that would grow among the stumps left from the clearing. Of course, they’d lost some of the crop to the deer, raccoons, and turkeys, but they’d been able to take a good portion to the docks in Forestville to send to market in Detroit.

They’d also grown wheat and oats in the cleared land closer to the cabin and barn. The crops had been plentiful and had brought them the cash they desperately needed.

Until Hans had so foolishly gambled away the profit . . .

Pain twisted through her. She had to prepare herself for the possibility that they might end up homeless. What hope did they have of meeting their loan deadline next fall if Hans kept squandering their hard-earned money?

Maybe if she pleaded with him to stop . . .

“Let’s go find your papa.” Annalisa forced her feet forward, trembling at the intensity of her need to keep him from harming them any more than he already had.

Could she really confront her husband?

If she did, she knew she’d make him angry again. In their three years of marriage, he hadn’t used physical force against her. But he wouldn’t hesitate to punish her in other, more subtle ways—as he usually did whenever she displeased him.

Only the past evening he’d forced her to skip supper because she’d forgotten to grease one of his traps. It hadn’t mattered that she’d been busy all day, pulling up the last of the root vegetables—carrots, beets, and turnips—and covering them with sand in their shallow cellar in preparation for winter.

Her brother Uri had witnessed Hans’s discipline and had later brought her something to eat. But even so, should she risk angering Hans again?

Gretchen stumbled next to her, and Annalisa clutched her daughter to keep her from falling. Thick clods of dirt littered the ground as if trying to stop Annalisa from going to him. Dried, empty cornstalks snagged at her skirt like brittle fingernails attempting to grab her and hold her back.

“*Gott*, help me.” She pulled Gretchen to a stop. Why did she think Hans would care what she had to say?

“Pray, Mama?” Gretchen peered up at her.

“Ja, let’s pray.” Annalisa closed her eyes. But even as her soul cried out to *Gott*, her plea died on her lips. *Gott* wouldn’t care about the problems of a young woman on a fall afternoon—especially a poor immigrant girl like herself. If *Gott* were like all the other men in her life, then He was busy with more important things.

*Gott* was probably at the farm across the road, helping her

family, especially her *vater*. After all, Vater was as religious as a good Lutheran could be and deserved Gott's help.

"Look." Gretchen tugged Annalisa's hand. "Papa's sleeping."

Annalisa's eyes flew open, and she straightened with a start. "What? Your papa? Sleeping? Impossible."

She followed the direction of Gretchen's finger, and the tumult in her mind came to an abrupt halt.

There, on the ground next to a pile of burning slashings, lay Hans. From the middle of the cornfield where they stood, it did indeed appear as if he'd decided to take a nap.

With the flames blazing nearby and the sparks shooting into the air, why would he do something so irresponsible?

Like all the settlers, he knew the dangers of fires fanning out of control and spreading.

"Come, liebchen." She walked faster, and Gretchen's short legs had to work hard to keep up. "He must be sick."

Why would Hans waste time sleeping when he could amuse himself in more entertaining ways like playing cards and drinking?

Unless he was sick?

When she reached the edge of the cornfield, she halted with an abruptness that caused Gretchen to bump into her backside.

She eyed the bright flames dancing in the undergrowth of bushes and vines piled into a windrow. The dry burning brush popped like gunshots in the silent afternoon.

The distant scolding and chattering of a migrating flock of passenger pigeons echoed through the stillness. Otherwise, the farm was too quiet, too motionless.

"Hans?" She couldn't bring herself to move another step toward him.

"Wake up, Papa." Gretchen let go of her hand and skipped ahead. For as little attention as Hans gave their daughter, the girl's love never wavered.

But even as Gretchen bent over to pat his back, wariness wormed through Annalisa's unsettled stomach. "Don't touch him!"

At her sharp command, Gretchen pulled her hand back as if she'd burned her fingers.

"Don't touch," Annalisa said again, trying to force a calmness to her voice she didn't feel.

Gretchen stepped back, fear fluttering in her widening eyes.

Annalisa forced her feet forward until she stood over her husband. "Hans? Are you sick?"

He didn't move.

She stooped and jabbed him through the coarse linen of his homespun shirt. "If you're not well, I'll tend the fire for you."

Still he didn't respond.

Her heart thudded like a dasher beating up and down against fresh cream. Slowly she reached for his arm. At her slight nudge it fell away from his face, revealing charred skin with patches of roasted pink flesh underneath. Some places had burned away down to the white bone. Amidst the blackness, his eyes were open and stared unseeingly straight ahead.

A scream burned in her throat. "Gott, help us . . ." She stumbled backward, tripping and falling painfully to her backside, spilling the nuts they'd collected. "Oh, Gott, help us!"

Gretchen began to move forward.

"Nein!" Annalisa scrambled toward the girl, grabbed her and buried the little girl's face into her empty apron. "Nein! Don't look."

What had happened to Hans?

Her body shook with sudden chills. She wanted to run away and hide, but her gaze returned to the awful sight.

Blood seeped from a deep gash near his hairline. Bright crimson smeared his sandy hair, turning it a muddy brown.

As angry as she was with Hans, as much as she despised his wayward ways, she hadn't wanted him to die.

The truth was, she couldn't survive without a husband. Not in this wilderness. Not as a woman alone on a forty-acre farm.

Bile rose in her throat.

A fly buzzed above the oozing and blistered flesh of his forehead.

Her stomach revolted. She turned away and retched on the hard barren ground.



“Annalisa must have a new husband.” Vater’s voice rose above the loud deliberating that had been ongoing since the men started their meal in the log cabin farmhouse that belonged to her parents.

“We are not disagreeing with you on this, Peter.” *Herr* Pastor reached for another slice of the thick brown bread on the platter in the center of the table.

With a crock of butter in one hand and a coffeepot in the other, Annalisa rushed to *Herr* Pastor’s spot. She plopped the crock next to him.

“Thank you, Annalisa.” He smiled and held out his mug for a refill. The whiskers around his mouth were spotted with the crumbs of all he’d already eaten.

She nodded but couldn’t form her lips into a smile, not even the barest semblance of one. She hadn’t been able to smile since yesterday—not since finding Hans.

Some of the neighbors had come to the consensus that Hans had merely suffered an accident, had hit his head and fallen unconscious into hot coals. But others—including Vater—decided that the greedy businessman, E. B. Ward, had murdered Hans so that he could finally get the land and build his mill.

It was all anyone had talked about at the funeral that afternoon, and now at the meal following the service. The men crowded together on the hand-hewn benches and scant chairs around the long table.

“We don’t disagree with you,” Herr Pastor said again. “But I’m only saying we may need to consider finding a God-fearing man from outside our own people. James McCann might be an Irishman, but he’s a Protestant and a hard worker—”

“Absolutely not!” Vater slammed the table. The spoons and knives rattled. Coffee sloshed over the edges of the steins. And silence descended through the crowded room. Even the women who’d clustered near the wood-burning stove ceased their chattering.

The sourness of a cabin full of sweaty men, unwashed after a long day of hard work, assaulted Annalisa anew. Her stomach swirled with the growing bouts of nausea. The stuffy heat, the spicy caraway of *Mutter’s rostbratwurst*, the tanginess of the sauerkraut—none of it eased her discomfort.

And it didn’t help that she was the center of the discussion.

“Nein! We won’t even consider it.” Vater pointed the nub of his missing forefinger at Herr Pastor. “It’s a good thing you’re a man of God or I’d send you running like Samson did to the Philistines.”

Annalisa leaned against the cool log wall with its mud and hay chinking and let it soothe the heat of her back. She longed to scoop up Gretchen, who was playing with the other children in the loft, and go home to bed.

She was tired of listening to everyone discuss Hans’s death, and she was tired of worrying about what would happen next.

But she couldn’t leave—not without knowing the fate Vater decided for her.

As hard as it had been with Hans, she knew there were men

who were worse, men who wouldn't hesitate to beat her or Gretchen.

Herr Pastor took a bite of bread, seemingly unruffled by Vater's outburst. Of all the men in the room, Reverend Hermann Loehe was the most educated and spoke English well enough to converse with the locals. He'd resided in Forestville the longest and had helped their community in countless ways since they'd arrived. They couldn't afford to alienate him.

His wife, *Frau* Pastor, broke away from the group of women in the corner and bustled to the table with more *kartoffelsuppe*.

"I could post a letter to my former parish down in Frankenthal," Herr Pastor offered. "They may have an unattached man who might be willing to relocate."

"Good idea, dear-heart," Frau Pastor said, ladling the soup into his bowl. Her fleshy cheeks were flushed and curved into a dimpled smile. She was the only woman who ever dared entering into the men's conversations. "I'm sure there would be a man worthy of our dear Annalisa from among the congregation."

"A complete stranger is no good," Vater bellowed as he held out his plate to Mutter.

As if Mutter had been watching for his summons, she scurried to the table to do his bidding and refill his plate. She still wore the same woolen peasant garb she'd brought with her from the Old Country. In fact, the plain brown dress and matching headscarf were the same she'd worn on the ship six years ago when they'd sailed out of Hamburg.

Even during the long months when they'd had to live in Detroit before finding land to buy, Mutter had insisted on wearing her sack-like garb. Most of the other Saxon women, when faced with ridicule over their heavy woolen clothes, had quickly conformed to the American styles.

But not Mutter. She would not think of wasting even the smallest length of thread to reshape their dresses.

“It’s too bad Leonard was the last of our men needing a wife.” Vater crossed his hands behind his head, revealing round damp spots under his arms. His sweaty hair stuck to his wide sun-browned forehead. Even though the door was open to invite in the cool evening air, the windows were sealed with oiled paper instead of glass, and the welcome fresh air refused to enter.

At the end of the table, Leonard belched. “Maybe it’s not too late to make an exchange, Herr Bernthal.”

Vater only harrumphed and wagged his hand at Mutter, trying to hurry her along with his second plate of sausage.

“I’ll give you back Idette,” Leonard continued, “in exchange for Annalisa.”

Annalisa stiffened. Next to her, Idette sucked in a breath.

“Idette is a lazy wife, and she has no experience with children.”

Vater sat forward and stared down the length of the table at Leonard. “I don’t know what kind of nonsense you’re speaking. None of my children are lazy. I’ve raised them all to be hard workers.”

Annalisa groped for Idette’s fingers. At seventeen her sister was only two years younger than she. Even so, inheriting five children on one’s wedding day would have taxed the most matronly of women. So far her sister had done the best she could. Couldn’t Leonard see that?

“A cow could manage my children better than she does,” Leonard grumbled.

The muscles in Idette’s hand tightened under Annalisa’s hold. Color infused her sister’s pretty face, and she learned forward as if she would defend herself.

“Then maybe I should have given you a cow instead of my daughter.” Vater leveled a stern look at Leonard.

“She’ll adjust,” Herr Pastor said quickly, glancing between Vater and Leonard, his whiskery eyebrows furrowing.

“Yes, give the child time,” Frau Pastor added. “After all, the wedding was less than three weeks ago. She’s young, hardly older than your children. And these things aren’t easy.”

“I’m doing the very best I can,” Idette said.

Annalisa knew she ought to stop Idette from speaking disrespectfully to her husband. But she couldn’t, not when she’d always admired Idette’s spirit and courage and wished she could have just a small measure of it for herself.

Idette lifted her chin and continued, “And I do everything I’m told.”

Leonard rolled his eyes. “That’s the problem. I need a wife who will see what needs to be done and do it without having to be told like a child.”

“You must gently instruct her,” Herr Pastor said. But his words were drowned by the guffaws and loud protests of the other men at the table. Pastor’s advice was as foreign to them as many of the American customs.

Idette glared at Leonard. “He’s a brute,” she whispered to Annalisa. “You’re lucky to be rid of your husband.”

Lucky? Annalisa knew better. Having a *bad* husband was better than *no* husband. What hope did she have for her future without a husband?

For several minutes the room filled with the usual boisterous noise, as all the men were talking at the same time.

Finally, Vater swallowed his last bite of sausage and shoved his plate to the center of the table. “I still have not solved the problem of what to do for Annalisa.”

If only she had a golden apple, or a golden goose, or some-

thing gold from one of the *Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales*. Then she would be able to provide Gretchen with a better life.

Vater's voice rose to dominate all the others. "If she doesn't have a husband, she'll lose the land."

"Why not sell it to Ward since he wants it?" someone said.

"Nein, I won't sell—" Annalisa caught herself and reined in her words, even though everything within her rose in objection. How could she stand back and let them sell her home and property to a crook like Ward? Where would they live? What would she do? She had no training or skills. How would she take care of Gretchen?

She pressed a hand to her abdomen. And maybe she'd have another life to care for. With the increasing nausea and the tenderness of her bosom, she had begun to suspect she was with child. It wasn't good timing. But she was sure she would love a new baby as passionately as she loved Gretchen.

As far as she could see, babies were the only good that came out of marriage.

But it would mean she must work all the harder. And how could she do that if she allowed Ward to take over the farm?

Thankfully, Vater was already shaking his head. "That *dummboozle* is as bad as Pharaoh enslaving the Israelites. We've already fought to free ourselves from the slavery of the dukes and barons of the Old Country, and we won't allow any man to control us again."

A chorus of *jawohls* and nods met his words.

"I won't give that man the satisfaction of buying Hans's farm, even if he puts a gun to my head." An angry scowl creased the thick beefy roundness of Vater's face. "If we let him build that sawmill, he won't do us any favors. He'll only empty our pockets by overcharging us for boards."

Like everyone in the room, Annalisa knew Vater's hatred

wasn't directed so much at Ward as it was at Baron von Reichart, the nobleman whose selfishness and cruelty had cost Vater the life of his oldest son.

If not for Baron von Reichart, they might never have left their homeland and all their family.

If not for Baron von Reichart, they might not have had to give up mining and learn a whole new way of living.

If not for Baron von Reichart, Vater would have two cherished sons, instead of one.

"Nein," Vater said. "We'll find a way to help Annalisa keep the farm."

"Why bother helping her?" Leonard said. "As reckless as Hans was, she won't be able to pay off the loan by next fall anyway."

Annalisa ducked her head and moved away from the wall. Even in his death, Hans was still shaming her. She bustled toward the shelves where she had left her pies cooling earlier when she'd brought them from home, and she refused to meet the gazes of the other women.

No one else needed to say anything. They all knew Leonard was referring to Hans's foolishness with their money.

"If she loses the farm next fall, so be it," Vater declared. "But at least the land will default back to Jacob Buel, and Jacob is a good businessman. He despises Ward as much as we do. I have no doubt he'll find another *Deutscher* to loan to."

Idette whispered into her ear, having followed her to the pies. "Don't listen to them. They're all dummboozles." Her sister's scandalous tone mimicked their father's.

Under normal circumstances, Idette's playful banter would have cheered Annalisa. But not today. Not when she was tired and sick . . . and worried. She might be free from Hans and all of his problems, but she'd gained an even bigger problem.

She had exactly one year to pay the remainder of the loan on the farm or lose everything. The loan had been set at four hundred dollars plus interest, and she still had over one hundred left to pay.

After Hans's poor management of their profits, she was already behind on what she needed to earn. Without the help of a strong man to run and maintain the farm, she was doomed.

Annalisa slipped her hand under the pie, baked from the last of the apples she and Gretchen had picked early that morning. The earthenware pan was warm against her palm, and she breathed deeply of the sugary cinnamon scent.

"Let's hide the pies." Idette reached for the other pan. "Then we can eat them for ourselves later."

"Ach, you're as silly as always."

Idette flashed her an impish grin.

But Annalisa's lips were stiff, like the crust of day-old bread. Her sister was only trying to coax a smile from her, but how could she ever smile again? Not now with so much at stake.

She wound her way to the table and slid the pie onto the edge near Herr Pastor. Then she stood back and watched his face.

His eyes lit, and he rubbed at the whiskers on his chin as if making space for more crumbs. "Annalisa, you bake the best pies I've ever tasted."

The words of praise spread warmth to her heart as they usually did. What had she done wrong that Hans had never praised her?

She slid a fork under the perfectly flaky piecrust and lifted out a wedge for Pastor. She'd hardly slid it onto his plate before he sank his fork in.

Vater reached for his plate, and his eyes regarded her with narrowed seriousness. "I've made up my mind. The only thing left for me to do is write to my brother, Matthias, in Essen and

ask him to find a young man from among our kin to come over and marry Annalisa.”

The other men chorused their agreement.

Their calls fueled Vater’s plan. “Herr Pastor,” he said eagerly, “will you write the letter this very night? Then we can post it tomorrow.”

A husband from among their kin? From their homeland? Annalisa let the idea sift through her. Of course they had many relatives still living in Saxony. Would marrying one of her distant cousins provide the solution to her problems?

“Matthias is a wise man. He’ll find someone good for Annalisa.” Vater nodded at her, as if to tell her he understood the difficulties she’d endured with Hans and that this time he hoped to find her a better match. “If we’re very lucky, he’ll come to us in time for spring planting.”

She nodded in return. She knew Vater was doing what he thought was best for her. And she would submit to his authority. But she still couldn’t keep from wishing somehow things could be different—that she could be more important to the men in her life, that she could make them love her, that she could find a way to earn God’s attention.

Maybe if she’d been a better daughter or wife . . .

“In the meantime,” Herr Pastor said between bites, “we must all work together to help Annalisa through the winter.”

His suggestion was met with several unenthusiastic ja’s.

“You’re right, dear-heart.” Frau Pastor patted her husband’s cheek with an affection that Annalisa often saw between them but couldn’t understand. “I don’t like the idea that Annalisa will be all alone. We all know E. B. Ward can’t be trusted.”

Vater shoveled in a forkful of pie from the slice Idette had given him. “I’ll send Uri and Eleanor over to check on her and to help.”

The tension eased from Annalisa's back.

Her younger sister would soon be of marriageable age and could shoulder a woman's work. And if her brother came to help—even though he was only twelve—she would be just fine. She hoped . . .

At least until her groom arrived.