

## Chapter One

Olivia Owens shook a patchwork quilt open with a snap, rustling a flurry of white skippers from their clover flower feasts. She knelt on the blanket's soft center and spread its corners flat over the grass near the settlement's new church building. Indigo embroidery spelled out the names of her parents and siblings on the quilt's yellow trim. Often, she was able to read the cross-stitched letters, but not now. The letters spelled words and the words had meaning. She could stare as long as she liked when this happened, but words would not appear. The monster hid them from her, and she hid the monster from everyone else.

An hourglass shaped shadow moved over Olivia's picnic blanket. Peggy Cotter hovered regally above, wearing perfectly polished boots, crinoline puffed skirts, and honey-hued ringlets shaded by a matching parasol. She smiled at Olivia, and dimples pitted her porcelain cheeks. "You won't believe what I just heard from Frances!"

Olivia squinted from the sun glaring over Peggy's parasol. "Do I want to?"

"Gabriel McIntosh kissed Cecelia Foster."

No, she didn't want to hear that. "Good for her," Olivia mumbled.

"I should think not! Gabe is such a cad. Haven't I told you?"

"Many times. Perhaps you should tell Cecelia."

"No, she will discover it for herself soon enough." Peggy flicked a lace-covered wrist and giggled. "And then there will be a scandal."

Olivia glanced at the church families, who were preparing for the picnic. They were trying to build a Christ-honoring community here. She sent Peggy a pleading look. "Don't spend the afternoon spreading gossip."

"Fine. You might not care what happens in this settlement, but I do." Peggy's skirts swished and crinkled as she walked away with tiny, rapid steps. She slithered across the grass and wedged her fashion plate figure close to her mother. Peggy whispered to her mother and pointed at Cecelia.

No sooner had Olivia looked away and Gabriel McIntosh strutted past her quilt, holding a hammer. Perhaps it had permanently fused to his palm after two years of building in the settlement. His broad-shouldered frame blocked the autumn sunlight as he turned back to her. "That's a big blanket for a girl with no food. Where is the famous Owens family feast this week?"

He almost got a smile out of her. She quelled it in time and resumed smoothing the blanket. "Walter and Alice went with my mother to get the food from our house after the service ended. They should be back soon."

"You must have drawn the long straw today." He grinned, deepening the smile lines on his clean-shaven face. Her mother was right: a handsome man shouldn't be trusted.

"If getting up before dawn to start cooking is the more desirable task, then yes I suppose I did."

Gabe stepped closer. His work-worn boots crunched fallen leaves. "You braided your hair differently."

“No, I didn’t.” She reached for the braid that had fallen to the front of her pearl-buttoned jacket. He was right. “Oh, I had forgotten.”

“I like it.” He’d shed the waistcoat and cravat he had worn over his starched blue shirt to the morning service. Now he’d cuffed his sleeves, ready to fix something for someone. He pointed at the blanket with his hammer. “Do you need help with that?”

She raised an eyebrow at his tool and chuckled. “Are you offering to nail my quilt to the ground?”

“No.” He laughed with a robust happiness that drew the attention of the others at the after-church gathering. Women paused emptying picnic baskets, and men ceased their masculine conferring long enough to stare.

Olivia cringed. One little joke had escaped her lips, and now she would be the topic of hushed gossip all afternoon. That seemed to be all the parents in the settlement spoke of during social gatherings—which young person would marry whom and when. She hated hearing her name mentioned in those conversations, especially in connection with a cad like Gabriel McIntosh.

Gabe didn’t take his eyes off her. That must be the same look he had given Cecelia Foster before he kissed her. She tucked her chin, wishing he would move along. Wasn’t it enough that his jocularly had made a spectacle? Did he have to pretend to like looking at her too? If he caught a glimpse of Peggy Cotter, it would certainly divert his attention.

A dozen children, dressed in their Sunday best, were playing on the front steps of the newly dedicated chapel. The wooden heels of their leather lace-up boots clicked on the stone stairs. The girls twirled in their printed cotton dresses with their white stockings gleaming in the sunlight. Two of the boys started swinging from the wooden railing at the top of the steps, and soon all of the boys clamored for a chance to swing from it too.

Tomorrow morning they would be Olivia’s first class of students. She cupped her hands around her mouth so her voice would carry across the churchyard. “Please don’t play on the railing, boys.”

The children continued playing while singing improvised rhymes about pioneers clearing land and digging wells. The boys took turns hanging from the rails, dirtying their trousers more each time they dropped to the ground.

Gabe smirked at Olivia. “They aren’t going to obey you with that cheery tone. You will have to speak with authority if you want them to listen.”

She took his unsolicited advice and affected her voice with firmness but aimed it at him instead. “Don’t you have some hammering to do?” Without waiting for his response, she stood, looked at the children, and tried again. “No hanging from the railing!”

One of the boys lost his grip and tumbled to the ground. He sprang to his feet and popped his suspenders, laughing. Within seconds, the children resumed their rail swinging.

Gabe’s mocking gaze inflamed Olivia’s threadbare pride. She pretended to ignore him. Finally, he walked to the chapel. He spoke to the children as he passed them on the steps. His words were lost in the wind before they could reach Olivia’s ears, but the children immediately dispersed. He glanced back at Olivia and winked before he disappeared into the chapel.

She wished she could follow him inside. He was nice to talk to when he wasn’t trying to impress her or flirt. Both rankled, but flirtation only led to disappointment.