

A Husband for Mari (The Amish Matchmaker)

By Emma Miller

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Back to Amish Country

Struggling single mother Mari Troyer decides to move—temporarily—to the Amish community of Seven Poplars. With a place to stay and a good job, Mari soon fits right in with the warm, welcoming Delaware residents. But when her son asks a matchmaker to find Mari a husband, Mari worries that the handsome builder who's become the boy's father figure can never be her intended. James Hostetler requires a wife as committed to the Amish life as he is. Need brought Mari to Seven Poplars, but maybe love and renewed faith will make her stay forever.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Emma Miller lives quietly in her old farmhouse in rural Delaware amid fertile fields and lush woodlands. Fortunate enough to be born into a family of strong faith, she grew up on a dairy farm, surrounded by loving parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Emma was educated in local schools, and once taught in an Amish schoolhouse much like the one at Seven Poplars. When she's not caring for her large family, reading and writing are her favorite pastimes.

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Wisconsin

Mari rolled up her grandmother Maryann's red-rooster salt-and-pepper shakers in a stained dish towel and stuffed them into a canvas gym bag. "What time is your boyfriend picking you up?" she asked her soon-to-be-ex roommate.

Darlene pulled her head out of the dark refrigerator, a carton of milk in her hand. There wasn't anything left but condiments, two eggs and the quart of chocolate milk. With the electricity shut off for the past forty-eight hours, Mari wouldn't have touched the milk. Darlene took the cap off and sniffed it. "Twenty minutes." She wrinkled her nose and took a swig. "You want the eggs?"

Mari shook her head. "You take them. I can hardly carry them to Delaware, can I?"

Darlene, thin as a rake handle, features embellished by enough dollar-store makeup for all the participants in a toddlers' beauty pageant, tucked the egg carton into a cardboard box. "Suit yourself." She picked up a green rubber band that had once secured celery and gathered her dyed midnight-black tresses into a pony-tail. "I'm gonna run next door and use the bathroom before Cassie goes to work."

Mari nodded; they'd been using their neighbor's bathroom since the electric was disconnected. Darlene went out the front door, inviting an arctic blast in, and Mari shivered.

She sure hoped it would be warmer in Delaware. Wisconsin winters were brutal. If it wasn't for the kerosene heater, they couldn't have stayed there the past two days. She rewrapped the wool scarf she wore and gazed around. There wasn't anything about the old single-wide trailer with its ratty carpet and water-stained walls that she was going to miss. She had very little to show for eighteen months in Friendly's Mobile Home Park: few belongings and no real friends. She and Darlene had become housemates only because they worked on the same assembly line at the local plant and were both single mothers. They weren't really friends, though. They were just too different.

Feeling the need to do something besides stand there and feel sorry for herself, Mari grabbed a broom and began to sweep the kitchen. She couldn't wash out the refrigerator or wipe down the cabinets, but she could sweep at least. That didn't take water or money, which was a good thing, because she didn't have either. She almost laughed out loud at the thought.

Money had been short since the plant closed and her unemployment ran out. Even shorter than it had been before. Jobs were scarce in the county. Mari had picked and sorted apples, cleaned houses and even tried to sell magazines over the phone. She read the want ads every day, but employment for a woman with an

eighth-grade education and few skills was nearly impossible to find.

She pushed her hand deep into her pocket to reassure herself that Sara Yoder's letter was still there and that she hadn't just dreamed it. Sara, an old acquaintance from her former life, was her only option now. If it hadn't been for Sara's encouraging letters and her unsolicited invitation to come stay with her in Delaware, Mari didn't know where she and Zachary would be sleeping.

Mari swallowed hard. She shouldn't dwell on how bad things had gotten, but it was hard not to. First her car had died, and then she couldn't keep up with her cell phone bill. She'd found a few days of work passing out samples of food in a supermarket, but, living in a rural area, without transportation, it was impossible to keep even that pitiful job. Her meager savings went fast; then came the eviction notice.

Mari had tried her best these past few years, but it was time to admit that she was a failure. A bad mistake, poor judgment and a naive view of the world had gone against her. She had nothing but her son now, and she was worried about him. Worried enough to move a thousand miles away.

At nine years old, Zachary was becoming disillusioned with her promises and forced optimism. She was always saying things like "When I find a better job, we'll rent a place where you can have a dog." Or "I know it's a used bike, but maybe next year I'll be able to buy you the new bike that you really wanted for your birthday." Secondhand clothes, thirdhand toys and a trailer with a leaky roof were Zachary's reality. And her bright, eager child was fast becoming moody and temperamental. The boy who'd had so many friends in first and second grade now had to be dragged away from watching old DVD shows on the TV and coaxed to get out of the house to play. In the past month, he'd brought home two detention notices, and most mornings he pretended to have a stomachache or a headache in an attempt to avoid school. She was equally concerned about the envy Zachary had begun to exhibit toward other boys in his class, boys who had name-brand clothing, cell phones and TVs and PlayStations in their bedrooms.

She'd wanted to dismiss Zachary's unhappiness as just a stage that boys went through. A few bad apples in his classroom, a difficult teacher, an ongoing issue with a school bully, would make anyone depressed. But those were all excuses.

Mari knew she had to do something different. She couldn't keep relying on neighbors or roommates to keep an eye on Zachary while she worked odd shifts and weekends. She needed a support system, someone who cared enough about them to see that he got off to school if she had to leave early, someone to be there if he was sick or she had to work late.

Mari had thought she could raise him alone, but she was beginning to realize she couldn't do it. Love wasn't enough. It was her concern for her son that had given her the courage to agree to move to Delaware. She needed to provide for her child, and she needed to give him what he had never had: structure, community and a real home where he wouldn't be ashamed to bring his friends.

Seven Poplars, Delaware, the town that Sara Yoder had moved to, had become a refuge in Mari's mind, the hope of a new beginning. In her dreams, it was a place where she and Zachary could make right what had gone wrong in their lives. Sara had offered her a room in her home and the promise of a job. There would be a tight-knit community to help with Zachary, to watch over him, to teach him right from wrong. And if it meant returning to the life she'd thought she'd left behind forever, that was the sacrifice she would make for her son's sake.

The groan of brakes one street over told Mari that Zachary's bus had entered the trailer park. She put away

the broom and began to stack the few bags they had on the couch. Sara had hired a van and driver to take them to Delaware.

The door banged open and Zachary came up the steps and into the trailer, head down, his backpack sagging off one shoulder.

"I hope you had a good last day." She tried to sound as cheerful as she could as she closed the door behind him to keep out the bitter wind. "There's still a couple of things—" She halted midsentence, staring at him. He wasn't wearing a coat. "Zachary? Did you leave your good coat on the bus?" Her heart sank. It wasn't his *good* coat; it was his *only* coat. She'd found it at a resale shop, but it was thick and warm and well made. "Where's your coat?"

He shrugged and looked up at her with that expression that she'd come to know all too well over the past months. "I don't know."

Mari suppressed the urge to raise her voice. "Did you leave it on the bus or at school?" She closed her eyes for a moment. There was no time to go back to school to get his coat before the hired van came for them, and she had no way to get there even if there was.

Zachary dropped his old backpack to the floor. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, hood up, but he had to be cold. He had to be frozen.

"I'm sorry about the coat," he muttered, not making eye contact. "But it wasn't all that great. The zipper kept getting stuck." He hesitated and then went on, "It wasn't in my cubby this afternoon. I think one of the guys took it as a joke. I looked for it, but the second bell rang for the buses. I knew I'd be in trouble if I missed my ride home." He swallowed. "I'm sorry, Mom."

She took a breath before she spoke. "It's all right. We'll figure something out." She dropped her hands to her hips and glanced down the hall. "You should see if there's anything left in your room you want to take. Check under the bed. The van will be here for us soon."

Zachary grimaced. "Mom. I don't want to go. I told you that. I won't have any friends there."

And how many do you have here? she thought, but she didn't say it out loud. "You'll make new friends." She forced a smile. "Sara said the kids in the neighborhood are supernice."

He wrinkled his freckled nose, looking so much like his father, with his shaggy brown hair and blue eyes, that she had to push that thought away. Zachary was his own person. He wasn't anything like Ivan, and it was wrong of her to compare them.

"You're talking about Dunkard kids," he said.

"Not Dunkards. That's not a nice word. I'm talking about Amish kids. It's an Amish community. Sara is Amish, and she's—"

"A weirdo," Zachary flung back. "I told you I don't want to go live with her. I don't even know her. I've seen those people in town. They wear dumb clothes and talk funny."

Mari pulled her son into her arms and held him. He didn't hug her back, but at least he didn't push her away.

"It'll be all right," she murmured, pulling back his hood to smooth his hair. "Trust me. You're going to like it there."

"I'll hate it." He choked up as he pressed his face against her. "Please don't make me go. I don't want to live with those weirdos," he sobbed.

"Zachary, what you don't realize," Mari said, fighting her own tears, "is that *we* are those weirdos."

Seven Poplars, Delaware, three days later…

The rhythmic sounds of rain drumming against the windows filtered through Mari's consciousness as she slowly woke in the strange bed. She sighed and rolled onto her back, eyelids flickering, mind trying to identify where she was. Not the trailer. As hard as she'd worked to keep it clean, the mobile home had never smelled this fresh. Green-apple-scented sheets and a soft feather comforter rubbed against her skin. Mari yawned and then smiled.

She wasn't in Wisconsin anymore; she was in Delaware.

There was no snow, but there was rain. They were farther south, and the temperature was warmer here. They'd driven through a winter storm to get to Delaware. The van drivers, a retired Mennonite couple, had been forced to stop not for the one planned night, but two nights because of icy conditions and snow-clogged roads. Mari and Zachary had finally arrived, exhausted, sometime after eleven the previous night.

Mari rubbed her eyes and glanced around the bedroom; there were two tall walnut dressers side by side on one ivory-colored wall and simple wooden pegs on either side of the door for hanging clothing. Simple sheer white curtains hung at the windows. It was a peaceful room, as comfortable as the beds. *An Amish home,* she thought sleepily, as plain and welcoming as her grandmother's house had always been but her uncle's never had. And this one had central heat, she realized as she pushed back the covers and found her way to the chair where she'd laid out her clothes the night before.

She could hear Zachary's steady, rhythmic breathing. She considered waking him, but decided that he needed his sleep more than he needed to be on time for breakfast. Sara had told her that they ate early so that Ellie could be at the schoolhouse on time.

Ten minutes later, face washed and teeth brushed, Mari came down the wide staircase to find Sara in the living room. "Good morning," Mari said.

"I thought you'd sleep in." Sara, short and sturdy and middle-aged, smiled. She was tidy in her blue hand-sewn dress, black stockings and shoes, and white apron. Her crinkly dark hair was pinned up into a sensible bun and covered with a starched, white prayer *kapp.* "But I know the girls will be happy to have you join us for breakfast."

"Should I wake Zachary?" Mari rested her hand on the golden oak post at the foot of the steps.

"Let the child catch up on his sleep. I'll put a plate on the back of the stove for him. What he needs most is plenty of rest first, then pancakes and bacon."

The sound of a saw cutting wood on the other side of the wall startled Mari, and Sara gave a wave of dismissal. "As you can hear, we're in the midst of adding a new wing onto the house. I apologize for the

noise this time of the morning, but the boys like to start early so they can get in a full day's work and still get to their chores at home after. Hope they won't wake Zachary."

"It's fine," Mari said. "Once he's asleep, he sleeps hard. Never hears a thing."

"Good. When I bought the house, I thought that it would be big enough," Sara explained, folding her arms across her ample bosom. "But I didn't realize how many young people would want to stay with their matchmaker. I've got a girl living here now, Jerushah, who leaves for her wedding in Virginia in a few days."

Sara was speaking English, for which Mari was grateful. *Deitsch* was the Alemannic dialect brought to America by the Amish and used in most households, but she hadn't spoken *Deitsch* in years, and Zachary didn't understand it at all. That was another adjustment he'd have to make if they remained in the community for any length of time, which she hoped wouldn't be necessary. In light of Zachary's reluctance to make the move to Delaware, the language difference was something she hadn't mentioned. Mari suddenly felt overwhelmed.

What had she been thinking when she'd agreed to come to Seven Poplars? A new school, new customs *and* a different language for her son? How could she expect a nine-year-old, raised in the English world, to adjust to living among the Amish? Even temporarily? Zachary had never lived without modern transportation, electricity, cell phones and television. And he'd never known the restrictions of an Old Order Amish community that largely kept itself separate from Englishers.

But what choice had she had? Apply for state assistance? Take her child into a homeless shelter? She could never blame those mothers who had made that choice, but if it came to that, it would snuff out the last spark of hope inside her. She would know that she was as stupid and worthless as her uncle had accused her of being, the same uncle who had offered to let her come home if she put her baby up for adoption.

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