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ISBN 978-1-59789-272-8

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Cover Design: The DesignWorks Group, www.thedesignworksgroup.com

Cover Photo: Steve Gardner, PixelWorks Studios, www.shootpw.com

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Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683, www.barbourbooks.com

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Printed in the United States of America.



Chapter 1

Ruth, watch out! Get out of the way!”

Ruth Hostettler halted. A hammer slid down the roof of her sister’s new house. “Ach!” She jumped back as it bounced off the sheets of plywood, just missing her head.

Martin Gingerich scrambled down the ladder and rushed to her side. “Are you okay, Ruth?”

Ruth nodded as she looked up at his strong, handsome face. She saw tenderness there, and something more. Did she dare believe he might be falling in love with her?

Her heart pounded like a blacksmith’s anvil as Martin pulled her to his side.

“You need to stay away from the work site. It’s too dangerous.” His hazel-colored eyes were wide with obvious concern.

“I—I was coming to see if the workers wanted something to drink.”

Martin wiped the rivulets of sweat running down his forehead; then he bent to pick up the hammer lying in the dirt near Ruth’s feet. “I think we could all use a break.” He leaned his head back and stared at the roof. “Luke most of all, since he’s the one who lost his grip on that hammer.”

Ruth’s gaze followed Martin’s. Luke Friesen sat near the edge of the roof, shaking his head. “Are you all right, Ruth?”

“I’m okay. Just a bit shook up.”

“I thought I had a good grip, but that hammer slipped right out of my hand.”

“You need to be more careful!” Martin’s harsh tone took Ruth by

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surprise. Usually he was very soft-spoken.

“*Jah*, well, she shouldn’t have been standing where she was. The work site’s no place for a woman.” Luke grunted. “Hand me that hammer, would ya, Martin?”

“Why don’t you come down and take a break? Then you can get the hammer yourself.”

“Guess I will.”

As Luke descended the ladder, Martin smiled at Ruth, lifted his straw hat, and brushed back his coffee-colored hair. “Would you like me to go with you to get something to drink for the workers?”

“That would be nice.” Ruth appreciated Martin’s kindness. In all the time she and Luke had courted, Luke had never offered to help with anything. For that matter, he’d never shown much concern for her welfare, not even when her family’s home had been broken into and other acts of vandalism had taken place. Instead, Luke had admitted to Ruth that he owned a truck he kept hidden in the woods and made her promise not to tell anyone. On several occasions, he’d acted as if he might be hiding something. Ruth was sure she’d done the right thing by breaking up with him. Having Martin as a suitor made her happier than she’d ever been during her courtship with Luke.

“I’m glad you weren’t hit by Luke’s hammer,” Martin said as they started for the house. “It’s bad enough that your sister and her husband lost their home in that horrible fire a few weeks ago. The last thing we need is for anyone to get hurt today.”

Ruth nodded. “We were all relieved that nobody was hurt in the fire. I know Grace and Cleon appreciate all this help building their new home. This is the second Saturday in a row that they’ve had a large crew working on it.”

“That’s what friends and family are for.”

Martin’s dimpled smile made Ruth feel tongue-tied and tingly. She hadn’t felt like that when she and Luke were together. More than anything, she’d felt irritated the last few months they’d been courting.

“Sure is a good turnout today,” Martin said.

“*Jah*. The house is almost done, and it will be good for Grace and Cleon to have their own place again.”

“I heard your *daed* say that the fire chief found a cigarette lighter

on the ground outside their old house. He thinks the fire might have been intentional.”

Ruth nodded, wondering if she should tell Martin that Grace thought the English reporter she used to date might have started the fire before he left the area. She decided it would be best not to say anything since they had no proof it was Gary Walker. Besides, Dad had his own suspicions about who might have set the fire.

When they reached the home of Ruth’s parents, she turned to Martin. “If you’d like to have a seat on the porch, I’ll run inside and see if Mom’s fixed anything to drink yet.”

“Okay.”

Martin took a seat on the porch swing, and Ruth hurried into the house.

She found her mother and two sisters in the kitchen, along with a few other Amish women and their nearest English neighbor.

Mom smiled at Ruth and pushed a wisp of dark brown hair back into her bun. “Are the men ready to take a break?”

“Jah. I came in to get them something to drink.”

“There’s iced tea and lemonade in the refrigerator.” Grace motioned toward the stove. “We’ve got some coffee heating, too.” Her blue eyes twinkled like sparkling water.

“You’ll need help carrying the beverages out,” Ruth’s younger sister, Martha, put in.

“Martin’s waiting on the porch to help me with that.”

“Martin Gingerich?” Sadie Esh asked.

Ruth nodded, and her cheeks turned warm.

“That fellow’s really sweet on my sister, and I think she’s equally sweet on him.” Martha grinned at Ruth, and the skin around her blue eyes crinkled. “Look how red in the face she’s getting.”

Ruth shrugged. She couldn’t deny her interest in Martin, but she wasn’t about to admit it, either.

“Leave your sister alone,” Mom said, shaking her finger at Martha. “When you find a fellow you like more than your dogs, you’ll turn red in the face whenever his name’s mentioned, too.”

“How are things going with the new house?” Grace asked.

“Everything was fine until I nearly got hit in the head,” Ruth said

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as she removed a jug of iced tea from the refrigerator.

Mom gasped. "Oh, Ruth, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It just shook me up a bit."

"How'd it happen?" their English neighbor Donna Larson questioned.

"A hammer tumbled off the roof. It could have hit me if Martin hadn't shouted a warning."

"Was it Martin's hammer?" Cleon's mother, Irene, asked.

"No, it belonged to Luke."

Mom pursed her lips. "Luke Friesen's here today?"

Ruth set the jug of iced tea on the counter and turned to face her mother. "He and his boss both came to help."

"Your daed's not going to like that. He doesn't trust Luke, and if he thought for one minute—"

"Ach, Mom, surely you don't think Luke would intentionally let his hammer fall." Martha's face had turned red as a pickled beet. "I think Dad's still angry because Luke's not working for him anymore."

"Luke was fired, and you know it."

"That was only because he didn't see eye to eye with Dad on everything."

Mom squinted at Martha. "Luke came to work late on several occasions, and he thought he knew more than your daed about things. And don't forget about those sunglasses of Luke's that were found near my clothesline after it had been cut."

Martha stared down at the table. "That doesn't prove he cut the line."

"Toby says Luke's been acting strange for several months," Sadie put in. "He thinks Luke hasn't been right in the head since he started running with some rowdy English fellows."

Ruth was glad Luke's mother hadn't come today. It wouldn't be good for her to hear such talk about her son. In fact, she didn't think they should be having this conversation, especially not in front of Donna Larson.

Martha shot Sadie an exasperated look. "You can tell your boyfriend that *he's* done some strange things, too. Does that make *him* a suspect?"

Sadie opened her mouth as if to comment, but Cleon's mother spoke first. "It's not our place to judge Luke or anyone else. It might be good if we change the subject."

"I agree." Ruth headed back to the refrigerator for a pitcher of lemonade. "I'm taking this outside. If some of you would like to bring out the coffee and cookies, I'm sure the men would appreciate it."



As Martin waited on the porch swing for Ruth, he thought about her near mishap with the hammer and thanked God that she hadn't been hurt. He'd had an interest in Ruth for a long time—ever since they were children. Even back then, he thought she was beautiful, with her dark brown hair and matching eyes, not to mention her gentle, sweet spirit. During their teen years, when they'd first started attending singings and other young people's functions, he'd been too shy to ask if he could give her a ride home in his buggy. Then Luke Friesen began courting Ruth, and Martin figured his chances were nil. Now that Luke was out of the picture, Martin hoped he might be able to win Ruth's heart.

"What's the matter, Martin? Did you get tired of crawling around on the roof?" Abe Wengerd asked as he clomped up the steps to the back porch.

Martin motioned to the house. "I came here to help Ruth get something to drink for the workers."

Abe glanced around, then tipped his head in Martin's direction. "Don't see any sign of Ruth. Looks to me like you're taking a break."

Martin chuckled. "Guess I am at that. But just until Ruth returns from the kitchen."

"How come you didn't go in with her?"

"Figured I'd only be in the way." Martin's cheeks warmed. "Besides, she asked me to wait out here."

"Reminds me of the way my Alma used to be." Abe reached under his straw hat and pulled his fingers through the ends of his unruly reddish-brown hair. "That woman could get me to do most anything." A shadow crossed his face as he stared down at his boots. "Sure do miss her."

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Martin couldn't imagine what it must be like for Abe, losing his wife after she was struck by a lightning bolt. Now the poor fellow had six children to raise on his own. Martin wondered whether Abe would marry again—and if so, whether it would be for love or so his children could have a mother.

“Did you come up to the house for a particular reason or just to see if I was loafing off?” Martin asked.

Abe leaned against the porch railing. “From what I’ve seen of your work habits at the harness shop, I’m convinced you’re not the kind to loaf around.” He nodded toward the back door. “In answer to your question, I was heading in to use the facilities.”

“What’s wrong with the portable outhouses that were put up for the workers to use?” Roman Hostettler asked as he stepped onto the porch. “Are they too smelly for your sensitive nose?” He snickered and bumped Abe’s arm with his elbow.

Abe nudged him right back. “They were both in use. I figured you wouldn’t mind if I used the one inside.”

“Don’t mind at all.” Roman pushed the screen door open. “Go right on in.”

When Abe disappeared into the house, Roman flopped into one of the wicker chairs that sat near the swing and fanned his damp face with the brim of his hat. “Sure has turned into a warm day, jah?”

Martin nodded. “That’s why Ruth went into the house to get something cold to drink. As soon as she comes back, we’ll take it to the workers.”

“It’s nice of you to want to help,” Roman said with a sly-looking smile. His brown eyes twinkled, as though he knew Martin’s secret.

Martin’s ears burned with embarrassment. Did Ruth’s dad know how much he cared for his daughter? Would Roman approve of his courting Ruth? He was tempted to ask but decided to bring up another subject instead. “Did you see that hammer fly off the roof a while ago?”

“Sure didn’t. Did anyone get hurt?”

“No, but the hammer almost hit Ruth.”

Roman’s dark bushy eyebrows drew together. “How’d it happen?”

“It was Luke’s hammer. He said it slipped out of his hand.”

“Humph! As much training as that fellow’s had using a hammer,

he shouldn't be losing his grip. That was just plain careless." Roman's eyes narrowed as he glanced at the place behind his house where the section of property he'd given Cleon lay. "I never invited Luke to this work frolic. If I'd had my way, he wouldn't have come."

"Who invited him?"

"Cleon. He invited Luke and his English boss, John Peterson. Guess he wanted all able-bodied carpenters to help so we could get the job done quicker."

"Even so, if he knew you didn't want Luke invited—"

"Since it's Cleon and Grace's house, I didn't think I had the right to say who could help and who couldn't." The scowl on Roman's face was enough to curdle fresh goat's milk. "Now that I know one of my daughters could have been injured because of Luke's carelessness, I have a right to say what's on my mind." He stood and pivoted toward the porch steps.

"Where are you going?"

"To send Luke Friesen home!"