

Katie's
Forever
Promise

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All Scripture verses are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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KATIE'S FOREVER PROMISE

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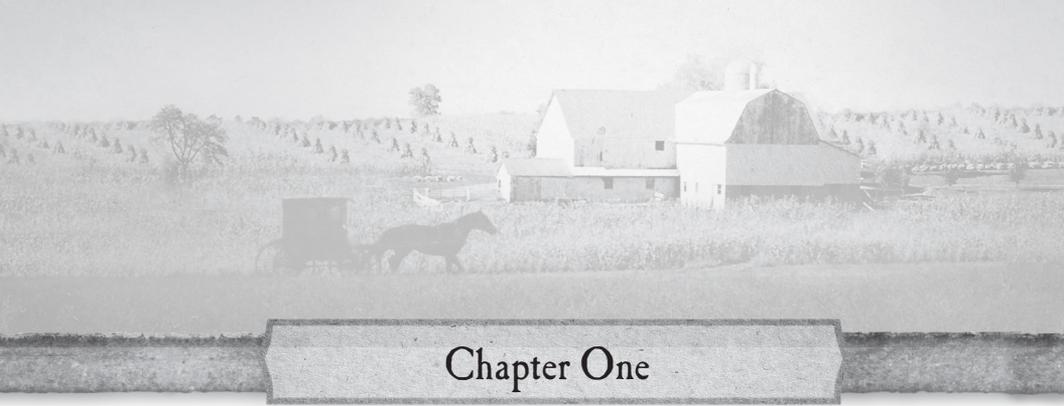
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Chapter One

Katie Raber sat on the tall, swivel chair with a smile on her face. She was now mistress and queen of this one-room Amish schoolhouse for the term. Her hiring had been reaffirmed this morning by Enos Kuntz himself, the chairman of the school board. Enos had paid her a special visit, leaving with a friendly nod and a quick comment. “I think you’ll do just fine with your new job, Katie. Let us know if you have any problems.”

Katie swept the top of her teacher’s desk clean with a shaky hand, pausing to replace the small plastic pencil holder she’d knocked over. On the other side of the room, pushed up against the window, sat a table loaded with the year’s supply of schoolbooks. She was a little scared, but she told herself there was nothing to worry about. This world of learning called her, just as she was certain it would also beckon eager young students once school began next week. And then, in less than two months, she would be twenty-one, considered an adult in her Amish community. Her wages would be her own to spend how she chose instead of

sharing them with her parents—*Mamm* and her new husband, Jesse Mast. How blessed Katie felt. It was still hard to comprehend all the changes that had occurred in the last few years.

Katie stood and looked out the window. Enos was driving away in his buggy, his bearded face still visible through the open door. Calm was flooding over Katie now. There could be only one reason he would take the time to drive all the way over here this morning, the week before school officially begins. And it wasn't because he harbored any doubts about her teaching abilities. The vote to hire her had been unanimous and given with pleased smiles on the faces of all three school board members.

No, Enos had stopped by to emphasize his approval one last time. Likely he thought she needed it—this being her first year teaching. But it was more than that. Enos knew the details of her past, as did all the Amish community. And they wished her well as she continued to put her life back together after the awful situation with Ben Stoll. Even now Ben was sitting in jail, serving out the last few days of his sentence.

Katie had survived that disastrous time because *Da Hab* had been with her, just as He'd been with *Mamm* and her after Katie's *daett* died. And just as *Da Hab* had been with the two while Emma Raber raised Katie alone. Katie's *mamm* had an awful reputation for a long time. After a love gone wrong in her teen years, a marriage to a man she learned to love, and then being widowed at an early age, Emma had chosen to remain a single *mamm*, raising her daughter on the land her husband had left her. She'd gone against usual Amish practice by refusing offers of marriage until, by *Da Hab*'s grace, she'd accepted a marriage proposal by a local farmer named Jesse Mast. That marriage had created a new atmosphere of change and acceptance, and Katie's reputation had improved along with her *mamm*'s. After Katie fell in love with Ben and he'd turned out to be involved in the drug trade, part of her acceptance in the community came from how

much she was admired for the way she'd handled herself since Ben Stoll's arrest and imprisonment.

She'd loved Ben with all of her heart. And he had broken and smashed her trust beyond repair. Now he was no longer part of her life. That had all happened over a year ago, when the news of Ben's arrest had reached Katie while she was in Europe with her Mennonite friends Margaret Kargel, Sharon Watson, and Nancy Keim. Only *Da Hab's* healing touch a few days later had kept her from spending years in bitterness and sorrow. The miracle had happened the morning they'd gone up in a cable car high in the Alps to Schilthorn, where she'd seen the mighty works of *Da Hab's* hands displayed in the mountain range around her. The tears had flowed freely that morning, washing the deepest pain from her heart. Afterward, she'd returned home and continued mourning her loss for a time, but without the crushing hopelessness that had first gripped her heart. Then last fall she'd made application to join the instruction class to officially join the Amish church, and this spring the *wunderbah* day had arrived. She'd been baptized by Bishop Jonas Miller himself! She was now a member of the church.

If anyone had entertained doubts about her, they'd been answered in how Katie had lived her life the past year. She still stayed in touch with her Mennonite friends Margaret and Sharon, but she saw them infrequently. The invitation to Margaret's wedding had arrived in the mail yesterday, and Katie would certainly attend. Beyond that, Sharon and Margaret understood that Katie had made the best choice for her—to stay within the Amish faith. And it was, Katie told herself. Her heart was settled on the matter. The Amish were her people, and this was her home. She'd seen the land of the church fathers in Switzerland, and now she'd chosen this faith for herself. This community in Delaware was the place where her heart could rest for whatever time *Da Hab* had for her on this earth.

Enos's buggy was already a black speck just before disappearing

around the curve in the road. In addition to his interest in her success in the classroom, there was the suspicion on Katie's part that Enos had hopes she would be his next daughter-in-law. She could tell by the light that sprang up in his eyes when he spoke to her of his son Norman.

Norman Kuntz, though, wasn't like his *daett* at all. He was shy and withdrawn for the most part. The boy was handsome enough and came from an excellent family, so he ought to bubble with confidence, but he didn't. So far he'd lacked the courage to take Katie home from the Sunday-night hymn singing—although he did spend considerable time stealing glances at her in the meetings. He'd mustered up enough courage lately to send a few tentative smiles her way.

There was nothing in Norman that set Katie's heart pounding so far. Not like Ben Stoll had done. That had been another matter entirely. But Katie knew she shouldn't be comparing Norman with Ben. Her life had changed for the better now, and she wasn't going back to the past. Ben had been a terrible misjudgment, and she didn't plan to repeat the error.

This time whoever the man was who drove her home, Katie wanted *Mamm's* full support. And hopefully Jesse's too, although he'd mostly care about whether the young man was a *gut* church member and knew how to work hard. Norman met both of those standards quite well. It helped, of course, that he would be a *gut* provider for his family, but that paled in comparison to the really important matter to Katie. Her main concern was that Norman would never do what Ben had done—break her heart.

Katie sighed, pushing the dark thoughts aside. Things were coming together well for her. This offer of a teaching job had been another blessing from *Da Hab*. One of the many she'd been given since Ben's betrayal.

Katie sighed again, allowing her mind to wander into the past.

For years she'd dreamed of capturing Ben Stoll's attention. *Mamm* had warned her that such handsome boys were above her, and she shouldn't dream that way. And that was long before Ben even knew Katie existed. But *Mamm* had been drawing from her own experience of rejection, and the young man she'd loved had never even asked her home. So Katie had rejected *Mamm's* counsel and hadn't drawn back when Ben finally noticed her at a Mennonite Youth Gathering. She'd ridden in Ben's buggy and held his hand. They'd even kissed—often and with great joy. How could she have been so wrong about him? Katie pondered the question and managed a faint smile. Even in this situation she could be thankful. The pain of that question no longer stung as much. She'd given the pain and hard questions over to *Da Hab*. He knew the answers, and He would forgive her where she'd been wrong.

Now she was being given a *wunderbah* opportunity by the community. They were entrusting her with the care of their children for a whole school year. This honor had been held by Ruth Troyer for the past few years. After chasing Jesse Mast before he'd married Katie's *mamm*, Ruth had finally found a man who asked to wed her—Albert Gingerich. He was an older farmer in the community whose wife had passed away last year.

Ruth had stepped down from consideration as a teacher this summer in preparation for her wedding, although she probably hadn't imagined in her wildest dreams that Katie Raber would be offered her job. Ruth might have hung on for another year if she'd known that. After all, she'd been rebuffed by Jesse in favor of Katie's *mamm*, Emma Raber, and the sting of the rejection and community talk surely still rankled in Ruth's mind.

Katie smiled at the memory of *Mamm* and Jesse's courtship. The two widows—Emma and Ruth—had faced each other down, and *Mamm* had won! The strange thing was that *Mamm* hadn't put up much of a fight—at least not out in the open. But maybe

that was the allure that drew Jesse in. Katie decided she needed to allow that *Mamm* had more wisdom than she let on at times. Ruth had had all of Jesse's children on her side at first, and she put her best moves on Jesse by baking the pecan pies he loved. *Mamm*, on the other hand, had turned down Jesse's advances the first few times he came calling, which seemed to make him all the more determined. And when she finally came around, Emma offered nothing but herself. In the end, all of Jesse's children except Mabel, the eldest, had come over to *Mamm*'s side.

Mabel hadn't been the easiest person to live with after the wedding, but since Katie's return from Europe they were on decent terms. Mabel's heart had been softened last year by seeing the great heartache Ben's betrayal had caused Katie.

A rattle of buggy wheels in the schoolyard interrupted her thoughts. Katie walked to the window again. She gasped as Ruth Troyer climbed out of her buggy. What did *she* want? Had she forgotten some of her personal possessions? If so, she could have come in the evening after I'd gone home, Katie thought. But, there was no sense avoiding Ruth, so she might as well put on a brave front.

"*Gut* morning," Ruth said with a forced smile when Katie opened the door.

"*Gut* morning," Katie replied as she held the door and invited Ruth in.

"I thought I might catch you here this morning."

"*Yah*," Katie managed to get out, her smile gone now. "There's much to do before school starts."

Ruth pushed past her and bustled inside. "I thought I'd drive over in case you might want some advice, seeing this is your first term and all. And remember, I did teach here for three years so I know many of the students and the material. If you have any questions, I'd be glad to answer them."

Katie swallowed hard. "Did the school board send you?"

Ruth laughed. "*Nee*, I'm here on my own. Don't tell me you're too high and mighty to accept help? Just because you're a school-teacher now doesn't mean we don't all remember where you came from, Katie Raber. After all, that man of yours is still sitting in jail."

"I have no connection with Ben Stoll anymore," Katie countered. "I haven't seen him since before he was arrested."

"Well, that doesn't matter now." Ruth breezed around the room, speaking over her shoulder. "I guess we all make our mistakes. But I, for one, would have seen that one coming. And I suspect your *mamm* did, but she was too busy stealing Jesse from me to warn you."

Katie turned and watched Ruth. This was after all her school-house now, and she'd better act like it was. Katie kept her voice even. "*Mamm* did have reservations about Ben—just to set the record straight. And she didn't steal Jesse from you. Jesse made up his own mind."

Ruth turned around. "Things do turn out for the best now, don't they? Thank *Da Hab* Jesse didn't decide on me. Then I never would have been available for Albert's proposal. Did you know he farms more than 100 acres northwest of Dover? Some of the best black soil in the area. It's worth a fortune. He'll have a mighty *gut* heritage to hand down to his children."

Katie forced a smile. "I'm glad for you, Ruth. And *Mamm* has fallen deeply in love with Jesse, so everything *did* turn out for the best."

"It always does." Ruth glared at Katie. "And I guess you know *gut* and well why you got this job. Enos is expecting quite a lot out of his investment, if you ask me."

"I don't expect you know what you're speaking of," Katie said. She tried to still her pounding heart. How this woman could get under her skin! Enos might hope she'd date his son, but he hadn't

made any requirement or suggestion for her to do so while hiring her.

Ruth laughed. “I don’t think you’re that blind, Katie. Enos is a man of high standards. And your past hasn’t gone away, believe me. He’s just overlooking it right now. But if you turn down the advances of his youngest son, I doubt if things will stay that way for long.”

Katie almost sputtered a denial, but she pressed her lips together instead. Nothing would persuade Ruth’s mind. Not once she’d made it up. And there likely was some truth to the woman’s statements.

Ruth smiled, apparently taking Katie’s silence as victory. “Let me show you the books then, and I’ll get out of here. I have a ton of things that need doing for the wedding preparations, but I told myself this morning that I owe you at least one visit since I was the former teacher. I’m aware you know nothing about teaching. I do hate to see you thrown into this situation and making a total mess out of it—to say nothing about all the decent learning from the past few years that could be lost. Let’s look at the books for this term.”

Katie walked toward the table by the window. Two of the books had fallen to the floor while she’d been going through them, but she hadn’t noticed until Ruth’s criticizing presence entered the room.

Ruth marched over and bent down to pick up the books. “This is no way to treat new books! I always told myself, if I don’t respect the school’s property, how can I expect ‘my’ children to? Because they do, after all, learn more by example than by any lecture. But how would you know such a thing? Your *mamm* probably never taught you much.”

Katie choked back her response. Ruth was trying to goad her into saying something she might regret. And Enos had just been

here, and he'd said nothing about books lying on the floor. Everyone knew such things happened during unpacking. But Katie knew Ruth would only see more of Enos's scheming and favor in his silence, so she might as well keep quiet about that too.

Ruth's voice continued in lecture mode. "These are your first-grade reading books, Katie. Be sure to spend plenty of time with that age group. The children need to learn quickly because everything else is at a standstill until they learn how to read."

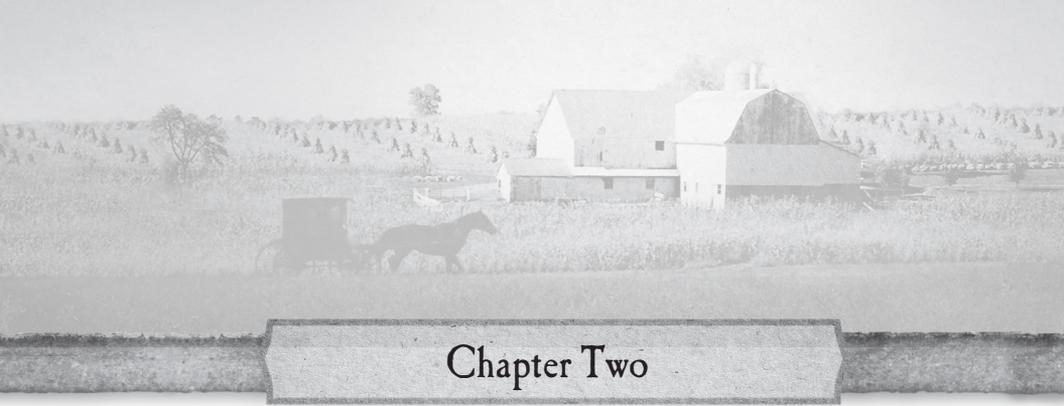
Katie nodded, forcing herself to listen. Ruth was telling her some *gut* things, and she did have much to learn. She even managed to keep a smile on her face as the former teacher droned on far longer than Katie had hoped. Over an hour later, Katie was more than ready to see Ruth leave. She summoned up her best manners as Ruth finally prepared to go. "Thank you for your time, Ruth. I do appreciate it."

"It's *gut* that you can listen," Ruth remarked. "I guess your *mamm* taught you something after all. Now, will you come out and hold my horse for me? He gets a little skittish when I take off. Albert promised me a decent horse when I move into his house after the wedding. Now that's a decent man, if you ask me."

Katie held her tongue as she walked outside. She held the bridle of Ruth's horse as the former teacher climbed inside the buggy.

"I hope you remember everything I told you," Ruth said as she took off with a slap of the reins.

Grinding her teeth, Katie watched Ruth go. That woman was the limit and then some. But Ruth was also a creature *Da Hab* had made, and her elder besides. And the woman had given her some useful advice.



Chapter Two

That evening the whole family was seated for dinner when Katie slid her kitchen chair forward while *Mamm* brought the last of the food to the table. Katie hadn't arrived home from the schoolhouse until a few minutes ago—too late to help. Apparently this would be another privilege of school teaching. When she'd worked as a cashier at Byler's Store, coming home late hadn't been an acceptable practice at all.

"Let us pray," Jesse said.

They all bowed their heads as Jesse led out in prayer. "Our great and heavenly Father, blessed be Your name. We pause at this evening hour to give You thanks, and to beseech Your continued aid and care over our lives..."

Katie listened to the sound of Jesse's voice. It was soothing after Ruth's harsh tones just a few hours ago. That woman's words had stung more than Katie wished to admit. Still, it wasn't true that her job had been given to her so Enos could influence her to be his future daughter-in-law. How did Ruth dare say such things?

She had to admit that Enos probably hoped she would say *yah* if Norman ever asked to take her home after a hymn sing. But the outcome of that certainly wasn't tied to her hiring in any way. Ruth shouldn't even be thinking such thoughts! If anyone had reason to entertain doubt about someone's character, Katie did. Didn't Ruth give plenty of cause for people to question her character. Yet *Da Hab* required that His people think only the best of others, even when they acted in ways they shouldn't.

"Amen," Jesse said, interrupting Katie's thoughts.

"Why's the stove still putting out so much heat?" Mabel asked.

Mamm leaped to her feet with a gasp and rushed over to turn the damper knob.

"Getting forgetful in your old age?" Jesse teased.

Mamm blushed. "That goes for you too, you know."

Katie smiled at their light banter. *Mamm* had blossomed since her marriage to Jesse. She actually appeared years younger than she had when they'd lived alone on their farm.

A shadow crossed Katie's face as the table chatter continued around her. She would have been married to Ben Stoll by now if he hadn't done what he did. Or at least they'd be talking of marrying next year. But what *gut* was it mourning what couldn't be helped? Besides, during and after Ben's trial had been a time of purifying for her, and now she felt settled about where *Da Hab* was guiding her. The brief time she'd spent associating with the Mennonite youth group now seemed like a dream, far off and distant—much like Ben himself.

"How did things go at school today?" Leroy asked from his place on the back bench.

Katie jumped. Then she quickly smiled. "Fine."

The eldest of Jesse's three boys from his marriage to Millie, Leroy had shown the most interest in Katie's work at the school. From the look on his face, the answer seemed to satisfy him. He

nodded as he dipped a huge helping of mashed potatoes onto his plate before passing the bowl to his brother Willis.

Mabel, though, was staring at Katie. “Surely something exciting happened? You didn’t sit there all day by yourself with just the books for company, did you?”

Katie shrugged. She really didn’t feel like going into the visits by Enos Kuntz and Ruth Troyer.

“Come on, tell us,” Mabel teased. “I can tell you’re holding something back. Let’s not start with secret things this early in the school year.”

Leroy grinned from ear to ear. “I see what Mabel’s after. She wants Katie spilling all the juicy gossip each night. Training her early so she’ll have the inside track on what’s going on in the community.”

Mabel didn’t deny the accusation. “Why shouldn’t I know if Katie does?”

They all laughed.

“Katie shouldn’t be bringing home news like that,” Leroy said. “Gossip isn’t good, so she won’t. You might as well get used to the fact.”

Mabel wrinkled up her face but didn’t say anything.

Taking a deep breath, Katie began anyway. “Well, Enos Kuntz showed up to give me some words of encouragement. And after that, Ruth Troyer came along to help me with the books and see if I had any questions about teaching. So, nothing really exciting happened.”

“Enos Kuntz?” Leroy was all ears now.

Everyone else laughed, and Leroy lowered his head. They knew Leroy had his eyes focused on Enos’s niece, Lizzie Kuntz.

Without missing a beat, Willis piled on. “Of course Leroy finds that interesting. He finds even the passing shadow of Lizzie to be of great interest.”

“You just wait!” Leroy muttered as laughter filled the room again.

Mabel made a face at Willis. “Ha! Someday you’ll be the same way,” Mabel said, defending Leroy. Then she dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand. “What I want to know is what Ruth came over for.”

“Katie just told you!” Leroy blustered, obviously trying to recapture his dignity.

“That’s why you should leave this kind of conversation to the women,” Mabel lectured her brother. “We know how to see below the surface of things—unlike men who only see what they see.”

“Now that’s nasty,” Willis said, back on his brother’s side in a flash.

“But it’s true,” Mabel said. “Am I right, Katie?”

Mabel *was* right, Katie thought as she deliberately kept her face neutral. Mabel knew Ruth Troyer well and had been on Ruth’s side back when Ruth had her *kapp* set for Jesse. Mabel had played her part in passing along anything unpleasant she knew about *Mamm*. Still... Katie smiled a little. Mabel had changed since then, and she shouldn’t hold the past against her.

“I’m right, am I not?” Mabel persisted.

“Maybe you shouldn’t pry into Katie’s business,” Jesse said. “Katie might not wish to share everything she and Ruth spoke about. Perhaps it was information Ruth had about some of the children. That’s a private matter between teachers, unless it involves Carolyn or Joel.”

Carolyn sat up straight at her place at the table. “I didn’t do anything wrong—*ever*! Plus I’m no longer in school. I graduated!”

“Neither did I!” eight-year-old Joel added. “And I’m still going to school.”

“I doubt that either of you were trouble free,” Mabel shot their way.

Katie struggled to speak. "I...really...Ruth had nothing bad to say about any of the children. I think she liked all of them very well."

"See, I told you!" Carolyn looked quite vindicated. "Ruth was a *gut* teacher."

"I'm sure she was," Katie agreed. "And Ruth wanted to share some of her wisdom with me. So she drove all the way over on her own time to help me out—even though she's busy with wedding preparations."

"I think you'll also make a great teacher," Joel piped up.

"I hope so." Katie said, lowering her head. That was the one uncomfortable thing about teaching in your own district. How would she handle giving orders to her brother? *Mamm* always did that at home.

"You'll be great!" Carolyn agreed.

Mabel turned to Carolyn. "Remember to keep thinking that when you hear that Katie has to boss Joel around. I believe in discipline, and I don't want to hear any reports floating around the community that my baby brother is getting special treatment."

"That's a *gut* attitude to have," Jesse said. "I'm hoping for the best for Joel this year again. And don't be all that hard on Katie. She's new at this and might need some time to learn the ropes."

"You can say that again," Katie murmured. Suddenly she was very glad she'd listened to everything Ruth had told her. The woman had a surprisingly large amount of wisdom behind that wagging tongue of hers.

"Guess what I heard today?" Willis spoke up. "You won't believe it!"

"That some girl consented to drive home with you?" Mabel shot at him.

Everyone laughed good-naturedly, but Willis looked undeterred. "Ben Stoll will be out of jail next week."

Katie gasped, and everyone turned to look at her.

Jesse spoke up at once. "That wasn't a nice thing for you to be saying at the supper table, Willis. Katie didn't need to hear the news dropped on her like that."

"I'm sorry," Willis said.

Katie caught her breath and tried to smile. "It's okay. That just came as a surprise, although I knew the time was getting close."

Leroy cleared his throat. "I'm surprised Ben's out so soon with all the charges that had been brought against him."

"We shouldn't talk about this at the table," Jesse warned.

Leroy shrugged. "The subject was brought up, and I'm curious, that's all."

"Willis can tell you later what else he knows," Jesse told him. "We shouldn't talk about this in front of Katie. She's suffered enough already."

"Thank you," Katie whispered, keeping her head down as the meal continued. She didn't join in the chatter when the subject changed to the day's events on the farm. She shouldn't have reacted like that when the subject of Ben Stoll came up. *Da Hab* had healed her, and she'd moved on. Perhaps next time she would do better.

When supper was over, they bowed their heads in silent prayer. Then the menfolk scattered to the living room. Jesse would be calling for evening devotions before long, but in the meantime the womenfolk would clean the kitchen.

Katie went to run water in the sink for dishes.

"Mabel and Carolyn, Katie and I will take care of the kitchen tonight. Both of you helped me prepare the food, so you've done enough," *Mamm* said.

"Are you sure?" Mabel asked. "We can help."

"Get on now, and I mean it!" *Mamm* gave both girls a sweet smile that softened the order.

Mamm is being quite wise, Katie thought. This way no resentment would fester between them over her working late at the school. Katie hadn't thought of how this could be best handled, but *Mamm* was already finding a solution. And *Mamm* probably wished to talk, if Katie didn't miss her guess. Both matters would be taken care of this evening at the same time.

Mabel and Carolyn were no more out of the kitchen before *Mamm* asked her first question. "So what did Ruth Troyer really want today, Katie? I know she didn't drive all that way just to 'help you.'"

"*Mamm*, please. The woman did offer some helpful advice."

"But that wasn't everything, was it?"

Katie looked down as she continued to wash dishes. "Well, no. She claims Enos Kuntz only gave me the job with the understanding that I'd be his daughter-in-law. And she rubbed in the fact that she's marrying again—and marrying rich at that. And she said something about you stealing Jesse from her."

Mamm smiled. "Some people are the limit, that's all I can say."

"You don't think Enos really gave me the job for that reason, do you? I know he'd like me to be open to Norman's attention, but hiring me would be going kind of far..."

"Of course he wouldn't do something like that." *Mamm* didn't hesitate. "Enos isn't that kind of man. And the entire school board had to approve your hiring."

"That's what I thought."

"I do approve of Norman." *Mamm* had a touch of teasing in her voice. "And Enos and his *frau* apparently approve of you. So on that point, Ruth is correct. All of us like the potential match."

"Oh, *Mamm*," Katie whispered, "do you think I can ever love again?"

"Love is a gift from *Da Hab*." *Mamm* looked pensive. "I was given it again, long after I gave up all hope. And twice at that—first

for your *daett* and then Jesse. *Yah*, you can love again. *Da Hab* will see to that.”

“But Norman...he’s so...so...timid. I’m not used to that at all. He hasn’t spoken a word to me yet, *Mamm*. Not one.”

“You mustn’t compare every young man to Ben.” *Mamm*’s voice was low. “That will be your temptation, Katie.”

Katie nodded. “I’ve tried to forget Ben. I really have.”

Mamm continued as if she hadn’t heard. “If Norman loves *Da Hab* and His ways, and if he loves you, then love can grow in your heart. You’re now a church member, Katie, and so is Norman. In fact, he’s been one for some time. That doesn’t happen often—that young men make up their minds so quickly. You can’t go wrong on this one, Katie. Even if the feelings don’t come at once, they will in time. They did for me—with your *daett* and with Jesse.”

Katie continued washing the dishes. *Mamm* was right, she was certain of it. After what had happened with Ben, she should be honored that Norman was even considering her for his *frau*.

They finished the dishes and found their way to the living room for the evening devotions. After Jesse read the Scriptures and they knelt in prayer, Katie slipped up the stairs.

Willis followed her, stopping her outside her bedroom door.

“Katie?”

“*Yah?*” Katie turned around and paused.

Willis glanced down the stairs before continuing. “I didn’t say anything at the supper table, but Ben wants to meet with you when he’s out of jail. It’s urgent, he says.”

Katie struggled to keep breathing. “I can’t, Willis. You know that.”

Willis shrugged, his slim shoulders barely visible in the shadowed stairwell. “I’m just passing on what I was told by Emery Graber.”

Katie didn't say anything more; she just stared as Willis disappeared into his room. What did Ben want? It didn't really matter though. Meeting him was out of the question. Their relationship was over...*way* over.