

Praise for *Mary's Calico Hope*

Author Anne Blackburne's *Mary's Calico Hope* is a fast-paced, heart-warming read of Reuben King and Mary Yoder, two loveable, relatable, and intriguing characters who fall in love. But their destiny together won't come without obstacles; one protagonist is Amish; the other, Mennonite. The road to true love is often a bumpy path, and in this case, becoming Mr. and Mrs. King doesn't seem likely. Despite my adoration for Mary and Reuben, the further I delved into the book, the more I wondered how this author would successfully deliver a happily-ever-after. However, Gott has a way of intervening. I won't reveal the denouement, but it's a stunner! All characters, including Hope, contribute to this highly intriguing emotional page turner that I anticipate will appeal to everyone who believes in the power of true love. Five stars!!

—Lisa Jones Baker, bestselling author

In *Mary's Calico Hope*, Mary Yoder was badly injured in a buggy accident as a child and is content living in the Dawdi Haus connected to her parents' farmhouse and with her work weaving baskets and raising specialty roosters whose feathers she uses to make excellent trout lures. When Reuben King, a Mennonite doctor, comes to town, they are attracted to one another, but Mary is a baptized Amish woman, which means they are forbidden to be together. And he wants her to have surgery to improve her mobility and lessen her day-to-day pain, but she's tired of surgeries. This second novel set in Blackburne's fictional town of Willow Creek, Ohio, reminds us that God's grace and mercy is ever present, especially when we're certain we don't fit in with our community. The story will captivate readers who love Amish culture and an endearing romance.

—Amy Clipston, bestselling author of *The Heart's Shelter*

Anne Blackburne pulls a very single, very science-minded doctor into a conservative Amish community, and she pitches him headlong in love! Science and faith tangle together in this sweet romance that proves that physical limitations make no difference when it comes to matters of the heart. Ms. Blackburne is proving herself to be a valuable addition to the Amish romance genre. Don't miss out on this heartwarming read!

—Patricia Johns, *Publishers Weekly* bestselling author



THE HEART *of* THE AMISH

Mary's Calico Hope

ANNE BLACKBURNE



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Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



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DEDICATION:

To my children, who are my biggest supporters!
Kelsey, Parker, Molly, Brianna, Cooper

To Linda, Karen, Elizabeth, Virginia, Jennifer,
John, Alex, Sherry, Kitrina, Pam, Martha, Janine
You believe in me and give me wings!

And to Phil, my wonderful bro-in-law/tech wiz!
Without your help, nobody would know about my books!

I love you all.

Thank you for your honesty and love.

CHAPTER ONE



“Careful, Hope, I’ll squish you if you don’t watch out.” Mary Yoder was careful not to set one of her crutches down on the half-grown calico kitten presently making a nuisance of itself by winding around her legs.

“*Ach!* That cat is going to make you fall, Mary!”

“*Maem*, don’t worry. I’m fine.” The petite blond woman smiled fondly at her mother as she did her best to avoid the adolescent feline.

“You know I can’t help worrying about you, Mary. I’m sure Hope is a very *gut* cat, but a fall could really hurt you.”

Mary kissed her *mudder* on the cheek. “*Ja*, I know. Which is why I’m very careful. I like having Hope around. She’s *gut* company.”

Mary reached down and stroked the pretty cat, a gift from her old friend Lydia Coblentz, who had given a kitten from her cat’s final litter to several unmarried Amish women in Mary’s community. Lydia’s only stipulation was that the cats must be indoor pets.

“If you need more company, you could move back into the main house. I worry about you living by yourself in the *darwdi haus*. How would I know if you fell and needed help?” Edie’s well-meant nagging made Mary hide a smile as she leaned one crutch against the wall by the table, pulled out a chair, sat down, and laid the second crutch next to the first. It was true she wasn’t light on her feet, nor could she change direction quickly to avoid an unexpected obstacle. But all things considered, she thought she did pretty well.

“I guess I could be like that television commercial *Englishers* talk

about, and yell, "I've fallen, and I can't get up!"

"Mary Yoder, this is not a joking matter."

"Come on, Maem. I have to joke about some things because laughter is better than tears, ja? And I love knowing you miss me, but I'm not moving back. It's nice and quiet in my little house, unlike the main house when my *brieder* are here. And honestly, I'm more likely to be knocked down by them than tripped by Hope."

"Ach, I can't argue with you there." Edie laughed. "They are very energetic."

"Ja, that's one way of putting it."

Mary had four younger brothers—much younger, as they were the children of her mother and her stepfather. The boys were six, eight, ten, and twelve. Mary's mother had been widowed at a young age when her husband was killed in the same buggy accident that injured Mary's legs and back. Mary had been fortunate to have been thrown clear of the vehicle when it was rear-ended by a big pickup truck being driven by a drunk Englisher. She was only three years old at the time of the accident and had no memory of the trauma or the pain she'd endured during several surgeries to save her life, and her legs.

To her regret, she could barely remember her father either. She only had vague recollections of a large, strong man with a soft brown beard and laughing eyes.

Edie Yoder set two steaming mugs of *kaffi* down on the table, then filled a plate with half a dozen cookies from the cookie jar on the counter and placed them on the table. She sat down and sighed, then patted Mary's hand and smiled wryly. "I'm sorry, *liebchen*. I don't mean to mother you to death."

"I am nearly thirty, Maem," Mary reminded her mother with a small grin. "You're going to have to cut the apron strings at some point, you know."

Hope jumped lightly to Mary's lap and settled down, purring as Mary stroked her soft fur.

"Ja, ja, I know you're a woman grown, daughter. But you'll always be my *boppeli*."

Mary rolled her eyes but leaned over to give her mother a kiss on the cheek, causing the cat to let out an indignant squawk. Both women chuckled at the tiny animal's ire, and Mary petted her in apology. "Fortunately for me, you have four young ones to lavish your attention on. Otherwise, I doubt you'd let me out of the house."

Eddie chuckled. "You're probably right. But Mary, I don't want you to think I don't trust you or don't understand that you're a capable adult. I'm sorry if I made you feel that way."

"Aw, Maem, I understand. You worry. It's what a mudder does."

"Ja! But I'll try harder not to." The women smiled at each other in understanding and sipped their hot coffee.

"So, did you hear about Ruth Helmuth and Jonas Hershberger?" Mary wiggled her eyebrows at her mother.

"I know they've been courting," Eddie responded, raising her own eyebrows questioningly.

"What? I actually know something before you do? You're slipping, Maem." Mary grinned and took another sip of coffee just to draw out the pleasure of being the bearer of gut news.

"Mary Yoder! Tell me what you know before I burst!"

Mary laughed but relented. "All right! Ruth stopped in to see us at work today, and she told me she and Jonas are getting married this fall! But you can't tell anyone, as it's a secret. She told me I could tell you."

Eddie clapped her hands together and grinned at her daughter. "*Wunderbar!* I can't think of a better matched couple, for I know she's always wanted *kinner*, and he has that adorable little daughter who needs a mudder! Speaking of which, I doubt this will remain a secret for long, what with that chatty little girl doubtless in on the secret."

"Probably so. I know Abigail is happy about the situation. She and Ruth already love each other. They're very sweet together. And they both got kittens from Lydia Coblentz, from the same litter as my Hope!" At the sound of her name, the cat let out a contented chirp, and Mary scratched her under the chin.

"I heard Lydia is moving into Ruth's dawdi haus. Is that true?" Eddie asked as she broke a cookie in half, nibbling around the edges

until both halves disappeared and she picked up another and repeated the process.

“Ja, and Ruth couldn’t be happier. She’s been lonely, I expect, since she lost Levi a couple years ago, and her *grossmammi* before that. Having Lydia in the house will be like having her grossmammi back again.” Mary picked up a cookie and bit into the soft, gingery goodness. “Mmm. I love your ginger snaps, Maem.”

Edie glowed with pleasure and gestured for Mary to continue with her story. “And Jonas doesn’t mind?”

“Ach, no! He’s a gut man. He encouraged Ruth to ask Lydia to move in after Lydia’s house burned down during the blizzard this winter.”

Edie opened her mouth to reply, but a firm knock on the kitchen door interrupted and caused Hope to leap to the floor to investigate.

Edie set her cup down on the table and pushed to her feet. “Now, who could that be? I’m not expecting anyone, are you?”

Mary shook her head, and Hope wound around Edie’s ankles and then strolled over to the door and stood looking up at it expectantly.

“Would you look at that? She wants to see who’s here!” Edie exclaimed.

“So do I, Maem,” Mary said with a smile. “Why don’t you open the door?” She could make out the shape of a broad-shouldered man through the cream curtains hanging over the window in the door, but that was all.

“I will, I will. It’s probably Germaine Stoltzfus come to talk about the pies we’re going to bake for the fundraiser next weekend.”

“I don’t think it’s Mrs. Stoltzfus,” Mary said as Edie wiped her hands on her apron and opened the kitchen door. Instead of her mother’s stout and matronly friend, a strange man stood at the door. As soon as he saw Edie, he smiled reassuringly.

“Good morning, ma’am. I’m sorry to intrude, but I seem to have gotten turned around, and I’m lost. Can you please tell me where the Hostetler farm is?”

Mary peered around her mother. The stranger was tall and slim, with the broad shoulders hinted at through the window curtains on the

kitchen doorway. He was dressed like a working man in denim jeans rather than homemade pants—so probably not Amish, though possibly Mennonite—and a blue chambray work shirt. His lack of a beard told her he wasn't married, though that wasn't a reliable indicator if he wasn't Amish, and the thought caused a warmth to spread throughout her body. Confused, she stared at the floor. How could a stranger have this effect on her? Especially one who probably didn't share her faith?

"Sure, you're not far." Edie stepped outside to join the man on the stoop and pulled the screen door closed behind her to keep the curious kitten inside. She pointed down the road to the south. "See, you go about half a mile and turn at the big white barn with the huge oak. The Hostetler place is just a ways along on the left. It won't take you five minutes in your truck."

Mary felt a surge of disappointment. If he was driving a truck, he definitely wasn't Amish. So no beard didn't necessarily mean no wife. Although how that should affect her, she couldn't imagine, she scolded herself silently.

"Thanks. Oh, and my name is Reuben King. Please excuse me for not mentioning it before."

Edie looked closely at the clean-cut young man. "King, you say? You wouldn't be the new *dokder*, would you? Took over from old Doc Smith over in Willow Creek?"

"Yep, that's me, Mrs. . . .?"

"Ach! My manners. I'm Edie Yoder, and this is my daughter, Mary," she said, standing aside and gesturing into the kitchen.

Mary felt the stranger's keen gaze on her and slowly lifted her eyes to meet his. Her breath caught in her chest, and she felt lightheaded. "How do you do?" she murmured.

He grinned at her, his teeth flashing white in his tanned face. Little crinkles were revealed at the corners of his eyes, which Mary saw were an unusual shade of brown, almost amber. He wasn't a very young man, she mused, nor was he much older than her own twenty-nine years. He looked fit and healthy and like he must spend a good deal of time outdoors to have that natural tanned look to his face.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mary, Mrs. Yoder.” His voice was smooth and somehow reassuring.

You just felt like trusting the guy, Mary reflected. Handy thing in a doctor.

“Well, you may as well come in and have a glass of lemonade,” Edie invited, snapping Mary out of her reverie. She stood back to let him enter. “Mary made it a little while ago. It should be gut and cold by now.”

“I wouldn’t want to interrupt your work,” he protested.

“No problem. We just finished putting the laundry up, and we haven’t started supper yet. As you can see, we are enjoying a short break. We have time to be neighborly to a new member of the community. Sit yourself down!”

She shooed him in like a mother hen with an errant chick, and he smiled again before taking a seat at the table next to Mary. She saw his glance at her crutches, and though his eyes widened slightly, he didn’t intrude with questions.

Edie showed no such compunction.

“What takes you out to the Hostetler place this afternoon, Dokder?”

“Maem!” Mary said. “That’s not our concern.”

“Ach! I know you’re right. I just want to make sure our neighbors are all right.”

“I don’t imagine Dr. King would be sitting here drinking lemonade if they weren’t, ain’t so?” Mary pointed out.

“True, true, I don’t suppose he would.” Edie laughed. “Would you rather have some hot tea?”

“Um, no, lemonade actually sounds perfect.”

“Gut, gut, and as I thought, it’s just right!” She pulled the pitcher from the propane-powered fridge and poured a generous glass of sweet, icy lemonade. “There you go! Drink your mouth empty!”

“*Denki!*” he said, savoring a sip of lemonade. A look of surprised pleasure passed over his face. He said to Mary, “This is truly excellent lemonade.”

She felt herself blushing again. “*Denki*. It’s probably the mint. It adds a nice zip.” Hope, who had disappeared from the room when the

doctor entered, chose that moment to zoom back in, clattering down the back stairs and whipping around the corner to disappear again into the living room.

Reuben looked surprised. "Was that a tiny tornado?"

Mary snorted, much to her dismay, but felt better when Reuben turned and grinned appreciatively at her. "*Nee*, it was my kitten, Hope."

"She behaves like a tornado sometimes, though, so it's not a bad description, you have to admit," Edie said. She ignored Mary's eye roll and continued. "So, Dokder"—she twinkled at the younger man as she pushed the plate of ginger snaps in his direction—"did your wife come to Willow Creek with you, or are you giving us a try before you decide to move your family here?"

Mary cringed. Her mother was a wonderful woman, but subtle she was not.

"Please, call me Reuben," he said, obligingly selecting a fragrant cookie from the plate. "And I'm not married, Mrs. Yoder." He bit into the cookie and made a low hum of pleasure before devouring the rest. Then he tipped up his glass to get the last drops of lemonade, making Edie beam with pleasure at his obvious enjoyment.

"I'm Edie. Would you like another glass?"

"No, but thank you very much. I've never tasted its equal." He stood and held out his hand first to Edie and then to Mary. "I'd better be getting on over to the Hostetlers'. They invited me to supper tonight as a welcome to the community. Denki for the hospitality!"

"You're welcome," Mary said softly.

Her mother accompanied the doctor to the door, opening it for him. "You're welcome to stop in any time you're in the neighborhood, Reuben," she invited. "Mary also bakes excellent cookies to go with her wunderbar lemonade!"

He looked over at Mary and smiled. "I might just do that." He nodded at them both, then trotted down the steps and over to his truck. He fired up the engine, glanced back at the house and, seeing Edie still standing there, saluted her before heading down the driveway and turning toward the Hostetler farm.

“Maem! Come inside, what are you doing?”

“I’m just waving the nice young man on his way. What’s wrong with that?”

Mary sighed. “Nothing, Maem. But there’s little point in informing our new town doctor of my talent as a baker. He’d hardly be interested in me. Also, you baked these cookies. It wasn’t quite honest leading him to believe they’re mine.”

Eddie waved away that small detail. “Pfft. Yours are even better.”

“Still. . .”

“Still what? There’s no harm done. Next time we’ll be sure to give him your cookies. In fact, we should invite him to dinner here to welcome him to the community! He could see what a gut cook you are! I wish I’d thought of it before he left for the Hostetlers.”

“Oh, Maem, the poor man was just here to ask directions, and we bushwhacked him. Besides, he’s not Amish. And as I said, if he were, he wouldn’t be looking at me for his *fraa*.”

Eddie turned sharply toward her oldest child. “Now, Mary, don’t you talk like that! You’re a lovely woman with a lot to offer any man smart enough to look past your slight disadvantage. My goodness, child, being able to walk quickly isn’t the be-all and end-all of human existence, you know! And as for his faith, well, I hear he’s Mennonite, and that’s not so different. He might even convert!” With that, she picked up the basket of folded laundry and marched up the back stairs, muttering under her breath about her silly daughter. Mary sighed and shook her head. She’d been called worse, though not often by her mother, who had always been very supportive of her eldest child’s challenges. At the same time, she’d refused to allow Mary to grow up thinking of herself as helpless or as less than other people. Consequently, Mary held down a good job making functional yet beautiful baskets for Jonas Hershberger. And she held her own when it came to household chores as well. She couldn’t do everything, but then, who could?

“I don’t suppose there’s really any reason I couldn’t marry and make some man a gut *fraa*, if I wanted to,” she mused. The new doctor’s odd amber eyes popped into her head, which she shook impatiently.

"Enough. Maem, I'm going to start supper!"

Pushing up from the table, Mary grabbed her crutches and made her determined way toward the fridge to get out the ingredients for that night's meal.



Later that evening, Reuben steered his old black Chevy pickup out of the Hostetlers' driveway and toward town and the combination house and office he was renting from Doc Smith. He'd enjoyed his supper and had found the Hostetlers, a Mennonite family, to be quite hospitable and welcoming. Of course, the fact that they had four unmarried daughters in their late teens and early twenties may have had something to do with their welcome of the young, single doctor.

"Careful, Reuben, you're becoming a cynic," he told himself. "They were a perfectly nice family, even if their conversation did tend toward cattle." He smiled as he recalled the heated debate between Mr. Hostetler—Paul—and his widowed brother, George Hostetler, about the relative merits of Angus versus Hereford beef cattle. It seemed Paul's family raised Angus beef cattle, while George's cattle were Herefords.

"I like them both, as far as a good steak goes," Reuben had mused. "And that's about all I know about either breed!"

Still, the dinner and the company had been very nice. And only the most recent such invitation he'd received since moving to town. He was slowly getting to know the various members of his new community. He'd only been in town about a month, but many people, English, Amish, and Mennonite, had gone out of their way to stop in and say hello, drop off some fresh butter or eggs, and invite him to dinner, church services, even a barn raising. He felt welcomed here.

As he passed the Yoder place, he smiled, remembering the shameless questioning of Mrs. Yoder and her pretty daughter's obvious discomfort, especially when the older woman dropped a couple of hints about Mary's suitability as a potential wife for him. He shook his head. Mothers were all the same, he supposed. His own mother, back in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, had tossed up her hands and given up

hope of ever having grandchildren. “My son, the dokder!” she’d said. “You know I’m sinfully proud of you, but I still want to cuddle some babies before I die!”

Now that all the years of college, medical school, and residency were behind him, he felt ready to take a deep breath and slow down a little, maybe start to think about establishing his own home and family. Plenty of people got married during medical training, but he’d felt the need to concentrate all his efforts on becoming a physician and didn’t think it would be fair to a woman to place her second in his priorities.

His thoughts drifted to Mary Yoder, who apparently needed two crutches to get around. But when Reuben thought of her, it was her gentle smile and lovely eyes that came to mind, not her physical challenges.

“She’s a lot like Eliza,” he mused, thinking of his younger sister with a smile. Ever the doctor, he couldn’t help being curious about Mary. “I wonder what’s been done to rehab her injuries,” he murmured as he pulled into Willow Creek, driving down Main Street and parking in front of his new digs.

Carrying the bag of fresh sweet corn he’d been given by the Hostetlers, he unlocked the glass front door of what had once been a gracious home but now held his clinic and his living quarters. The place was owned by the previous doctor, Dr. Smith, who had retired and moved with his wife of forty-five years to Florida.

“Don’t worry, son,” he’d told Reuben when he handed over the keys to the building. “You’ll do fine. And when you decide to stay, I’ll sell you the place for a fair price, like old Doc Schwartz did me back in 1980.”

“If I decide to stay,” Reuben had reminded the older man, who had chuckled and said something about the Hotel California as he climbed into his car, making his wife laugh as they pulled away.

“You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave,” he murmured the lyrics to the old song to himself as he checked the first floor before heading upstairs. “Doesn’t seem like a month has passed already,” he mused, putting the corn into the refrigerator and pouring himself a glass of iced tea to take into the living room. He plopped

down onto the couch, which, like all the furniture, had come with the place, and turned on the television to see what sports he could find.

He was hoping for a baseball game, but he seemed to be out of luck there. He found harness racing and settled back with his feet up on the sagging leather ottoman. He reflected that many standardbreds, once retired from racing, ended up being purchased by Amish folk to pull their buggies. And that led his thoughts back to Mary Yoder. "I wonder when she last got checked out? Maybe there's still something that could be done."

The Hostetlers had filled him in on the terrible buggy accident that had claimed Mary's father's life and taken much of the use of her legs from her. She'd been, what? Three? Four?

"A lot of time has passed. Could be too late."

He grabbed his laptop and began researching developments in the treatment of spine, leg, and hip injuries over the last twenty-five years or so. Soon he was deeply engrossed, the television forgotten. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, and he sat up straight. Had Mary been one of old Doc Smith's patients? If so, her records were very likely right downstairs, and he could find out exactly what was wrong with her legs. Jumping up, he hurried downstairs. He'd worry about the question of whether it was ethical to poke into the old medical records of a grown woman who wasn't currently his patient later, he decided. Right now, he was seized with an urgent need to see if he could help her. He didn't question these occasional obsessions that grabbed him by the throat from time to time. This was part of the personality that had led him to become a doctor against tall odds—so that he could help people like Mary live better lives.

With that shaky justification in his mind, he began to search through old files lining the walls of his office. He'd see what he'd see and worry about how to approach the Yoders with it later.

CHAPTER TWO



“Here, chick chick chick!”

Seated in an old metal chair, Mary tossed handfuls of feed in practiced arcs as the colorful birds she bred ran this way and that trying to gobble up as much as possible. “Ah, the sun feels gut on my face after all the rain we’ve had,” she told the birds, who didn’t bother to answer. She chuckled at the antics of the greedy birds as they hurried to and fro trying to beat each other to each kernel of grain that bounced on the ground.

“There’s plenty for all of you, you know.”

“So, you talk to chickens,” a deep voice said. “Could be a sign of something serious.”

Mary started, nearly tipping her chair as Reuben, who had made no sound as he approached, stepped forward and grabbed the chair to steady it. Her crutches, leaning on the back, slid onto the ground.

For a moment Reuben loomed over Mary, caging her awkwardly between his large body and the chair. They stared at each other as the moment dragged on, until Mary broke eye contact and exclaimed, “Ach! I’m so clumsy. Would you please hand me my crutches?”

Reuben quickly straightened and took a step back from the chair before bending to comply with her request. Mary avoided his eyes while she strove to bring the confusion caused by his unexpected nearness under control.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "You aren't clumsy. I surprised you. I apologize."

Having run out of plausible reasons to avoid it, Mary raised her eyes to his. She bit her lip. "I just didn't hear you before you spoke. I was caught up in my chore. The chickens are sort of my pets."

Reuben glanced at a second chair sitting near Mary's, and he nodded at it, seeking permission to sit down.

"Oh! Ja, of course! Make yourself comfortable. After I finish here, I'll get you a cold drink, and you can tell me why you've stopped by."

Reuben sat down, folding his tall frame into the old-fashioned metal chair. "You don't need to trouble yourself about a drink, Mary. I didn't come here to add to your workload."

"Nonsense." She dared a glance at him that revealed a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "My mudder would insist!"

A slow smile spread across his handsome face, making Mary's heart race, and he chuckled. "Well then, mustn't disappoint your mudder! Got any more of that marvelous lemonade?"

Collecting herself once more, Mary nodded. "I do. Let me finish with my chickens, and we can go in for a glass."

She scattered the remaining feed from the bucket in her lap and laughed as the chickens zoomed around, greedily snapping it up. Then she placed the bucket on the ground, grabbed her crutches, and pushed to her feet. She was gratified that the doctor didn't try to help. She couldn't explain even to herself why such gestures embarrassed and even annoyed her, but they did, and that was a fact.

Reuben picked up the empty feed bucket. "Where does this go?"

Mary pointed with her chin to the neat white shed beside the large chicken coop. "There's a hook on the wall above the feed bins, if you wouldn't mind."

He hung the bucket on the indicated hook before taking a quick look around. Mary followed him inside and watched him visually explore the space.

His eyebrows climbed toward his hairline, and he whistled low. The shed wasn't only a storage area for the chicken feed and other

tools Mary would need to care for her birds. It was also obviously a workroom. Stepping farther into the space, Reuben peered at the tools lined up neatly along a counter, as well as the boxes, baskets, and bins placed with care so that whoever worked there wouldn't need to get up to fetch anything they needed. A skylight was set into the ceiling of the space to provide additional illumination.

Hanging on a wall adjacent to the work area was an amazing collection of colorful trout flies, creatively and skillfully fashioned out of rooster feathers, fur, and twine.

"It's sort of a hobby of mine."

"This is. . .amazing! I've never seen the like."

Mary felt a blush steal over her face. "It's not that much, just a hobby, like I said. Makes me a little extra money."

He glanced at the flies again. "May I look more closely?"

She shrugged. "Sure, why not? Here, let me turn on this lantern, and you'll be able to see better." She reached around him and turned on a battery-operated lantern hanging from the wall.

He stepped closer and carefully plucked up a small compact lure with upright wings made from rooster hackle feathers and a long, double tail and a small hook. He examined it, then turned to her. "What kind is this?"

She bit her lip. "That's a dry fly. It floats on top of the water, like an adult insect. It's my favorite lure to make because you can see the trout take it. I was going for a mayfly with that one, but there are several different types."

He nodded and replaced it carefully, picking up another small lure, this one green and brown, fat and heavy with its bead head and thicker hook. It obviously wouldn't float. He turned it this way and that before turning to look inquiringly at Mary.

"That one is a wet fly. It imitates the newly hatched stage of an insect and is designed to bump along the bottom like a nymph searching for food in the gravel or sediment. I also make streamers, heavier lures that jerk along just under the surface of the water—really hard for a hungry fish to resist. And I make emergers, which imitate an insect

just trying to break free from the water through the surface film to become an adult. There are other types of fly-fishing lures, but I like these best to fish with, and to make.”

She gestured to a line of colorful lures, some with long feathers trailing from tightly tied centers, others stubby and weighted to sink to the bottom. No two were alike, but each conveyed the essence of a water insect in the various stages of aquatic insect life. “I have a lot of fun making these, and the fact that I raise my own roosters makes it even more satisfying.”

“Mary, these are amazing. Where did you learn to make them?” He reverently trailed his index finger along the row of rooster-tailed trout lures.

She felt heat creeping up her neck and face, and she hoped the shadowy workspace hid her reaction to his praise. “My *grossdaddi* taught me to fly-fish and showed me basic lure-making techniques. I got really interested in my teens and found books on the subject at the library and on the internet. After I read everything I could get my hands on, I started creating my own designs.”

Reuben let out a low whistle. “Wow, I’m impressed. And you raise the roosters for their feathers?”

“Ja. My roosters are bred specifically for their feathers. But we eat them too, of course, as it would be wasteful not to.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Do these feathers come from the birds outside?” He stepped back outside and surveyed the satisfied-and-healthy-looking flock of birds still scratching around in the grass and dirt for any missed feed.

“No. Some of those are my laying hens, you know, for eggs, and the rooster for that flock, Henry. And also the hens from my feather line not currently sitting on eggs. My feather roosters are all inside the big barn in individual cages. You can’t let them run free, or they’ll peck each other’s feathers out.”

“That would be counterproductive, I suppose,” he commented, looking toward the big barn across the spacious barnyard. “May I see the rest of your operation?”

She shrugged. "Why not? Come on. We can get that lemonade afterward."

They strolled in companionable silence across the wide space, and when they reached the large white barn, Reuben opened the door and stood aside for Mary to pass through before him. She nodded her thanks and maneuvered inside. He followed and was surprised to find the space well-lit with overhead lights illuminating several dozen roomy wire cages along two walls. In the center of the room were several dozen more spacious cages containing brooding hens or hens with chicks.

"Wow, I'm seriously impressed," Reuben said. "I didn't expect anything this grand. You're a serious breeder, aren't you?"

Although she felt another blush stealing across her cheeks, Mary held her head up proudly. She'd worked hard on her line of hackle roosters, and she wasn't going to pretend otherwise.

"Ja, I am. I have a waiting list of people who want to purchase fertilized eggs from me."

"I'm not surprised. These birds are just beautiful." He strolled quietly along the line of rooster cages, each separated by several feet to keep the birds away from each other and reduce stress. "Mary, this is amazing. I didn't know we had anything like this in the area. Nobody told me. Don't people know you do this?"

She grimaced and shrugged. "No, not really. I mean, people know I breed roosters and make lures, but I don't go around advertising how valuable these birds are. I wouldn't want people to think about stealing them."

"Ja, I can see that." He crouched down to study a particularly glorious bird. "This fellow is just gorgeous."

She smiled, genuinely pleased. "He's part of an experimental breeding program I'm trying out. He's from the third generation, and I think it's going to be a winner. I'll probably give the breed a name with the next generation."

He turned to stare at her. "Wait. You've created a whole new breed of chicken?"

"Well, I'm working on it. The genetics are pretty complex, but as a physician you no doubt understand how all that works?"

He nodded, and she continued. "Ja, probably better than I do. Anyway, you breed for the hackle feathers, which are the most important for creating the dry fly lures. This all goes back to just a couple of breeders, who really pioneered this entire industry. There are only half a dozen companies in the country creating really gut lures. And I'm trying to break in and join their ranks. I'm considered a bit of an upstart, especially because I'm a woman, and these people don't even know I'm Amish." An impish smile played around her generous mouth at the thought. But when she saw Reuben's face blank and his eyes suddenly become riveted on her lips, she recalled herself and snapped herself back to the subject at hand. She'd wonder what that meant later. "But my results speak for themselves. My lures float just right on or below the surface of the water, and they turn very satisfactorily when you cast them. It all translates into catching a lot of fish, with a pretty piece of craftsmanship."



Feeling a bit embarrassed at his momentary lapse when Mary had smiled so winsomely, Reuben tried to follow the topic so he wouldn't look like a green kid getting his first glimpse of a pretty girl, but he found himself forgetting about how impressed he was with her enterprise and simply admiring how simply lovely she was. He'd noticed the other day when he'd met her that she was very pleasant looking, but the kitchen had been dim and he'd been standing outside in the bright sunlight, looking in. Once he'd been invited inside, Mary had kept her head down much of the time, shyly avoiding his attempts to catch her eye. Consequently, he hadn't really appreciated her beauty, noticing instead her crutches and her labored movements in the brief time he'd been there—purely a professional observation, based on his training as a doctor.

Now, under the bright lights inside her poultry barn, with the look of eager interest in her subject matter shining on her intelligent

face, Mary was more than just pretty, she was stunning. Reuben was surprised he'd failed to notice the other day. But then, when a professional problem caught his interest, he often wore blinders to all else.

Which reminded him—he hadn't come here today to admire her chickens or her lures, no pun intended. He'd come to discuss what he'd found in Dr. Smith's medical records.

And he wasn't at all sure he'd receive a positive response from this remarkable woman, who obviously didn't let her disability slow her down in the least.

Unsure how to proceed, he decided he might as well just dive right in. If she was offended, he'd be sorry. If she was angry, he'd deal with it.

"Um, Mary, I'm very impressed with your operation here, and I'd love to see more and learn about it in greater detail another time. But today, I actually came over to discuss something more specific, if you have a few minutes?"

She looked at him carefully, the enthusiasm dimming noticeably in her eyes. He had the uncomfortable feeling people didn't often indulge her interest in her birds, and he wished he'd held his tongue and let her talk more about the chickens, and waited for another time to broach what was certain to be a touchy topic.

"Ja? Well, sure, we can go inside and have that lemonade now, and you can tell me what's on your mind, Dokder. You'll have to forgive me if I went on too long about my little hobby here."

He grimaced as she turned and headed for the door. He'd struck a nerve, and again regretted the bad timing. But now there was no help for it, so he followed her from the barn, pulling the door closed firmly behind him. He wouldn't want to be responsible for letting a predator inside that particular chicken coop!

Now he just had to find the right way to present his idea to Mary, and he had no idea what he was going to say.

CHAPTER THREE



“Mary, I really did enjoy seeing your breeding operation, and I would love to hear more another day. Really, I mean it.”

Mary kept walking laboriously toward the house, seemingly ignoring Reuben as he trudged along in her wake. When they reached the kitchen door, he hurried around her to open it, and she stopped and narrowed her eyes at him.

“Dokder King, I appreciate your kindness, but there’s no need to pretend an interest you don’t feel. I’m used to people finding my fascination with those birds to be a bit, well, odd. No need to feel bad about it. Now, let’s go in and have that lemonade, and you can tell me why you came.”

She preceded him into the kitchen, and he followed, knowing he’d messed up but not sure how to fix it. He’d have to leave that for another day, he decided, stepping into the cozy interior of the farmhouse and hanging his hat on a hook by the kitchen door. The pretty calico kitten he’d glimpsed the other day was snoozing on a cushion by the stove. It pried one eye open to peer at them before settling back down to its nap.

“Sit yourself down.”

“Can I help with anything?”

Mary hung her crutches on a hook beside the propane-powered refrigerator, put her hands on the counter, and let her chin drop to her chest. Reuben couldn’t see her face, but he had the feeling she was gathering her thoughts. He started to speak, hoping to salvage