

Where There's Smoke . . .

Chapter One

“Look at ‘da big girl! Oo like eggs?” Andy asked in enthusiastic baby talk. Seventeen-month-old Leah continued to stuff scrambled eggs into her mouth. She gave no indication that she even heard her eleven-year-old brother’s question. Down went the hands into the little bowl, scooping up handfuls of delicious breakfast. Her hands came toward her mouth, then Leah squeezed the eggs between her fingers until she crammed in everything that didn’t fall into her lap or all over the table. This performance was repeated again and again. The pattern was only occasionally broken when she picked up her baby spoon and banged it on the table, or pushed the spoon into her mouth along with eggs or her fist. She wasn’t particularly interested in Andy or any of his observations right now; just in stuffing herself with warm well-squeezed eggs.

“Mom, look how much Leah is eating!” Andy exclaimed. The Nelson family had been concerned about Leah when she and Matthew first arrived from Russia five and a half months earlier. The Nelsons had no idea that her health problems were caused by food allergies. It had taken many doctors’ visits, tests, and careful nursing to get her to where she was today: generally a happy and normal little toddler. Even though she had been eating pretty well for over a month, there was still joy in watching her eat heartily and in seeing her happy. Thankfully, Leah was too young to notice others eating things that she was not

The Farm Mystery Series

allowed to eat. The Nelsons knew, however, that sooner or later she would have questions. She would have some future lessons in contentment and self-discipline to learn.

“Yes, dear, I see,” Mom said, smiling at Andy. She then left for the kitchen to check on something that was still cooking.

“So, was it a big fire?” Jason turned to Dad, wanting to get back to the primary subject of the breakfast conversation. “How many units showed up? . . . Did you get to go inside and try to rescue anybody?”

Dad, although a relatively new firefighter on the Oakland Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department, had been on a number of fire and first responder calls since joining two months earlier. Oakland was a small township and without the help of volunteers like Timothy Nelson, it wouldn’t be able to protect its citizens.

“It was just a garage fire, Jason,” Dad was saying. “We always get called out when the Forest City Volunteer Fire Department has a structure fire, for mutual aid. Just like we always call them when we have a structure fire. And a garage, even though it is small, is still a structure.” Dad took a drink of milk before continuing. “It was just our two departments there last night. In fact, by the time we got there with our pumper, the fire was out. Just a lot of smoke. All we did was help them make sure the fire was completely out and that there weren’t any stray sparks still left around that could start the house or woods on fire.”

Where There's Smoke . . .

“Did you have your lights and sirens on?” Ben asked. “And did you drive fast?” Three-year-old Matthew looked at Dad with big eyes as he awaited the answer.

“We got there as quickly as we safely could,” Dad said, smiling. It seemed that the boys always wanted to hear of Dad driving at breakneck speed to a fire. In reality, fire trucks have to be very cautious when driving to a scene. If not, they could have a wreck. That would create a new problem, instead of helping to solve the original problem. “Of course, it took us a while to get there, since it was outside our township limits. But yes, we got there really fast. There's not much traffic at 1:30 in the morning, you know.”

Mom had returned from the kitchen. “Isn't it hard to fight fires in the dark?” she asked, recycling some of the eggs in Leah's lap back into Leah's bowl. “Maybe it's just me. But it seems like it would be sort of scary to be out there in the night doing that.”

“While the fire is going, there's generally plenty of light,” Dad answered, “but you're right. When the fire is out, it can seem very dark, especially with all the smoke and steam. We do have special lights on our pumper that help some. Of course, they can only do so much.”

“Mom, Leah is making a big mess!” Ben warned.

Leah had missed her mouth completely with a big handful of eggs, and had, instead, deposited them in her lap. This seemed to raise her curiosity, so she quickly took another handful and intentionally dropped them over the side of the table. Everyone

The Farm Mystery Series

watched. The sound of eggs “plopping” on the floor was unmistakable. Ben giggled.

“No, Leah,” Mom said, making sure that Leah was looking into her eyes. “You must eat them. Don’t throw them on the floor.”

“Oh, she’s such a mess!” Ben exclaimed. “She’s got egg smeared all over her face and in her hair.”

Mom laughed. “I seem to remember another toddler we had around here about six years ago who looked very much like Leah does. Except his favorite was to smear spaghetti in his hair.”

“I didn’t! Did I, Mom?” Ben asked.

“You sure did,” Cathy remembered. At sixteen, Cathy was the oldest of the Nelson children and had been her mom’s best help for years. “I remember what the bathtub looked like after you were through with it, Ben. It was awful! There was a bright orange stain all around the tub.”

No one was looking at Leah during this short conversation. No one saw that she had, totally by accident, been successful at dislodging the suction-cupped bowl from the table so that now it was no longer attached to the table top. The conversation continued.

“Dad, were you the one who drove the fire truck to the scene last night?” Jason asked. Thirteen-year-old Jason was always interested in getting as many facts as possible about this new part of Dad’s life.

“No, Mr. Parker, the engineer, was the driver. And did you know . . .”

Where There's Smoke . . .

Dad was interrupted by Cathy's shout. "Mom . . . you need to . . . Mom, watch out . . . it's going to . . ."

But before she could get the words out, a series of events unfolded in the Nelson dining room. Leah, holding her bowl which wasn't attached to the table, was sliding it from side to side while Cathy was stumbling with her words. Suddenly Leah slung it to the left. The bowl flew across the smooth table top, right toward where Mom was sitting. Before Mom could act, Leah's dish of squished eggs, in what looked like slow motion, slid off the table and landed upside down in Mom's lap.

Mom let out a little scream of "Oh!" Dad saw what was coming and he tried to prevent this accident. While trying to rise quickly he didn't push out his chair far enough. As he stood up, the edge of the table lifted off the floor a little. The table landed back on the floor with a loud "thump." Startled, Ben jerked his hand, turning over his glass of milk. It was a full glass of milk. A tidal wave of milk went careening across the table right toward Jason and Andy.

"Hey, watch out, Andy!" Jason called. "Here comes Ben's milk!"

Andy, seeing that his lap was about to get a milk shower, acted quickly. He grabbed both his and his brother's napkins and made a dam to keep the milk from waterfalling over the top of the table. The disaster was averted. Andy and Jason started laughing, unable to talk because they were so tickled.

By now, Mom was back in control of her senses. "Cathy, help!" Mom began laughing and

The Farm Mystery Series

spooning egg off her dress. “Please run and get a towel for the milk.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cathy laughed too. “Did you ever see anything like this?” As Cathy was running out of the dining room, Jason, without warning, pushed his chair back to get up and help. The result was not helpful. Another disaster erupted, as Cathy ran into the chair, dumping Jason on the floor.

“Whoa!” Dad exclaimed. “Everybody stand still a minute, before we destroy the whole house.”

Dad’s authoritative voice, as always, was effective. The moment of stillness helped everyone decide what should be done and how it should be done. In a second, he commanded, “Okay, you can move.” Then in a very deep tone of voice and very slowly, he added, “B . . . u . . . t s . . . l . . . o . . . w . . . l . . . y, o . . . k . . . a . . . y?”

Everyone laughed and got into action. Soon the messes were cleaned up.

“What about your dress, honey?” Dad was concerned. “Will the eggs ruin it?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Mom said, reassuringly. The sailor dress she was wearing was Dad’s absolute favorite. It was navy blue and had a sharp white collar with navy blue piping around the edge.

“I hope not,” Jason echoed his dad’s concern. Everyone loved Mom’s sailor dress.

“I’m glad you men are concerned about my dress,” Mom smiled. “I’ll work on it in a few minutes. I think it’ll be fine.”

Where There's Smoke . . .

Mom disappeared into the kitchen, and the sound of the oven door opening and closing could be heard.

“So, what were we saying before our little accidents?” Dad asked, thinking that perhaps someone had asked him a question that he hadn't answered.

Before anyone could answer, Mom walked back into the dining room.

“Wait a minute!” Mom sniffed the air with a confused look on her face. “Do I smell smoke?”

Everyone instantly became quiet and started sniffing. Leah banged her spoon on the table and echoed in her little voice, “Moke?”

“Yes, I'm sure I smell smoke,” Mom insisted, going back to the kitchen, trying to locate the odor.

“I do smell something a little different,” Jason said. “But it smells sweet smelling, not like smoke.”

“That must be the apple crisp I'm baking,” Mom replied. “No, this is a smoke smell. Doesn't anyone else smell it?”

“Did you say apple crisp?” Andy asked, avoiding her question in order to learn more about the really important topic. A hopeful expression appeared on his face. “Is it for breakfast, Mom?”

Mom sniffed near the pantry before answering. “No, not in there,” she mused to herself. “I mean, yes, Andy. It is for breakfast and will be ready soon.”

Before long, everyone except Leah was walking around the kitchen sniffing near electrical outlets, behind doors, inside cabinets, and around the stove. They were trying to find the odor Mom had described.

“Timothy, surely you smell it?” Mom asked.

The Farm Mystery Series

“No, I’m sorry, I can’t smell any smoke,” he answered. “Does anyone else smell anything? I’d sure like to avoid having our house go up in flames. Being on the fire department has helped me realize that accidents and fires really can happen to anyone at anytime. Even people like us.”

But, try as they might, no one could smell anything burning. Ben found an unusual odor on the floor behind the kitchen trash can, but sheepishly discovered it was due to a poor job on his part of removing the garbage the evening before. With a wet paper towel, he quietly cleaned up a small splotch of stew on the floor and a little bit that was on the baseboard.

“Sorry, honey,” Dad consoled after a few minutes, “but none of us can smell it.”

“Right here,” Mom said, stooping down and pointing to a section of the floor near the wall. “It seems to be coming from somewhere around here. Surely you can smell it here?”

Everyone took a turn, putting their face near the floor where Mom indicated. However, no one else could smell anything.

“You know, Mom, you’ve said yourself that you have a more sensitive nose than anyone else in the family,” Cathy remarked.

“That’s true,” Mom replied. “My father, that’s your Grandfather Aldrich, always used to say that I have Uncle Raymond’s nose. They said he could smell when the bread was being delivered to the grocery store and that was over a block away from his house.”

Where There's Smoke . . .

“Yes, and I remember that you’re the only one who could smell that propane leak we had one time,” Andy added. “And the repair man said that was a really tiny leak. No one else could smell it, not even the repair man.”

This didn’t reassure Mom. “Oh, Timothy, that’s right. I’m the only one who smelled it and it was really something serious! Maybe this is also.”

Dad looked at Andy with a somewhat disapproving look on his face, then answered his wife. “It’s possible; but if we can’t find the source, I don’t know what we can do about it.”

Dad thought for a minute while Mom started cleaning up Leah. “Andy, you and Jason look carefully downstairs under the kitchen. No, on second thought, go ahead and look everywhere in the basement. Ben, Matthew, and I will look on this floor. Cathy, you can take the upstairs of the house. Everyone smell around carefully and see if you get any whiff of smoke. We’ll meet here in a few minutes.”

Five minutes later, everyone was back in the kitchen. No one had any “smoke news” to report.

“Connie, do you still smell it?” Dad asked. Mom had changed Leah’s outfit, and was now giving her some toys to play with in the kitchen.

Mom wrinkled up her nose and slowly turned her head, trying to pick up the scent. “Maybe. Maybe just a little bit. But not like I did a few minutes ago. Yes, maybe just a tad.”

Dad looked at his watch. “I’m afraid I’m going to miss that apple crisp you’ve got baking. I have to take off for work. After the looking around

The Farm Mystery Series

we've done, I don't think we're in any danger right now. But Connie, you keep an eye out in case something changes."

"I'll keep an eye out, and a nose out," Mom smiled.

"Boys, you do whatever you can to help Mom," Dad directed. He grabbed his lunch pail and headed for the door. After hugs and tossing Matthew up into the air a few times, Dad left for work.

As the boys were enjoying some hot apple crisp, Jason said, "Say, Andy. Dad told us to be ready to help Mom with this smoke business. Do you think this is a case for The Great Detective Agency?"

Jason and Andy had a small office under the basement steps with a board nailed up announcing the headquarters of "The Great Detective Agency." They took on mysteries that happened around their farm. They had solved quite a few in the last couple of years. The agency was always trying to solicit new business because it was fun to be helpful. The boys never charged for their services, although Andy often dreamed about "someday" when they would be old enough to work as full-time detectives.

"That's a great idea," Andy agreed, clearing his plate and glass over to the kitchen sink where Mom was working. "Mom, would you like The Great Detective Agency to work on this?"

Mom was all in favor of the boys doing whatever they could to find answers to what was causing the smell.

Taking out a small spiral notebook from his back pocket, each boy started taking notes about the clues to the Case of the Smoky Smell. "Okay, Mom,"

Where There's Smoke . . .

Jason began. "What does the smoke smell like? How would you describe it?"

"Like . . . well, just like smoke, I guess," Mom said, laughing. "I know that's not very helpful. Let me see. Okay, I guess I would say that it smells like something on fire that is made out of wood. You know, like a campfire kind of smell. With maybe a little bit of some other kind of smoky smell as well. I don't know, maybe just a very little bit like cooking meat?"

"Hmmm." Jason wrote down the clues. "Okay. And exactly where does it smell the strongest right now?"

Mom went back to the place where she had stooped down earlier, but after sniffing around for a minute, she rose. "That's odd. Now I can't smell it. Not at all."

Jason gave a knowing glance to Andy, who nodded and made a notation in his book. "How long would you say it's been?" Jason asked Andy.

"I'd say it's been ten minutes. Fifteen minutes at the most since Mom said she could smell it the last time." Both boys made entries in their books.

"Have you smelled smoke before?" Jason asked. "I mean, I know you smell smoke sometimes. But have you smelled smoke in the house when you didn't think there should be smoke?"

Mom thought for a minute. "No, not as far back as I can remember. What I mean to say is, I've smelled smoke from time to time, but not like this. I've always been able to identify what was causing the smell."

The Farm Mystery Series

“What kinds of things caused the smoke smell you’ve smelled before?” Jason asked, getting the question out even though it was a bit of a tongue twister.

“Oh, lots of things. Things on the stove burner or in the oven probably more than anything else. Once, Dad had a fire going outside burning some brush and I could smell that in the house. It was spring and the windows were all open. And I’ll never forget the time something overheated in his workshop when he was sawing boards. Yes, and once it was a huge wildfire about 100 miles from here, but the smoke was being pushed along with a strong west wind.”

“And you don’t think it’s from the stove this time?” Andy asked. From time to time food boiled over on the burners of the stove or fell into the oven. Both were causes of some pretty interesting and non-aromatic smells. Andy couldn’t help but think a simple explanation was all that was needed.

“Not this morning,” Mom said confidently. “I just cleaned all the burners; and I cleaned the oven yesterday. No, it was the day before yesterday. Anyway, I don’t know of anything that has spilled on it.”

About that time, Leah started getting fussy. “Boys, I’ve got to change Leah’s diaper again. If you have any more questions, you’ll have to follow me upstairs while I change her.”

“Oh, I think that’s about all the questions we have for now,” Jason said quickly. “We need to do some more thinking and investigating before we’ll have more questions to ask.”

Where There's Smoke . . .

As Mom carried the whimpering toddler out of the kitchen, Andy placed his nose close to the floor, sniffing carefully. Jason followed suit.

“This could be something serious,” Andy noted. “I’ve heard about electrical wires that short out and cause fires. And I think sometimes they just smell smoky for a while before they actually catch on fire.”

“Sure,” Jason agreed, “but it seems like the smell would stay there if it was something electrical. That won’t explain why our smell was here and is gone now.”

“That I don’t know,” Andy answered truthfully. “I think we have to keep, as one possible solution, that the wiring is getting hot, or shorting out, causing the smell of smoke. For all I know, it wouldn’t smell except when the wire was being used. Now what are some other possible reasons?”

Jason thought for a while. “You know, one time I smelled something sort of like something was burning. And it turned out to be ironing. Cathy was ironing a shirt and it smelled really funny, kind of like some hot chemicals or something.”

When the boys checked, they found that indeed the iron had been used that morning. Even though it was unplugged, it was still a little warm. Neither could smell any unusual odors on the iron nor the ironing board. However, it was possible that this was the cause of the odor, and they took notes accordingly.

“Let’s go and ask Cathy about the ironing,” Jason suggested. “Maybe she smelled something this morning as she was ironing.”

The Farm Mystery Series

“Boys, I need you two to pull weeds around the tomatoes and corn,” Mom called down the stairs. “And Andy, the basement looks like it hasn’t been swept for a week! I want you to take care of that, please.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the boys called back.

“Well, I guess we’ll have to postpone our investigation for a while,” Jason said as the two boys walked out of the door.

Andy didn’t answer. But as he pulled the door shut behind him, he looked back into the kitchen for a minute. Was this the last time he would see the kitchen as it was right now? Was there going to be a fire soon? And was there anything he could do to stop it?