

Etch of a Promise: Book One of the Carpenter's Legacy Series

Ruby M. Holder

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In the romance novel Etch of a Promise, a burgeoning couple is compelled to work through their personal and psychological challenges together.

In Ruby M. Holder's romance novel *Etch of a Promise*, an upbeat tradesman and a troubled young woman meet in the spring of 1884.

Nicklaus is a spontaneous, curious adventurer who hopes to someday be a master carpenter. On an early version of a bicycle and armed with a sketchbook, he embarks on a tour of Cologne's churches as part of his journeyman travels, marveling at their Romanesque and Gothic architecture. He hopes to gain ideas for his own work in the process. But during his travels he also meets Maria. She's an appealing, melancholic runaway who could distract Nicklaus from his plans.

Told in alternating chapters, the story reveals the reasons behind Maria's negativity at a slow pace. She is prickly and suspicious, and it takes time to learn fresh details about who she is beyond her problems. Her family life is harsh; she rejects their future plans for her, and she has doubts about the general appeal of men. Nicklaus is kept in the dark on these points for a while; still, he overlooks Maria's brusque manners, which piques her curiosity—as does his upbeat commitment to his goals.

Indeed, Nicklaus revels in his craftsmanship (which warrants him a position of social respect), and he is eager to absorb new experiences. In addition to Maria, he meets priests, small business owners, and townsfolk of goodwill; he converses with them and benefits from these new relationships. His easygoing outlook also means that the story's setbacks are seldom treated as true hindrances, though. Nicklaus is generally content—in contrast to Maria, who is slow to trust. The narrative stalls while it's covering his interactions with others and her emotional roadblocks. Italicized thoughts are used to explain what people are thinking; the device is heavy-handed.

The book's progression is made more languid because of its focus on everyday details. Maria interacts with her women friends, who banter with her and give advice. In time, Maria and Nicklaus form a friendship based on period practicalities; they converse, and Nicklaus proves to be warm and supportive, but it still takes time for them to move toward a relationship. Shared, seasonal celebrations help the relationship along, binding the couple to their broader community.

Still, Maria and Nicklaus are cautious about sharing personal revelations with one another; their meetings are variously playful to measured. They have a misunderstanding that further delays the story's romantic elements. And when their passion does arrive, it is less exciting than it is a natural step forward based on what's come before—though it's also a step that leads to doubt about Nicklaus's future plans. A late instance of violence in the tale represents a jarring deviation from this otherwise reassuring love story.

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psychological challenges together.

KAREN RIGBY (July 14, 2023)

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