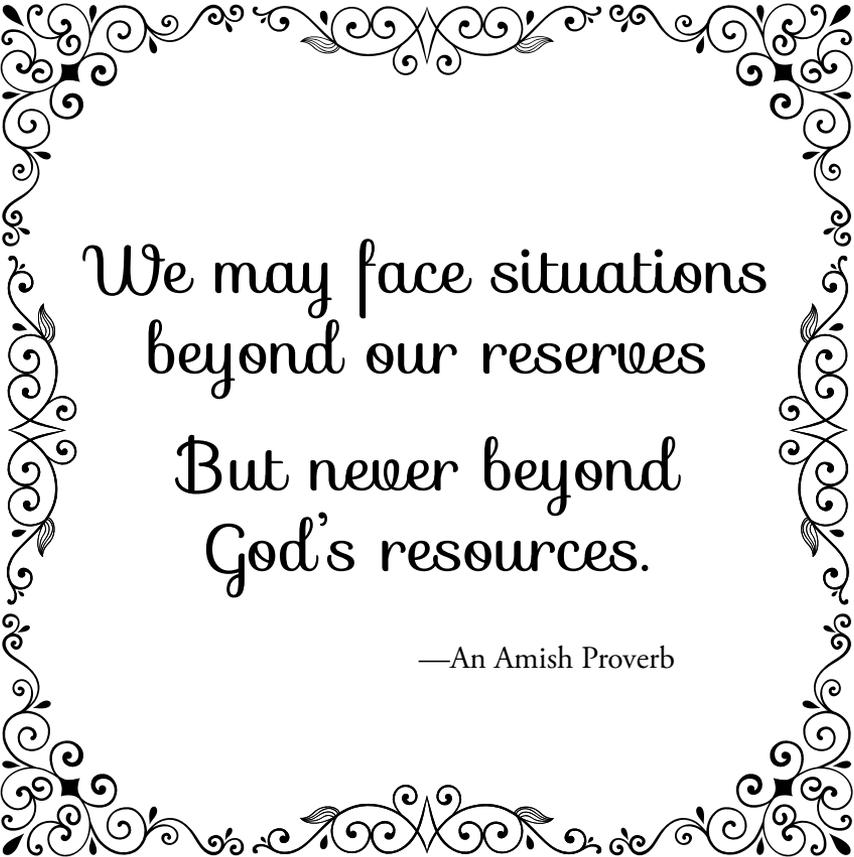


NANCY MEHL



Blessings

IN DISGUISE



We may face situations
beyond our reserves
But never beyond
God's resources.

—An Amish Proverb

SUGARCREEK AMISH MYSTERIES

Blessings in Disguise

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NANCY MEHL

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Blessings

IN DISGUISE



CHAPTER ONE

Cheryl Cooper sipped her coffee and stared out the window of the quaint cottage. Fall had come to Sugarcreek, Ohio, and the trees were ablaze with color. It was hard to believe how much her life had changed. Leaving her safe and secure job at the bank in Columbus to run a gift shop in Sugarcreek? At first, the idea sounded crazy, but now that she was here, she was filled with a sense of peace. The kind of peace she hadn't felt in a long time.

Her aunt Mitzi had taken off for Papua New Guinea to be a missionary, something she'd wanted to do all her life. "If you'll run my gift shop and send me ten percent to fund my mission work, you can keep everything else you make," she'd said. Somehow, Cheryl found herself agreeing. Even though she'd almost changed her mind a dozen times, here she was. A shopkeeper in a small town hailed as the Little Switzerland of Ohio.

Suddenly, something touched her foot and she shrieked. Looking down, she caught a glimpse of her Siamese cat, Beau, running out of the kitchen. "Sugar and grits," she said under her breath, using a phrase she'd picked up from her Southern-born mother. This game of his was hard on her nerves, but she couldn't help but laugh at him. Ever since they'd moved in, Beau had been busy finding new places to hide. He'd created an odd game in which he

jumped out, batted at her with his soft paws, then dashed away like his tail was on fire. Cheryl wasn't exactly sure what precipitated this creative activity, but she assumed he was just excited to have so much room to explore. Her small apartment in Columbus hadn't afforded him much space. She was thrilled he was enjoying himself, but she really wished he'd find a new hobby.

She checked the clock on the wall. It was time to get ready for another day at Mitzi's store, the Swiss Miss Gifts and Sundries Shop. Although Aunt Mitzi's rapid-fire training session had left Cheryl a little shell-shocked, she'd been running the store alone for a little over a week now. She finally felt she was getting the hang of things.

Cheryl quickly downed the last of her coffee and hurried to the bedroom to get dressed. After pulling on her slacks and sweater, she went into the bathroom to put on her makeup and fix her hair. Trying to tame her red hair took a few minutes, but she was finally satisfied with the result. Of course, that didn't mean it would look neat for long. "Your hair fits your personality," her aunt had told her once. "You're too unique to be normal, whatever that is. Color outside the lines, honey. Have some fun!" Well, Cheryl certainly felt unique, but she was pretty certain her definition of that word wasn't the same as her aunt's. And fun? She hadn't had much of that either. She'd waited five years to marry her fiancé, Lance Wilson. Five long years. And then one day he announced that he'd decided he was "not the marrying kind." At thirty, her options were limited. And coming to a small town of a little over two thousand people? Now those options were almost nonexistent.

Something brushed against her leg, and she looked down to see Beau standing next to her. “Have you come to apologize?” she asked.

As if trying to mend fences, he purred contentedly.

She smiled at him. “I love you, and I’m glad you’re happy. But if you don’t stop scaring me, we’re going to have a very serious conversation.”

He meowed loudly and rubbed against her leg again.

Cheryl laughed and leaned down to pick him up. “You’re something else, you know that?” she said as she nuzzled his soft fur. She gently sat him on the floor. “Well, I’m off. You stay out of trouble, young man, you hear me?”

Beau responded by suddenly racing out of the kitchen like he’d seen a ghost.

Chuckling, Cheryl grabbed a jacket and stepped outside to a brisk fall morning. The October air was invigorating. Since her aunt’s charming cottage was only four blocks from the store, she was able to walk to work, something she couldn’t do in Columbus. She passed the small general store that sold many of the products produced by Sugarcreek’s Amish community. Next to the Sugarcreek Old Amish Store was Yoder’s Corner. Run by August and Greta Yoder, it was one of the most popular restaurants in Sugarcreek. Known for their homemade cinnamon rolls as big as plates and tasty sausage they made themselves, the restaurant was always busy.

Across the street, Jacob Hoffman, a Mennonite man who owned Hoffman’s Furniture, came out on his front porch, a push broom in his hand. He looked up and smiled as Cheryl walked by. “*Guten morgen*, Cheryl.”

“Good morning, Jacob,” she called out.

By the time she reached the gift shop, Cheryl was humming. She really did like this town and these people. She unlocked the front door of the Swiss Miss. The store was decorated in the same cottage style as Mitzi’s house. The outside was painted a cream color with cornflower blue accents and red shutters. Cheryl particularly loved the turret room on one side of the building, a heart-shaped window on the other side, and the flower boxes under the windows.

As she stepped inside, the aroma of homemade candles, candy, and pungent cheese filled the air. It was a strange mixture, but Cheryl loved it. The shop had gleaming wood floors, a spot in the corner with a potbellied stove, and oak shelves that lined the walls. The shelves were filled with all kinds of homemade gifts and foods. At the back of the shop was a long wooden counter that held an old cash register and several display cases with different kinds of candy. There was a stool where Cheryl could sit while visitors perused the unique items offered. And by the front window was a small table with a checkerboard and two chairs. At first, Cheryl thought it was just for ambiance, but on her second day, two elderly men came in and started a game of checkers.

“How often does this happen?” she’d asked her aunt.

“Ben and Rueben Vogel are brothers,” her aunt had explained. “They play at least four times a week. Once in a while, someone else may decide to start a game, but most people in Sugarcreek know it’s time to vacate the table when the Vogel brothers show up. They kind of own that spot.”

“But they don’t,” Cheryl had said. “Surely the table should be available to anyone who wants to use it.”

Aunt Mitzi had grown silent for several seconds. Finally, she’d said, “Ben and Rueben are rather special. You see, years ago Ben left the Amish church. Rueben was raised to believe that if someone leaves after they’ve been baptized, they must be shunned. Thankfully, the idea of shunning is slowly fading in many Amish communities. But Rueben just hasn’t been able to let it go. If you’ll watch them, you’ll see that they never speak. They just meet to play checkers.”

“Do the leaders in their church support this...shunning?” Cheryl had asked, aghast at the practice.

“Not here,” Mitzi had said. “Although the church still takes leaving very seriously, they look more to reconciliation than to judgment.” She’d shrugged. “You’ll run across some practices you may not agree with. I know it might be hard for you to understand the Amish way of doing things, Cheryl. It’s not a lifestyle I would pick, but these are good, hard-working people who truly believe that separating themselves from the world keeps them closer to God. Who are we to tell them they’re wrong?”

Although the story of Ben and Rueben troubled her, in the short time Cheryl had spent with some of the Amish people in Sugarcreek, she had developed an affinity for the gentle folks who supplied items for the store. Their desire for a simpler life was something she could understand and appreciate.

Cheryl brought her thoughts back to the present. Even though she was getting the hang of running the shop, she still needed to

focus her attention on the task at hand. She didn't have time to daydream.

The bell over the front door rang, and Naomi Miller came in. Naomi and her husband, Seth, were Amish. They provided jellies, jams, candies, baked goods, and different kinds of cheese to the gift shop. Their products were very popular. Not only with tourists but with the townspeople as well.

“Good morning, Naomi,” Cheryl said.

“Good morning,” Naomi responded. “It is a beautiful day, *ain't so?*”

Cheryl smiled at Naomi's use of the colloquial phrase often used by the Amish. Although Naomi was ten years older than Cheryl, there was something almost childlike about Naomi. An innocence and sweetness that belied her age. She was a petite woman, standing four inches shorter than Cheryl's five-feet, six-inch height.

“It certainly is a lovely day,” Cheryl replied.

Naomi carried the basket she was holding up to the counter and sat it in front of Cheryl. “I have apple butter today. And more strawberry jam.” She smiled. “Your customers certainly seem to like it, *ja?*”

Aunt Mitzi had warned her niece that Naomi's jams and jellies didn't last long. She'd been right. Especially about the strawberry jam. After seeing how popular it was, Cheryl had taken some home. She'd grown up with jam and jelly bought in a store. Naomi's recipe actually tasted like fresh strawberries, and Cheryl vowed never to buy another jar of jelly from the local grocery store.

“Not just my customers,” Cheryl said with a smile. “I'm addicted to it.” She grinned. “Two of the last thirty jars we sold were mine.”

Naomi laughed. “I am glad you enjoy it, but please do not pay for it.” She pulled out two jars from her large basket. “My gift. And let me know when you need more.”

Cheryl was touched, but she shook her head. “I can’t accept your generous offer. I’m more than willing to pay for what I use.”

Naomi frowned at her. “Cheryl, you should never turn down a gift. You stop the hand of *Gott*, and you rob the giver of a blessing.”

Cheryl’s mouth dropped open. Had she offended Naomi? It wasn’t her intention. “I...I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Humor twinkled in Naomi’s dark brown eyes. “My lifestyle may be simple,” she said, “but my mind is not. When I offer you a gift, I am aware of my actions.”

Naomi’s lighthearted, mild rebuke made Cheryl laugh. “Well, your mind may not be simple but mine was.” She reached out and took the two jars of jam. “Thank you. This is a wonderful gift, and I appreciate it.”

Naomi smiled. “How are things going for you? You seem much more relaxed than you did on your first day here alone.”

Cheryl nodded. “I feel so much better. Everything’s finally starting to make sense. Not that I don’t have a lot to learn.”

“You will do wonderfully. We are blessed to have you here. I will miss my friend, Mitzi, but I know she is doing the Lord’s work.”

A young woman dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt came up to the counter with something in her hands. Naomi saw her and moved over so she could make her purchase. The woman stared at

Naomi for a moment, taking in her modest dress and prayer covering. Then she smiled and held out a cloth doll without a face.

“I love this Amish doll. How much is it?”

Cheryl shook her head. “I have no idea. I don’t recall seeing it on my shelves.” She looked at Naomi. “Did Aunt Mitzi sell these?”

Naomi frowned. “I do not remember these dolls, but I do not know all of the store’s inventory.” She smiled at Cheryl. “These dolls sell for twenty dollars at the gift shop down the street.”

“Twenty dollars is fine,” the woman said as she opened her purse.

Cheryl rang up the purchase then wrapped the doll in tissue paper and put it into a bag. The woman thanked her and walked out of the store.

“That’s the fourth item someone has found on my shelves that I didn’t know anything about,” she told Naomi. “I checked and they’re not on my inventory list. I didn’t sell the first two things, but I sold the third and put the money in an envelope until I can figure out what to do. I’m assuming my list is wrong. I guess I need to do a new inventory so I know what’s going on.” She reached down and picked up a large manila envelope under the counter. After opening it, she slid the money inside and made a note about the doll on the outside.

“Mitzi was always very precise and organized,” Naomi said. “I find it odd that your information is wrong. What other items were not on your inventory list?”

“A woven basket, a carved wooden horse, and a cross-stitched dish towel.” She picked up the horse and the towel from a shelf

under the counter and put them on the glass countertop. “They’re beautifully made, but I don’t feel right selling them. I have no idea where the money is supposed to go.”

“Maybe someone is trying to bless you,” Naomi said gently. “I would not worry about it.”

“Maybe,” Cheryl said slowly.

A man came up to the women with a Bible in his hands. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see a price tag anywhere.”

A King James Version Bible was tucked into a beautiful hand-tooled leather cover. Cheryl shot Naomi a look. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “Where did you find this?”

The man motioned over to a shelf near the front door. “It was there, next to the wooden birdhouses.”

“I think someone left it here by mistake,” Cheryl said. “I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t sell it to you.”

The man shook his head. “That’s too bad.” He ran his hand over the cover. “This work is exceptional.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “Again, I apologize.”

“Not a problem,” he said with a smile. “I wouldn’t want to make off with someone else’s Bible.” He put it on the counter. “I own a hardware store in Oklahoma. My advice to you is to find out who made this cover and acquire some for your shop. I guarantee you they’ll sell.”

Cheryl thanked him, and the man left to join a woman who was looking at jars of apple butter.

“See,” she whispered to Naomi. “That’s what I’m talking about. Something really strange is going on.”

She picked up the Bible so she could put it on the shelf behind the counter with the wooden horse and the towel. As she leaned over, a piece of paper fell out from between the pages. Cheryl picked it up and read:

You need to be very careful. Someone in Sugarcreek is not who they say they are!

ORDER TODAY!