



MYSTERIES *of* LANCASTER COUNTY

ANOTHER'S TREASURE

**SNEAK
PEEK of
CHAPTER 1**

**Read it
Now!**

Secondhand
Blessings

Nancy Mehl

ANOTHER'S TREASURE

Elizabeth Classen stood on the front porch of the old Victorian house that had been in her family for generations. She ran her fingers lightly over the porch railing. She remembered standing out here with her father when she was a girl, watching shooting stars streak across the sky.

The sun peeked over the edges of Pennsylvania's rolling hills and cast a pinkish glow on the countryside. The earthy smell of fresh-tilled soil filled the air. Elizabeth loved Lancaster County, and she loved her family home, although living here without her mother felt odd. Elizabeth kept expecting to see Mama sitting in her favorite chair, reading a book, or knitting something in pink or blue for the latest addition to their extended family. Moving back home and taking care of her mother after her father died had been an easy choice. Elizabeth had no husband or children to tie her down. Her sisters, Mary and Martha, had given up much more than she had to come home. They both had children, although neither was married anymore. Mary's marriage had ended in disaster, and Martha's beloved husband, Chuck, died two years ago from a heart attack. They'd both left grown children behind in Kansas and Indiana to come back to their childhood home in Bird-in-Hand, Pennsylvania, and take over the family business. She was so thankful for them. Now there were voices in the house. Noise. It had been too quiet since Mama had passed on to her heavenly reward.

Roger, the Classen's rooster, suddenly crowed, welcoming the dawn. Elizabeth smiled. She loved to hear his morning greeting.

Suddenly the screen door squeaked and a voice said, "You're up early."

Elizabeth turned to find Mary standing behind her.

She held out a cup of coffee. "Thought you could use this."

"Thanks," Elizabeth said, gratefully accepting the steaming cup.

Mary came up next to her. "It seems so strange to be standing here again. Mama and Papa both gone now."

"I know. I was just thinking the same thing. I feel a little guilty, you know," Elizabeth said softly. "Asking you and Martha to give up so much."

Mary gave her sister a gentle squeeze. "Oh, Sis. You didn't disrupt our lives. We both needed a change. I hated working for that grocery store. On my feet all day. I enjoyed talking to customers, but we never had time for a real conversation. Everything moved so quickly. Taking over the family business is... Well, it's just perfect. And now maybe I can paint again. Who knows? Maybe someday we can even sell my paintings in our store."

Elizabeth chuckled. "Your goal is to sell your beautiful paintings in a thrift store?" Mary laughed. "Oh, but Secondhand Blessings is so much more than a thrift store—with all its treasures and special finds! Besides, selling a painting anywhere would be great. Now, let's get going. We need to be ready when our customers flood in."

"Not sure I can believe for a flood. At this point, even a trickle would be welcome. I'm not sure why we fought so hard to keep this place and continue the store."

"Yes, you are. Because it's...ours. Because Papa and Mama loved it. Our great grandmother started it so long ago. How could we sell our land, our home, and the store to...strangers? This is our heritage." She patted Elizabeth's shoulder. "Martha and I came because we love this place too, Elizabeth. We want this just as much as you do."

Mary turned to go inside, but Elizabeth caught her by the arm.

“But what about your kids? Won’t you and Martha miss your children?”

Mary grabbed her hand. “Of course we will, but we can’t live our lives through them. It isn’t healthy for us or for them. Frankly, I started getting a little clingy. Cheese and crackers. I don’t want to be one of those mothers.”

Elizabeth smiled at her sister’s use of a term their mother had taught them. “Classens don’t swear,” she’d said once when Mary repeated a word she’d heard at school. “If you must say something when you’re upset, why don’t you just say...cheese and crackers?” Now, when one of the sisters needed to express frustration, they fell back on the old adage.

Elizabeth nodded slowly. “I understand. I really do. Maybe if I’d ever married or had children, I wouldn’t have felt so... purposeless. But now...” She wiped away a quick tear that fell down her cheek. “Being here makes me feel useful. Alive.”

She took one more deep breath of the country air and followed Mary back into the house. Martha was in the kitchen, standing over the stove, cooking.

“Oh, Martha,” Mary said. “I told you I’d bought some muffins for breakfast. You didn’t need to do this.”

“Nonsense,” Martha said, huffily. “We need a nice hot breakfast to give us energy for today. Besides, I haven’t gone to a lot of trouble. It’s just bacon and eggs. Toast. Oh, and hash browns.”

As Martha pushed back a strand of brown hair from her forehead, Elizabeth marveled at how beautiful she still was, even at fifty-five. Her bright blue eyes were set in a delicate face that complimented her lively disposition. Both Martha and Mary each reflected the personalities of their New Testament namesakes—Martha was a doer, whereas Mary, the youngest of the three sisters, was a dreamer. Sensitive, adventurous, and sometimes careless, Mary was more likely to leap before she looked, unlike Martha and Elizabeth. Frankly, Elizabeth couldn’t understand why any

man would leave someone like Mary. Elizabeth actually envied her. She’d never been that free and easy. As the older sister, she’d always felt responsible. For everyone.

Knowing better than to argue with Martha, the three sisters sat down at the rustic wooden table made by their father and ate a quick breakfast. Of course, it was delicious. Martha was an incredible cook.

After getting dressed, the sisters tended to a menagerie of animals. Mary had brought her dachshund, Tinkerbelle, with her, and Martha had added two cats, Oreo and Clyde, along with her Yorkie, Caboodle. Their mother’s Border Collie, Pal, added one more dog to the already impossible mix. Besides the domestic animals, their mother had accumulated three pygmy goats, a horse, and a cow. Then there were the hens...and Roger. As long as Elizabeth could remember, the Classens had owned chickens. Fresh eggs were a staple in their household.

“Only four eggs this morning,” Mary called out as she came in the front door. She carried a basket into the kitchen and put it on the counter.

“It’s eight-thirty,” Elizabeth called out. “Let’s get out to the barn.”

Elizabeth tried to ignore the nervous butterflies in her stomach as the sisters walked toward the big red barn, the front part converted to a store. Elizabeth looked over at her sisters. Mary wore jeans, boots, and a nice white blouse. Her blonde hair was pulled back and fell softly on her shoulders. Martha wore slacks and a light purple sweater, perfect for the nippy spring weather. Elizabeth glanced down at her plain brown skirt, blue blouse, and no nonsense loafers. Mary liked to tease her that she took after their grandparents who were once Conservative Mennonites. Her sisters urged her to try more modern clothes, but for now, she was comfortable as she was.

When they reached the barn, Elizabeth unlocked it and pulled the door back, glancing up at the hand-painted sign over

the entrance that read Secondhand Blessings. She made a mental note to have it touched up at some point. Inside were rows of tables and shelves, as artfully arranged as any department store—and sparkling clean now, after days of work. On one side of the store were all the clothing racks. At the back were appliances and dishes. Other sections included household goods, crafts, decorative items, tools, and jewelry. Many of the tables in the middle of the store contained miscellaneous items that didn't fit a larger category. On a table near the checkout counter, Martha had added some baked items. Banana nut bread, zucchini bread, lemon poppy seed bread, and cranberry bread loaves were encased in specialty bakery bags with the store's name, Secondhand Blessings, on the label. It was a new venture for the shop. After jumping through some hoops with the health department, the sisters had won approval to sell food. Mary had suggested that, down the road, they offer lunch items, along with a couple of tables and some chairs, but Elizabeth wasn't sure it was a good plan. They'd shelved that idea for now.

Elizabeth grabbed three aprons and handed one to each sister. Then she slipped into hers.

Mary went over to one table in the middle of the room. "The things we got from the Smucker's estate sale should go quickly. Especially the candleholders and the china. Even the bric-a-brac is classy."

"There are still some things that need to be cleaned and polished," Elizabeth said. "I just haven't had time to do it. I think we'll do well with them, though. I'm so glad Ruth helped me inventory everything. It was so kind of her." Ruth Zook was the wife of the pastor of Mount Zion Mennonite Church.

"How is Pastor Zook feeling?" Martha asked. "He looked rather frail last Sunday."

Elizabeth shrugged. "Just getting older as far as I know." She sighed. "Ruth told me she wished he could retire, but they just can't afford it."

Mary, who'd been straightening one of the shelves snapped her fingers. "I can't believe I forgot to tell you this," she said. "You know Darlene, the waitress over at the Two Bird Cafe?"

"Sure."

"She told me that Ruth and Pastor Zook are resigning the church. Going to Florida."

Elizabeth frowned. "That doesn't make sense. Ruth told me they didn't have the money to leave Bird-in-Hand just two weeks ago. What could happen in such a short time that would change everything?"

"Maybe their children are helping them," Martha said. "It's not really our business anyway."

"I realize it's not our business," Elizabeth said. "I'm just curious."

"Well, I think we should be glad for them," Mary said. "They've both worked very hard for many years. He was Mama and Papa's pastor too."

"I am glad for them," Elizabeth said, starting to feel a little frustrated. Her sisters had a way of turning things she said into opinions she didn't actually have.

"Where's the inventory list from the Smucker's estate?" Mary asked suddenly.

Elizabeth picked up a large notebook kept under the counter. "Right here. Why?"

"I just found a picture on the floor, under the table with the Smucker's items. I don't remember a photo being part of the estate." She held up an old sepia-colored picture.

"I don't either," Elizabeth said. She quickly looked over the list. "There's a picture frame with a picture, but that's it. Maybe we sold the frame during the church party, but whoever bought it didn't have any use for this picture." The church had put together a party to celebrate the reopening of Secondhand Blessings, and the sisters had allowed the members to purchase items before the

official opening. “Yes, here it is. We sold the frame to Dorothy Mulligan. I guess she didn’t want the photo.”

“Why would she?” Mary said. “She doesn’t know the people in this picture. Mary brought the photo over to Elizabeth.”

She looked it over carefully. It was a street scene with a crowd milling about in the background. A young couple stared into the camera, half-smiles on their faces. “I’ll take it,” she said. “Maybe we should keep it just in case someone wants it someday.”

“I truly doubt that will happen,” Martha said. “Just more junk sitting around.”

Elizabeth didn’t answer, but she slid the picture into her apron pocket. She turned toward the entrance as she heard someone drive up quickly and stop, their brakes squealing. Seconds later, a woman rushed into the barn, her face red and her eyes wild. Elizabeth recognized her. It was Anita Smucker, the Smuckers’ daughter. She’d organized the estate sale after her father died. “Can we help you, Mrs. Smucker?”

Anita pointed a finger at her. “I want it back,” she said shakily. “Now.”

Elizabeth walked toward her slowly. “Want what back?” she asked. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I want it back,” she repeated. “Everything. All the things you took from my parents’ house. It’s a matter of life and death!”