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BY SERENA B. MILLER



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Prologue

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The leather on Rachel Troyer's gun holster creaked as she shifted her weight on the kitchen chair. Her three elderly Amish aunts shot wary glances toward the offending weapon.

"My niece." Bertha clucked her tongue with disapproval. "Carrying a gun!"

This was an old subject—thoroughly discussed and dissected over the years. Her aunts had made it abundantly clear that they disapproved of her profession as a police officer. Bertha, the old fox, was trying to distract her from the subject at hand, but Rachel was determined to not get sidetracked.

"That's *not* what we were talking about, Bertha, and you know it," she said. "It's time for the three of you to make a decision. You can't put it off much longer."

Square-faced and stolid, Bertha lifted her chin. "This old inn has been welcoming guests ever since your grandfather built it a hundred years—"

"I know the story," Rachel interrupted. "You've told it to me many times. He came from Pennsylvania to Sugar Creek, Ohio, with only a new wife, a mule, and carpenter's tools. He bought a farm, built a six-bedroom house, filled it with four kids, rented out three of the bedrooms, built two cabins for extra travelers, and tapped the sugar maples he found growing on the place. He was also a bishop

in the Amish church. I get it. Grandfather Troyer was a great man. The place has history.”

“Which you do not value.”

“I *do*. But I value the three of you more.”

Frustrated, Rachel pulled her hair into a tighter ponytail. As their closest relative, it was her sad task to convince her aunts that they were too old and fragile to continue doing the heavy work necessary to keep the small inn running.

Unfortunately, they were of an entirely different opinion.

She had known it would be difficult. The Amish were not exactly known for their willingness to accept change, and Bertha was being especially pigheaded today.

“I’m only asking this because I love you.” Rachel glanced around the table at their glum faces. “You *do* know that, don’t you?”

All three averted their eyes. The phrase “I love you” was rarely heard in Old Order Amish households. It made them uncomfortable. In their world, one *showed* one’s love rather than verbalize it. Yapping about “love” was something the “Englisch” outsiders did. The Amish put muscle behind the word instead of their mouths.

Rachel knew this, but she was desperate for anything that would impress upon them how strongly she felt about the issue of closing the small inn her grandmother had named the Sugar Haus.

Gentle Lydia, who was peeling a basketful of windfall apples from their small orchard, laid down her paring knife and repositioned a straight pin that was holding the waistband of her dark green work dress closed. A plain white choring kerchief covered her gray hair. At seventy-six, she was reed-thin in spite of the never-ending stream of sugar-infused cakes, cookies, and pies that flowed from her kitchen.



Her aunts' use of straight pins to hold their clothing together had annoyed Rachel for as long as she could remember. But nothing else was acceptable among the stricter members of their church district.

It was a puzzle to her. She could understand the church's traditional ban against buttons on women's clothing. Plain dress was part of their identity—and buttons, she supposed, could conceivably be considered fancy. She could even tolerate the restriction against zippers—which mainly affected the men who had to wear britches with buttoned flaps. But for the life of her, she could *not* understand their church's prejudice against the convenience of safety pins.

She caught sight of Anna's vulnerable bare feet tucked beneath her chair and winced at the thought of how many straight pins her sweetest aunt must have stepped on in her lifetime. She longed to protect her from pain of any kind. Anna's struggle with Down syndrome was difficult enough.

"The three of you need a break," Rachel pleaded. "You should enjoy the years you have left instead of half killing yourselves by waiting on guests."

"How?" Bertha gathered the long skirt of her brown dress to one side and eased her recently broken leg into a more comfortable position atop a footstool. An active seventy-eight, Bertha had been robust until taking a tumble down the stairs one week earlier.

"How what?"

"*How* should we 'enjoy' ourselves?" Bertha stuffed an errant strand of gray hair beneath her white prayer *kapp*. "How should we spend all this *frei* time you say we need?"

"However you want. Travel. Quilt..."

"I have already traveled everywhere I wish to go," Bertha said. "And I do not enjoy quilting. Quilting is what Lydia does."

“Maybe you could get caught up on your reading.” Rachel had made up her mind not to budge on this issue. As painful as this discussion was for all of them, they had to face the facts.

“After I have read and Lydia has quilted”—Bertha snagged an apple slice from Lydia’s bowl and took a bite—“what then? Are you going to put in electricity and make us watch television all day long like your *Englisch* friends?”

“I quilt *goot*,” Anna piped up.

Anna, at fifty-seven, was pushing the odds of longevity for someone with Down syndrome. She was, in fact, one of the main reasons Rachel wanted her aunts to close the inn. With Anna’s insistence on being part of every activity, she worked too hard for someone who, like so many with Down syndrome, struggled with a weak heart.

Rachel could not bear the thought of living without Anna’s unquestioning love or Lydia’s gentleness or Bertha’s strength of character. She wanted her aunts to live forever. They were all she had.

“You do quilt *goot*.” Lydia patted her younger sister’s hand, and Rachel’s heart ached with love for these good women. She knew for a fact that Lydia frequently stayed up after midnight removing Anna’s lengthy and disorderly quilting stitches—and then redoing them by lantern light. This was a closely kept family secret they all conspired to keep from Anna forever.

“And you want us to live on Victoria’s money.” Bertha spat out the words as though they tasted of poison.

For the first time, Rachel realized that she had underestimated the pain Bertha had endured because of her younger brother’s marriage to a local *Englisch* girl. In her aunts’ eyes, it had been this marriage that pulled their only brother into a job that had taken his life—a profession Rachel now shared.



“Yes,” Rachel said flatly. “I do. Now that I’ve turned thirty, the trust fund my mother left me is accessible, and this is what I want to do with it. I have looked forward to helping you for a long, long time. There is no reason the three of you need to keep working so hard.”

“You have no obligation to do this for us,” Bertha said.

“No obligation?” Rachel shook her head. “You have been my surrogate mothers ever since the day I was orphaned at eleven. You went without sleep when I was sick. You made special meals for me when I was hungry. You sewed clothes for me to wear. You gave me a happy life—even though I chose not to accept your traditional faith. I’ve wanted to do this for you ever since I learned I would receive an inheritance.”

“Taking care of you was not so hard.” Bertha waved a dismissive hand. “You were an obedient child. You owe us nothing.”

“Please, Bertha. Don’t be stubborn about this,” Rachel said. “It’s time you started receiving instead of giving all the time.”

Bertha cocked her head. “And are *you* going to ‘retire’ from your work now that you have this money?”

The question took her by surprise. She had focused so much on her aunts’ needs that she had not considered the possibility of quitting her own job. Now that she thought about it, the idea terrified her. Who would she *be* if she was no longer a cop?

“No. I won’t retire. I—I like my work.”

Bertha’s eyes narrowed. “You did not like it so much when that bad man in Cleveland put you in the hospital.”

Rachel swallowed against a sudden wave of nausea. She still battled flashbacks of the beating that had almost ended her life.

“We’re not talking about me right now. Will you, or will you not, stop taking in guests?”

Bertha frowned. “What do *you* think, Lydia?”

Lydia rose and dumped the bowl of just-sliced apples into the large cooking pot she had positioned on the kitchen stove. Widowed and childless, she was the quietest of the three and in many ways the most fragile. It made Rachel cringe every time she saw Lydia wrestle the heavy pots and pans with her arthritic hands, as she created huge breakfasts and mounds of fresh-baked sugar cookies for their guests.

Rachel hoped for Lydia’s support. If *anyone* had earned a rest, it was her middle aunt.

It didn’t happen.

Lydia shook some cinnamon into the pot, added a couple of cups of sugar, and turned on the propane flame. “Who will I cook for,” she asked, plaintively, “if we have no guests?”

Rachel stared at the surface of the old oak table and fought to gain control over her emotions. She was trying to give them a *gift*, for crying out loud. She was trying to take care of them—just as her father would have wanted her to do.

She had imagined them getting misty-eyed with gratitude and relief. She had dared to hope they would be pleased with her generosity. Instead, they were acting like bewildered children who were being punished when they had done nothing wrong.

“I think we can still take care of our guests,” Bertha said brightly. “My leg will heal. Anna’s heart is strong enough to gather eggs for breakfasts. I can use a stool to help Lydia in the kitchen. We can hire a nice Amish girl to do the laundry. We will manage.”

“You have been promising to hire a ‘nice Amish girl’ for the past five years. Somehow it never happens.”

“We did not need help before this.”



“Really?” Rachel arose, put both hands flat on the table, and leaned forward. “You fell down the steps carrying a chamber pot from the upstairs bedrooms, Bertha!” she exploded.

“True.” Bertha chuckled. “Fortunately, the chamber pot was empty.”

Anna sniggered then looked at Rachel’s face and sobered.

“Bertha was something, she was.” Lydia, still smiling, was gathering another lapful of apples into her apron from the bushel basket beside the table. “She went down the steps—*kershlammy!* I found her at the bottom, wearing the lid like a hat.”

Bertha laughed out loud at the image Lydia had painted.

“That is *not* funny.” Rachel couldn’t believe her aunts could find humor in the situation. It had scared her witless when she had learned that Bertha was on her way to the hospital. “How can you laugh at such a thing?”

“*Ach.*” Bertha made a rueful face. “At our age, if we do not laugh, we will shrivel up inside.”

“*Dess lacha behayt sich zu veina!*” Rachel said sharply. “Excessive laughter turns into crying.’ *You* were the one who taught me that proverb, Bertha.” She took a deep breath and plunged on. “You could have broken your neck. It’s time to stop doing all this—this needless work.” She gestured around the enormous kitchen unadorned by modern conveniences.

Anna innocently continued to smile, but Lydia and Bertha reacted as though Rachel had slapped them.

“Honest labor *iss* from *Gott.*” Bertha’s Germanic accent deepened as she crossed her arms over her chest. “We are used to our ways.”

Lydia began to peel another apple, but not before Rachel saw the hurt reflected in her eyes and knew that she had gone too far. Her

aunts considered the work of running the inn a calling—not an act of drudgery.

She adored them, but these three women were going to be the death of her. Even giving them the use of her mother’s money wasn’t going to keep them from working until they dropped.

Unlike some Amish business owners who found ways to compromise in order to thrive in the modern world, her aunts ran a strictly Old Order Amish establishment. No electricity. Flashlights and kerosene lamps at night. Gravity-fed plumbing. Everything they did was labor-intensive.

The problem was, tourists might *think* they wanted to experience the simplicity of Amish life—but not if it involved sleeping without air conditioning, sharing a single downstairs bathroom, waiting for the low water pressure to refill the tank, or eschewing television and wi-fi.

Most of the guests who were willing to put up with a complete lack of modern conveniences did so for two reasons only—her aunts’ low rates and Lydia’s generous cooking.

She had watched the quality of her aunts’ clientele drop in recent years and was afraid that if they didn’t make some changes soon, the Sugar Haus Inn would turn into a flophouse for deadbeats with no money. Her aunts, tenderhearted and easily taken in by a sob story, were barely scraping by as it was.

Anna gently touched Rachel’s face. In one of her surprisingly insightful moments, she gazed at her with understanding and sympathy. “You are ’fraid for us?”

A lump rose in Rachel’s throat. “Very afraid.”

“Cause you *leeva* us?” Anna said.

“Yes, because I love you.”



Anna leveled a look at Lydia and Bertha. “I don’t want Rachel ’fraid.”

It was rare for Anna to take a stand. Rachel thanked God that she had chosen to do so now.

“I know Lydia’s not as strong as she used to be,” Bertha grumbled. “And Anna is taking heart medication now. I am not much use until this leg heals. I *know* we have slowed down—but what you are asking is a hard thing.”

“I know,” Rachel said. “I’m sorry.”

Bertha remained silent for a long time as everyone awaited her decision. Finally she released a sigh that came from the depths of her soul. “Even though it is hard to accept...you are right. We will close the Sugar Haus Inn to paying guests. We will accept the use of Victoria’s money. But I insist on one thing.”

Rachel’s heart grew lighter as she realized she might have won the battle. “What’s that?”

Bertha pointed to an old wooden plaque hanging on the wall beside the kitchen door. It had defined her aunts’ philosophy of life for as long as Rachel could remember. It read: BE NOT FORGETFUL TO ENTERTAIN STRANGERS: FOR THEREBY SOME HAVE ENTERTAINED ANGELS UNAWARES.” HEBREWS 13:2

“*If* we have reason to believe that Gott Himself has brought a stranger to our door, we will not turn that stranger away.”

“But—”

“That is scripture, Rachel, and I will not compromise on doing the Lord’s will.”

Rachel respectfully bowed to the older woman’s convictions. She knew she had achieved as much as possible. Bertha was no pushover. The older woman had endured shunning in order to train as a nurse.

She had worked in a Haitian orphanage for twenty years, until her parents had fallen ill. Then she had come home to kneel before the very Amish congregation that had banned her, asking for forgiveness and returning to the stricter religion in order to be allowed to care for her ailing parents—and Anna.

Bertha might be nearing eighty, but she had a spine of steel when it came to doing what she believed to be right.

Rachel pulled a savings passbook out of her back pocket and laid it on the table. “This should be enough to keep you comfortable for several months. Tell me when you need more. I don’t want you doing without a thing.”

“*Dank*,” Bertha said with dignity. “Thank you. Our church will be blessed not to part with alms for us, and we will be glad not to have to receive them. I will go to my room now, to pray over this.”

Doubt filled Rachel’s mind at her aunt’s words. “I thought you had already made your decision.”

“Yes, of course.” Bertha waved a hand. “We will do as you say. We will no longer give *The Budget* our advertising dollars, and you may take down the sign at the end of the road. But I will ask Gott to give us wisdom so that if there is a stranger He wants us to minister to—we will not blindly turn an *engel* away.”

“Agreed.” Rachel resolved to add her own prayers to Bertha’s—that there would *be* no more strangers, no more demanding guests. She believed in God, but she didn’t buy into the whole “angels unaware” thing.

Her aunts had earned a much-deserved retirement, and she was going to see to it that they got one. Whether they wanted it or not.