

||| A SEASON IN PINECRAFT |||

Her Heart's Desire

SHELLEY
SHEPARD GRAY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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For my lovely friend Clara,
who gave me my first tour of Pinecraft.
Here's hoping that we'll get to meet
there again one day!

To those who use well what they are given,
even more will be given.

Matthew 25:29



Do what you can, with what you have,
where you are.

Amish proverb

1



MARCH

There were only two beds in the motel room. Two beds for the three of them to share. Looking at the somewhat shabby space, Mary Margaret Miller felt her insides knot.

When the Pioneer Trails bus driver had announced they'd needed to make an emergency stop in Georgia because the storm was too fierce to drive through, it had almost sounded like a grand adventure. Mary had never traveled much farther than Sugarcreek or Berlin, Ohio. And though she did know quite a few Englischers, most everyone she knew was Amish, just like her.

She'd been so excited to see new things and meet new people, she hadn't even been too concerned when the bus pulled into the parking lot of a small, rather run-down motel just off the highway. But now, as she stood next to two girls she barely knew and studied the forlorn pair of beds, Mary realized that her spur-of-the-moment decision to travel to Pinecraft, Florida, by herself hadn't been the greatest idea.

Not at all.

Or perhaps her earlier prayers on the bus were to blame.

After all, she had suggested to the Lord that surely anything would be better than being on a large bus in the middle of an ice storm. Maybe He had decided to take her at her word.

Lilly broke the silence first. "Do either of you want to guess what that stain on the wall is from?"

All three of them turned to stare at the dark blob seeping down from the ceiling to rest near the light switch. "I-I've been trying to pretend it wasn't there," Betsy said. "Obviously, that plan isn't going too well."

"I would say that I've been trying to not think about the bedspreads, but I canna seem to think about anything besides who all has touched them previously," Lilly murmured.

Betsy wrinkled her nose. "M-maybe we should put them on the floor, jah? They m-might be infested."

"That would surely be best," Lilly said.

Straightening her slim shoulders, Betsy glanced Mary's way. "Are you all right?"

"Hmm? Oh, jah." Finding her voice at last, Mary attempted to sound optimistic. "Do you girls have any thoughts about how we should decide who gets to sleep alone tonight?"

"I don't mind sharing a bed with either of you," Betsy said. "I doubt I'll s-sleep much anyway."

"It doesn't matter to me either," Lilly said. "Betsy might be wide awake, but I'm exhausted. I've been so nervous about this trip, I haven't slept much for the last week. I could almost sleep on the floor." As they all looked at the threadbare carpet under their feet, Lilly wrinkled her nose. "Scratch that. I'm not going to put my head anywhere near that carpet."

Mary smiled at her. "I wouldn't let you even if you wanted to do such a thing. You'd likely get a skin rash or something."

After carefully pulling off the comforter and tossing it in the

corner of the room, Betsy sat down on one of the beds. “That settles it, then. I’ll share this bed with Lilly, and you may have the other one all to yourself, Mary.”

Now Mary was embarrassed. Why had she even brought up their sleeping arrangements in the first place? No doubt the other girls thought she was the type of person who always needed her way, even at the expense of others. Tentatively, she said, “Sorry if I sounded pushy. I . . . well, I sometimes say all the wrong things.”

Betsy shook her head. “There’s nothing to forgive. If we’re being honest, I-I’m so happy to be out of my little Kentucky town and doing something different, even staying in this motel feels exciting.”

“I feel the same way,” Lilly added as she carefully pulled the straight pins from her kapp, then set them on the dresser. “I can’t even remember if I’ve ever had a sleepover with two friends.”

“M-me neither,” Betsy said with a smile before she seemed to realize what she’d just insinuated. “I mean, not that you two are my friends or anything.”

Mary gaped at the other two women. All three of them were in their early twenties. Betsy, with her dark hair and matching eyes, was a true beauty, and Lilly looked like everyone’s best friend. She was so chatty and smiley. How could they, too, have trouble making friends? It didn’t seem possible.

Worried there was a private joke between them that she was unaware of, she frowned.

As soon as she did, Betsy said, “Did I offend you, Mary?”
“Nee.”

“Are y-you sure?”

Seconds sped by as she debated what to say. It had been so

long since she'd felt like she could be completely honest. No, that wasn't right. It had been a long time since she'd been able to allow herself to be vulnerable. People could be cruel, and she'd learned that from personal experience. She'd been bullied and teased by so many kids when she was in school.

Almost everything inside her was protesting letting even the smallest bit of her guard down. Her heart wasn't eager to be bruised, especially not now, with these two new girls. If she said the wrong thing, it could ruin her whole vacation.

On the heels of that was the memory of her evening prayers a few weeks ago. She'd knelt at the side of her bed, praying and crying and asking the Lord to help her make a new start. And He had. In just a few weeks, she'd sold enough of her greeting cards to buy a bus ticket to Pinecraft for a long, much-needed vacation.

Her parents, well aware of how miserable she'd been for years, had been supportive. They'd even chipped in a little so she could stay at the Marigold Inn for two weeks. And her father refused to let her pay him back. All he asked was that she try to be positive while she was on vacation. Try to let other people see the *real* Mary Margaret that he and her mamm knew and loved.

Even Preacher Marlin had stopped by their house to offer encouragement. He'd brought over some of his favorite postcards from Pinecraft and told her about each one. While sipping his lukewarm coffee liberally laced with cream and sugar, Preacher Marlin even confided that he'd had one or two adventures on the beach in Siesta Key.

She'd giggled, thinking about their gentle, seventy-year-old preacher kicking up his heels in the sand and surf.

But most importantly, Mary's favorite preacher had reminded her that she was a person worth knowing. They'd prayed to-

gether about that too. By the time he'd left, her resolve had grown even stronger to experience as much as she possibly could on her vacation.

Now, sitting in the motel room, all those good feelings settled in her heart. She'd promised people who cared about her to try to come out of her shell. Was she really going to throw all those promises away and go back to the person she'd been in Trail, Ohio?

No. No, she was not.

After taking off her kapp and shoes, she sat down on the bed too. "Betsy, you didn't offend me at all. To tell you the truth, I was just thinking that both of you seemed like the type of women who have lots of friends and beaux. I was surprised." Realizing that neither had said a word about boyfriends, she cleared her throat. "Or do you have boyfriends?"

Betsy chuckled as if the question was mighty humorous. "N-nee."

"I don't either," Lilly said without even a flash of a smile. "What about you?"

Mary realized then that she could either keep all her bad experiences and disappointments to herself . . . or she could be completely honest. The decision was easy to make. She didn't want to lie and had the feeling that her lies wouldn't sound believable anyway.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, she said, "The truth is . . . back in my hometown of Trail, I didn't really take."

Lilly's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I wasn't popular," she replied, inwardly wincing because "not popular" was a big understatement. "I wasn't popular at all with the boys in my church district." Deciding she might as well admit the whole truth, she added, "Nor with the girls."

Comforted by Betsy's and Lilly's sympathetic looks, she added, "I've always kind of been on my own."

"Me too," Betsy said. "I have bad asthma and it's kept me from doing a lot of activities everyone else does. Plus, I used to stutter even more than I do now, so it was hard to even speak to the other kids." She shuddered. "E-every time I get upset or really excited, my mouth seems to freeze. I was teased a lot."

Teasing someone for stuttering was especially cruel. "I'm sorry."

"I am too, b-but I've learned to accept how things are." She smiled at Mary. "I only shared that so you'd know I mean it when I say I've spent a lot of time by myself as well."

Lilly joined them on the bed, leaning up against the fake wood headboard. "I've been a loner too. My parents adopted me and made sure everyone knew it."

When both Mary and Betsy gasped, Lilly chuckled softly. "Sorry, I guess that came out kind of bad. Was it too much to hear from a relative stranger?"

"Not at all," Mary said quickly. When Lilly gave her a knowing look, she smiled. "But it was a lot to hear so boldly."

After they shared another smile, Lilly looked down at her lap. "I don't usually confide so much. Actually, I never do. I guess I feel comfortable with the two of you. So comfortable I don't even think about how my words might sound. I'll try to be better."

"Don't," Betsy said. "I like that you're being so honest. B-be as honest as you want."

"Okay, then." Lilly took a deep breath. "I love my adoptive parents—I really do—but there's been times when I wish I wasn't a symbol of their good works. It's been hard to live down."

She rolled her eyes. “Here we are, all Amish. All in communities where living simply and being part of the group is valued. But instead of feeling like I was just one of the crowd, I was always known as ‘poor Lilly, whose parents adopted her.’” She lowered her voice. “Or poor Lilly; there must have been something wrong with her because her real parents gave her up.”

“Ouch,” Betsy said.

“The label has stung. I’m not gonna lie.”

The three of them regarded each other, and a new calm seemed to fill the air.

“You two are wallflowers like me,” Mary blurted.

Betsy raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“It’s, um, an old-fashioned term. It’s a girl who kind of stands on the sidelines and watches while everyone else does things.” Trying to think of a better example, she said, “Once, I checked a romance novel out at the library that was about wallflowers. See, in this book, all the girls were asked to dance except a pair of women. They were essentially ignored and had to spend most of the evening sitting in chairs and wishing for boys to ask them to dance.”

“While everyone else lives, you mean,” Lilly said. “If being a wallflower is the correct term for it, then that fits me perfectly. That’s what I’ve been doing for years now—standing off to the side and waiting to be noticed.”

Betsy nodded. “While everyone else just walks by.”

Mary felt a lump form in her throat. The girls’ comments were so close to how she often privately felt, it was stunning.

Betsy and Lilly seemed really nice. It was too bad that they also felt like they’d been overlooked.

Mary felt a little depressed . . . and maybe a little angry too. She wasn’t perfect, but she wasn’t a bad person.

It wasn't right. There was more to her than that. She was nice, was reasonably attractive, and had a really good heart. There was no reason every other girl in her hometown had a better chance than she did of finding a beau or making good friends. It was time people started seeing the person she always wished they'd see.

It was time to start anew.

"I don't know how you two feel, but I'm sick of being a wallflower," she blurted.

Betsy's eyes widened. "Well, of course you are. B-being a wallflower stinks."

Lilly giggled. "Indeed."

"Okay, no pun intended. However—"

Mary interrupted. "What I'm trying to say is that I don't want to just stand around and hope someone notices me or invites me to do things anymore."

"I don't either, but what can you do?" Lilly asked. "It's like our futures were determined when we were little girls."

"I can't do much at home, but I can be different in Pinecraft, right?" Though she was doing her best to sound confident, Mary realized she was really looking to them for guidance and support.

Betsy slowly nodded. "You're right. I can't exactly hide my stuttering, but no one here has to know that I'm an asthmatic with an overprotective mamm."

"No one is going to know I'm an adopted foster child except for you two," Lilly said. "What about you, Mary?"

"No one is going to bring up any embarrassing situations from my past because I'm not going to say a word about them. From this point on, all I'm going to be is Mary Margaret from Trail, Ohio."

Feeling cleansed by their confessions and almost buoyant, she added, “And you know what? I don’t care if we make a ton of other friends anyway. If the three of us stick together, we can have our own fun, right?”

“Right.” Betsy grinned. “Starting this minute, we are wall-flowers no more.”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. After peeking through the peephole and seeing Anna, their English guide, and her husband Jerry, the bus driver, Mary opened the door. “Yes?”

Jerry held out a pizza box. “Here you go, girls. One pepperoni pizza and three sodas. Do you need anything else?”

Mary looked at the other two girls, then shook her head. “Danke, but nee. We have everything we need right here.”

Anna smiled at the three of them. “I knew it. I told Jerry here that if there were three people on our bus who were going to take this setback in stride, it was you three pretty girls. I bet none of you has ever met a stranger.”

Mary just smiled, but as she closed the door, she felt a surge of satisfaction. She might be in a run-down motel room in the middle of an ice storm . . . but already her future was looking a whole lot brighter.