



Blessing in Disguise

by Lauraine Snelling

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“Uff da.”

Bridget Bjorklund sank into the rocking chair on the back porch of the Blessing Boarding House and fanned herself with a folded newspaper. Her swollen feet hurt, her back ached, and the thought of rising and doing this all over again in the morning was more than she wanted to think of at the moment.

“Mor, where are you?” Hjelmer called.

“Out here.” Her son was the last person she wanted to talk to this evening. If he saw how weary she felt, he’d tell her again to send for Augusta, her eldest daughter and his older sister. Hjelmer thought he knew all the answers, especially since he had become the area’s representative to the Constitutional Congress for the soon-to-be state of North Dakota. While they hadn’t been formally admitted yet, everyone knew it was just a matter of time at this point. If the representatives and other politicians could come to an agreement, that is.

She plastered a smile on her face and heaved herself out of her chair. After swatting one of the mosquitoes that persistently whined in squadrons around her head, she opened the screen door just in time to almost bump into her son’s broad chest.

“Were you sitting down? Are you all right?”

She ignored his questions and only through sheer will kept herself from limping on her way to the stove. “The coffee will be ready in a couple of minutes.” She brushed a lock of snowy hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist. After all the wishing for the wind to die down last winter, now she would give an entire day’s baking for a breath of breeze.

“Hot, isn’t it?”

“That doesn’t begin to describe it.” She rattled the grate and added a few twigs and bits of kindling to the coals in the stove. “So how was your trip?”

Hjelmer shook his head. "Wrangling, that's what. Those blowhards can find more to argue about than anyone I've ever seen. Every one of them has an opinion on every little issue and thinks his is the only right one. Seems like every time there's something the railroad men don't like, the papers get lost so we can't vote on it. Between the railroad and the flour mills, the owners want to squeeze the life right out of the farmers. I never in all my life have seen such goings-on."

Brigid kept herself from reminding him that he had wanted to serve in the Congress. He was one of only ten Norwegians who'd been elected to represent the counties, and the honor had been good for them all. "Surely losing papers like that can't be legal?"

"No, of course not. But no one can prove anything."

"So when will we be a state, then?"

"Who knows? Even though the territory is officially divided, we have issues to hammer out, and the people must vote to ratify the constitution first, like I told you."

"Seems like Norway's monarchy is easier."

"Mor! There'll be no monarchy in this country. The government is 'of the people, by the people, and for the people.' Remember when I read you the Constitution of the United States of America?"

Brigid didn't bother to tell him how little she had understood in spite of his efforts to educate the people of Blessing.

He took a chair at the table. "How have things been going here?"

"Busy. Rarely a night that all the beds aren't full. If I had ten more, I could probably keep them busy too."

"You aren't thinking of adding on already?"

She could tell by his tone what he thought of the idea. While the thought had crossed her mind more than once, she wasn't about to tell him that.

"So how is that new girl working out?" he asked.

He would zero in on her weak spot. He had always had a knack for that.

"You want cookies with this?" She gestured to the coffeepot she'd filled with water and coffee grounds.

"Mor? You didn't answer my question."

“All right. She quit. Met a man here in the dining room. He asked her to marry him and go out west to homestead, so she did. Henry helps as much as he can, but the railroad keeps him pretty busy too. Ilse serves and takes care of the rooms, Goodie helps me cook, and Eulah, Sam’s wife, does the laundry and helps with the scrubbing up when she’s here. Right now she and their daughter Lily Mae are out setting up the cookshack. They’ll go along to cook as soon as the crew leaves. We’re making do until she gets back. That should be enough.”

“But it isn’t.” Hjelmer tilted his chair back on two legs.

“Stop rocking that chair back. I have enough trouble keeping legs on the chairs. All you men think straight-legged chairs are for tilting back. You want to rock, then go sit in the rocker.” She heard the chair legs make contact with the floor but refused to turn and look at her son’s face. She’d said too much, she knew that, but somehow the words flew out of her mouth before she could clamp her teeth on them.

Which led to another problem. She’d had a toothache off and on for several weeks, only now it hurt all the time. She’d snapped at Ilse today too, and the poor girl almost broke out in tears. That wasn’t fair, and she knew it, but ... She kept from cradling her jaw only by supreme effort.

“I think you should write to Augusta.”

Bridget sighed. “We’ve been over this before. Augusta is engaged, and unless her young man wants to come to America, she won’t leave home.”

“But you could write and ask.”

“Ja, that I could.” So why hadn’t she? She knew the reason without asking the question. Augusta had made clear her opinion about her mother’s opening a boardinghouse instead of staying with Haakan and Ingeborg, where “she could be cared for.” The words still irritated Bridget beyond measure.

Why did they all think she was too old to run a boardinghouse? She’d cooked, cleaned, done the wash, baked, gardened, at every house she’d ever lived in. Ingeborg’s and Kaaren’s, no less. But here she didn’t have little children underfoot. How she missed that.

The coffee began to boil, and she moved it off the hottest part of the stove to let it simmer until strong enough. Going to the cupboard she took out the cookie jar and, setting it on the counter, arranged sour cream cookies on a plate. The jar was nearly empty. Once she’d taken to bagging cookies, the men bought the bags as they left and ate them throughout the afternoon. She could never bake too many cookies. In fact, that’s what she should be doing right now.

She thought longingly of her spinning wheel and the new Singer sewing machine at Ingeborg’s house. At least doing those things, she could be sitting down. Resisting the

desire to knead the aching muscles in the middle of her back, she set the cup in the saucer and poured Hjelmer's coffee first and then a cup for herself. Tipping some of the hot brew into the saucer, she blew on it and sipped from that. Hjelmer followed suit, at the same time reaching for a cookie.

"Um. No one bakes sour cream cookies like you do, Mor." He closed his eyes the better to savor the flavor. He dipped the cookie in his coffee for the next bite, then looked at his mother. "So when are you going to write to Augusta? Anyone can tell by looking at you that this venture is too much without competent help."

Bridget closed her eyes and shook her head. "Is tonight soon enough for you?"

"No, it should have been done weeks ago, but now will do." He loosened his tie and propped his elbows on the oak table.

"Why don't *you* write the letter?" Bridget rubbed her temples with the tips of her fingers. "Isn't that something you have learned to do up there with all those ... those ..." She shook her head and got up to find writing paper. She kept a packet somewhere for her guests when they wanted to write a letter home.

Sitting down again at the table, she dipped her pen in the ink and wrote swiftly in Norwegian, since Augusta had either refused or not taken time to learn English. She'd find out what a mistake that was—if she decided to come, that is.

Dear Augusta,

I am writing this at Hjelmer's insistence. Do not feel like you have to come if you don't want to. I know your intended has to make the decision for you both, but if you would consider coming here to Blessing to help me in the boardinghouse, I would be grateful. Every time I get a girl trained to help me, she meets one of my boarders, they get married, and off they go, usually westward where there is still free land. There is plenty of work here for Elmer too, since I assume you will want to marry at home. You will be amazed at the flat country, as all of us have been.

If you decide to come, we will send the tickets immediately. We are well but still missing our dear Katy, who brought so much laughter to all of us.

Your loving Mor

"Here, now you add to it." She slid the letter across the table and carefully handed him the pen and ink. "And don't spill any of that on the tablecloth. It doesn't come out."

Hjelmer folded back the tablecloth as she had, then added a few more lines, signed it, and blew on it to dry the ink before folding the paper and inserting it in the envelope. What he

didn't want his mother seeing was his description of how tired she looked. If Augusta had any sense of family responsibility, she'd be on the next boat.

"But I didn't tell her all the news." Bridget reached for the envelope.

"You can write more another time." Hjelmer stuck the envelope in his pocket and pushed back his chair. "I'd better be going. Told Penny I'd be here only a few minutes."

"Ja, she doesn't let on, but she misses you terribly when you are gone." *And she wants a baby badly, but she won't get one with you traipsing all over the country and never at home here to tend to business.*

He stood, then leaned forward to peer at her intently. "What is wrong with your face?"

Without volition, her hand flew up to cover her jaw. "Nothing."

"Mor."

"Ja, so I have the toothache." She glared at him. "It will go away."

"You want I should pull it?"

"Hjelmer Bjorklund, you go on home to your wife." She didn't add *who wants you*, but she thought it.

When he went out the front door, she took her fan and returned to the rocking chair on the back porch, mosquitoes or no mosquitoes. Rocking in the dusk, she watched the evening star appear on the western horizon. The sourdough was set for pancakes in the morning, Sam's boy, Lemuel, had brought up water for the garden, and all the rooms were full. What more could she ask for?

"Screens on this porch, that's what." She smacked another mosquito and, wiping the blood off her arm with the corner of a bit of muslin, went back into the hot kitchen. If it didn't rain soon, the gardens would be a waste in spite of all the watering.

"Uff da. So much to think about." She fetched a whole clove from her spice shelf and pressed it on the offending tooth.