

THE SHUNNED

JAY HUGHES

ra^venous
romance

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Ravenous Romance™

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

James Semerad was a checkout boy at Whole Foods Market. He wasn't used to getting checked out himself. But today, that was exactly what was happening.

James was shy, handsome, young, and closeted. *Very* closeted. He was a sophomore at Penn, a smalltown boy from rural Central Pennsylvania. Amish country. His parents were Amish. They'd married young, had James nine months to the day after their wedding. They had raised James and his seven siblings on their meager earnings from farming and Amish carpentry. They had dressed him in plain black pants and homemade white shirts until he was a teenager, when he demanded some goddamn T-shirts and blue jeans. (His parents had allowed him that one luxury in the spirit of *Rumspringa* , but nothing

else.)

And they had taught him nearly from birth that homosexuality was a sin.

That sex with *anyone* was a sin, unless it was a married couple making babies. James's father had beaten James with a switch out by the woodshed any time he'd made the least indication that he was a "sissy," as his father affectionately put it. "The Semerads are real Amish men, James," his father has always said between swats. "Not sissies." He'd repeat the phrase in German, and beat him again.

Small wonder James was closeted. Nobody knew he was gay. Nobody. Sometimes, James wasn't even sure he knew it himself.

But the hot older man standing in James's checkout line seemed to know it. Knew it better than James did himself, in fact. The hottie made a show of looking James up and down the whole time he was ringing him up. When James handed him the credit card slip for his signature, he scrawled his phone number across the top of the receipt, tore the sliver off, and pressed it into James's hand. "Call me," the hottie whispered in his ear before picking up his overloaded shopping bags and heading out to the parking lot.

James flushed. His whole body heated up, and he almost swooned. He had to put both hands on the side of his register to steady himself. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, blew it out. His groin tightened, and he thanked God the checkout counter was well above waist-high. Otherwise, the hunched-over old lady who had just bought out the store's entire stock of bulk organic chocolate would be getting an eyeful.

An openly gay man had openly flirted with James in a public place. While James was working, no less. This was uncharted territory. James was a virgin, a boy in a big city that still frightened him most of the time. Getting picked up by a total stranger wasn't something his childhood back in Loftstad Anabaptist (Amish) Community had prepared him for. James had been raised Amish in virtually every sense of the word. His parents' house had electricity, but it came from a gas generator, not the regular power grid, and they'd used it only to run the refrigerator they used to keep eggs and milk cold for market. Otherwise, their house was lit entirely by candlelight and kerosene lamps. There were no appliances, no motor vehicles, no modern conveniences of any kind. They did barn-raising and quilting bees and made Amish cheese, and they spoke Swiss Low German at home. They'd called their non-Amish neighbors "The English." No television, no radio, no family photographs since Amish/Mennonite tradition banned all artificial images. No music, no video games, no nothing. James had run away after his *Rumspringa* was over, and never looked back.

"Hurry up, sonny," he heard the old woman squawk. "I haven't got all day. I've got thirty-four pans of marble brownies to bake for the church bake sale tomorrow."

James's eyes fluttered back open, and he somehow managed to bring himself back to earth. "Sorry, ma'am," he whispered, and began passing the heavy chunks of shrink-wrapped organic chocolate over the scanner. "I bet your brownies will be good, too. Our organic chocolate is amazing."

"It better be," the old woman snapped. "It's goddamn expensive. I'm only buying it because my husband can only eat organic food now. The pesticides aggravate his heartburn."

"Pesticides are bad for everybody," James said, and finished ringing up the order. "That'll be sixty-seven dollars, eighty-three cents. And worth every penny, I promise."

The old woman muttered a few swear words under her breath, and pulled out four crisp twenty-dollar

bills from her pocketbook. "Highway robbery," she growled.

"Yeah, they don't call us 'Whole Paycheck' for nothing," James said with a chuckle. "But pesticides and GMOs are very bad for you. It's worth the extra money to protect your health." He wrapped up the order into two heavy brown paper shopping bags. "Do you need any help getting these out to your car, ma'am? I'd be happy to carry them for you."

And yes, he *was* happy to carry them for her. But not because he was into helping out grumpy old ladies. Because there was still a chance he might be able to catch hottie in the parking lot.

The old woman smiled, revealing tobacco-stained dentures. "That would be nice, hon," she said, giving James a little wink. "And I'll make it worth your while, too."

All right, so now two people in a row had checked him out in the checkout line. Today was shaping up to be a productive day.

James locked down his register and picked up the two heavy shopping bags. "Just lead me out to your car, ma'am."

The old woman shuffled along in her heavy orthopedic shoes, traveling at the top speed of your average snail. It took her almost five minutes just to get out the front door.

Oh well, so much for finding the hottie. He was probably long gone by now.

They finally arrived at an ancient Dodge Dart. The old woman keyed open the rust-flecked trunk, and raised it with great effort. "Just toss 'em in there, sonny," she squawked. James obeyed, and even shut the trunk when he was finished for good measure. Anything for a decent tip.

The old woman pressed a quarter into his palm. "For your trouble, hon," she croaked, then got into her car and drove away.

James couldn't help but laugh. Who really gave quarter tips these days? People who were stuck in the Dark Ages, that's who. He should know. He came from a long line of people who were stuck in the Dark Ages.

Just for kicks, James scanned the parking lot, searching for the hottie. There was probably no chance at all of finding him now, but—

But there he was. Leaning against his blue-and-white Cooper Mini convertible. Waiting for him.

"Hello, gorgeous," Hottie said as James sauntered up. He oozed confidence, sensuality—two things James had never possessed, let alone expressed in public.

"Um, hi," he stammered. "I'm James."

"I know. I read your name tag."

James felt himself blush. He'd never exactly been comfortable in his Whole Foods uniform and apron, on display at the front of a busy store, wearing a name tag that announced his presence to the world. He'd grown up as a plain, anonymous Amish boy. A plain, anonymous Amish boy who'd learned to be ashamed of what he truly was. And yet here he was, living on his own in the big city, flirting with a

gorgeous man in a parking lot. “I uh-hh, I’ve never really done anything like this before.”

“Oh honey, you’re young,” Hottie said with a chuckle. “There’s probably *a lot* of things you’ve never done before.” Hottie paused, licked his lips, and winked at him. “I’d like to change that.”

James reached into his pocket, pulled out the crumpled slip of paper Hottie had handed him back in the store. Across the top was a phone number, but no name. “What’s your name?” he blurted, still completely unsure of himself.

“What do you want it to be?”

He balked. “You’re not one of those, uh-hh, what do you call it? Hustlers?”

“Oh no, hon, I’m totally legit,” Hottie said. “I’m a lawyer.”

“Okay. Then why—“

“I’m just offering you a good time, James. No strings attached.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Unless, of course, you *want* strings attached.”

“To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what I want,” James admitted. “I’m umm, I’m kind of new at this.”

“Everybody’s gotta start somewhere. What time do you get off?”

James glanced at his watch. Three-twenty. “At four. My shift’s almost over.”

“Well, none of my stuff is perishable,” Hottie replied with a smile. “I can wait. See you back here at four, then.”

“Okay. Well, umm, see ya.”

James bolted back inside, his heart racing.

What on earth had he just done?

Chapter Two

James counted the minutes until the end of his shift. It was Saturday afternoon, and he had no classes until Monday morning. His homework was light and could wait until tomorrow. It was still early in the term, he had only two papers due, and midterms weren’t for another few weeks. He had plenty of reasons to just take it easy and blow off some steam. But he still felt uneasy.

James had never really had any fun in his entire life. The Amish weren’t exactly known for having fun, after all. The Amish were just about as serious and conservative as people got. He’d been raised to believe that having any kind of fun was a sin. To the Amish, life was supposed to be hard and miserable; true joy came only in the afterlife. Any joy you felt while on Earth was supposed to make you feel guilty.

That kind of guilt complex was pretty hard to shake, and it had stayed with him despite leaving his family and the Community behind three years ago. It also made it damned hard for James to enjoy himself no matter what he did.

James had run away from home in search of the joy he'd never had growing up, but now that he was out in the great big world, he didn't even know how to let loose and relax. He was always looking over his shoulder, half expecting his gray-bearded father to be there, frowning and holding a switch.

And now here he was, winding down the last few minutes of his shift, contemplating having fun with a total stranger. A very new, exciting, *intimate* kind of fun. The kind of fun his body had secretly desired for as long as he could remember.

It scared the living shit out him.

James rang up his last customer, shut down his register, and balanced out his cash drawer. He punched out his time card and changed out of his Whole Foods uniform into jeans and a loose white polo shirt. Though it had been three years since he'd donned the handmade "plain" clothes of his Amish heritage, modern clothes still felt awkward on him. He didn't know how to put colors together or how to shop; he'd never learned how. He stuck to jeans, black pants, and white shirts, since that required as little thought as possible. He'd really never learned how to shave properly, either. He'd had to teach himself with a cheap Bic disposable he'd bought out of a vending machine at the bus station the night he ran away, tearing his face to ribbons in the process. Growing up Amish meant he'd missed out on learning all the little things that everyone else took for granted.

James was young, inexperienced, a fish out of water. He didn't know how to dress, how to flirt. He hadn't the foggiest idea how to behave on a date with another man. And yet here he was, about to go on a date with a hot, sophisticated older man. A man who was out of the closet, who flaunted his gayness in public. On top of all of that, he was a lawyer. Something James hoped to be himself someday.

Either today was the luckiest day of his life, or he was in way over his head. Probably a little of both.

He gave his boss a nod goodbye and headed out to the parking lot. Hottie was still there, leaning against the hood of his Mini, reading a copy of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "Well, look what the cat dragged in," he said, looking James up and down. "Or rather, out."

James panicked, glanced quickly over both shoulders. "Shhhh," he begged. "I'm not, um, you know—"

"Out?" Hottie finished for him, raising his eyebrows. "Yeah, I sort of figured. Hence the pun."

"I gotta be honest," James said, running a nervous hand through his closely cropped auburn hair. "I'm really not comfortable talking out in the open like this."

"Wow, you *are* wet behind the ears," Hottie said, folding up his newspaper. "Why don't we just hop in my car and take a little drive? Unless you'd prefer we take separate cars over to my place? I live out on the far north end of town, along the Main Line."

"I, uh, I sort of don't have a car right now," James admitted. He wasn't about to admit he didn't have a driver's license, either. "I just live a couple of blocks from here, in student housing. Nontraditional student housing, anyway, not the regular dorms. I'm a first-year at Penn."

"A nontraditional first-year, huh?" Hottie cast a glance at James, obviously sizing up his age. "You can't

be that much older than your average freshman. How'd you work that out?"

"Kind of a long story."

Hottie smiled. "Great. I love long stories. You can tell me on the way." He unlocked the passenger-side door of the Mini and held it open for James, who hesitated a moment, then stepped inside.

"Drive'll be about an hour, in traffic," Hottie said as they pulled out of the parking lot. "So feel free to spin your yarn as long as you want."

"Do you always drive an hour out of your way for groceries?" After growing up in The Community, as he called it now, James was accustomed to taking his time doing just about everything, but he knew the rest of the world usually didn't bother.

"I do when I need organic tomatoes, basil, and a decent aged Parmesan for my world-famous chicken Parmigiano," Hottie replied. "I only use organic when I'm cooking for guests. And I've found that the downtown Philly Whole Foods is a great place to find potential guests, if you know what I mean."

"What about the free-range chicken?" James asked, trying to change the subject off flirting, at least for a minute or two.

"I got that covered. There's a small organic poultry farm out my direction that supplies me whenever I need anything."

"Supplies you? Do you own a restaurant? I thought you were a lawyer."

Hottie laughed. "Oh, sweetie, *I am* a lawyer. I just happen to be a lawyer with a culinary arts degree. Law is my second career. Executive chef was my first one. Used to head up the kitchen at Bene Blanco in New York. I was rated four stars by Zagats for five straight years. But I gave that up when my ex and I started fighting too much over the restaurant profits. We broke up over it eventually. I sold my share in the restaurant back to him and used the money to go to law school."

"Which law school? Penn?"

"Nope. Harvard."

James choked. Hottie was a Harvard man? Okay, so now he was officially *inway* over his head. Drowned, even.

"Don't let my pedigree intimidate you," Hottie said, taking his hand off the gearshift long enough to pat James's knee. "You don't have to be that smart to go to Harvard Law. You just have to know the right people."

James flushed. That last remark hit a nerve. James didn't know anyone. Not in the real world, anyway. Hell, he still didn't know too much about how the real world actually worked.

Hottie picked up on James's tension right away. "Hey, kiddo, relax." He stopped the car at a red light, reached an arm behind him into the tiny cubbyhole that passed for the Mini's backseat, fiddled around in a small cooler, and produced two chilled bottles of Evian. "Here, take a load off. You'll at least need to wet your lips if you're gonna tell me your life story."

James popped open the Evian and took a long sip. "All right. But first you have to tell me your name."

The light turned green, and Hottie downshifted the Mini as he sped through the intersection, heading for the highway. "Fred. Fred Billingsley. Of the Main Line Billingsleys." He cocked his head at James and winked. "Sweetie, you have officially snagged yourself a blue-blooded piece of the American aristocracy. I'm the last surviving member of the Billingsley family, a long line of bluebloods that owned most of the Eastern Seaboard at one point or another. First shipping, then railroads, then steel mills. Then the steel mills tanked, so the last couple of generations have been living off the interest."

"Huh?"

Fred just kept right on talking. "The Billingsley men were a randy band of old queens that married for convenience and procreated solely for the good of the family business." He laughed. "Except for me, of course. The line stops with me, my friend, and I like it that way. I've never been that interested in being an aristocrat. Though I do love to spend money, so it certainly helps that I have some. But I can't say I've ever liked playing the role of a snob. I love people. I couldn't care less where anybody went to school or what they do for a living, as long as they like to have a good time. So, what do you think, James? Have you ever dated an aristocrat before?"

James gave Fred a blank look. "I'm sorry, but I honestly wouldn't know the difference between an aristocrat and a hole in the ground."

"Perhaps I should rephrase that," Fred said. "Have you ever dated *anyone* before?"

"No to both questions," James murmured, mortified. "Truth be told, I'm Amish."

Fred almost lost control of the car. "You're *what*?"

"Amish."

"You're *Amish*?" Fred sputtered. "As in, straw hats, and buggies, and barn raisings, and weird religion, and no TV?"

"Yep."

Fred gave an ecstatic sigh. "Oh. My. God. I have hit the mother lode."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, picking up a cute closeted virgin is every gay man's fantasy. But a cute, closeted, *Amish* virgin? Oh sweet Jesus. That's got to be the Holy Grail of gay fantasies."

"Holy Grail?"

Fred laughed. "Oh, I forgot. You're Amish. So you probably don't even know what the Holy Grail is. It's a Catholic thing. Um, well, never mind." He laughed harder as he merged the Mini onto the expressway. "I guess I've probably scared the living daylights out of you by now, huh James?"

"Yeah, pretty much. By the way, how did you know I was a virgin?"

"Sweetie, it's only written all over your face."

James slumped down in his seat. Suddenly he felt very small.

Fred patted him on the knee. "Don't worry, hon. I won't put the moves on you if you don't think you're ready for that yet. But if and when you are. . ."

"I'll, uhh, I'll let you know."

"Sounds like a plan. So, James the Amish Virgin Boy, aren't you going to tell me the rest of your life story?"

"There's not a whole lot to tell, really. I grew up Amish. I hated it. My dad used to beat me. I think he always knew I was gay and tried to beat it out of me."

"Oh my God, James, I'm so sorry." "It's okay."

Fred's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. "No, it's not okay. It's horrible for any kid to have to go through that in this day and age."

James sighed and shook his head. "What matters is I got out. I ran away from home when I was sixteen. Hitchhiked as far as Lancaster, then I got a bus ticket for Philly. I lived at the Philadelphia bus station for two months before a social worker found me and got me into a halfway-house program for runaway Amish youth."

"Runaway Amish youth, huh? So does that mean there are a lot of you Amish boys running around town?"

"More than you might imagine. And not just boys. Girls too. I lived at the halfway house for a couple of years, worked odd jobs, studied for my GED. As soon as I had my GED I started applying to colleges, and I got into Penn. Sort of faked my way in, really. Being bilingual in English and German helped. I'm majoring in German literature, with a minor in history, and I'm on a partial scholarship. The job and student loans pay for the rest."

"Well, James, I've gotta say I'm impressed. You're nothing if not resourceful. A lot more than just a pretty face." Fred glanced at him and smiled. "But let's not forget the pretty face. When God made you, honey, He broke the mold."

"Thank you. I think." A little more at ease now, James polished off his Evian and took a moment to stretch out his legs. "So, you're a lawyer, huh? What specialty?"

Fred downshifted the Mini, accelerating to pass a semi truck. "Criminal."

"Criminal? Really? You're a defense lawyer?"

"Yep. I get the bad guys off, baby. And in more ways than one."

James scoffed. "No, seriously now. What specialty are you, really?"

"I already said. I'm a high-priced criminal defense lawyer. My specialty is white-collar crime, but I'll take whatever unsavory business comes through the door. I might be a blueblooded Main Line aristocrat, hon, but I spend money like water and the Billingsley family fortune isn't gonna last forever."

“Have you defended any murderers?”

Fred coughed. “All of my clients are innocent until proven guilty.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Fred cast his eyes sideways at James. “Spoken like a true barrister. Methinks you might be considering a law career yourself?”

“You guessed right,” James replied. “Though I won’t be touching criminal law with a twenty-foot pole, thank you very much. I’m more interested in family law. Child advocacy, minor emancipation, things like that.”

“Sounds like a very personal choice.”

“It is.”

“Well, child advocacy law is a very noble ambition, James, but it’s not gonna pay your student loans. Or any bills at all, for that matter. Most of that kind of work is done *pro bono*. So you’ll have to come up with some other area to focus on in order to survive.” Fred switched from the passing lane back to the center one. “If you want family law as a specialty, there’s good money in divorce law. Maybe by the time you get out of law school gay marriage will be legal. You could be a gay divorce lawyer! With the way us boys are always dumping each other, you’d make a fortune.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“It’s always nice to have dreams,” Fred mused. “That’s all I’m saying.”

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. The heavy downtown traffic slowly began to thin as the landscape shifted from urban concrete to green, leafy suburbia. James gazed in awe out the window as they passed sumptuous greystone estates set back on tree-covered hills overlooking the highway. “So, uh, this is the Main Line, then?” James asked. “I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never been out this way.”

“Yes, this is the Main Line. Gets its name from the commuter rail that runs out here. It was the first major commuter rail in the United States, after the New York subway. It was state of the art, for its time, anyway. The rich always require the best transportation, you know.”

“I suppose. I don’t really have any experience with rich people.”

“Seems to me you don’t have much experience with anything,” Frank remarked as he pulled into an exit lane. “Then again, I don’t know anything about being Amish, so we’ll call it even.”

“Thanks.”

“Here’s where we get off. I live pretty far out, so it’s another twenty minutes or so before we get to Billingswold.”

“Billingswold?”

“That’s the name of our family estate. We have two hundred and fifty acres. I’m the seventh-generation

Billingsley to own it. And since the buck stops with me, I'll also be the last."

"Two hundred and fifty acres, huh? So you're a farmer too?"

Fred laughed. "Good God, no. Billingswold is two hundred and fifty acres of woods and manicured strolling gardens. Though I fired the gardener last month, so things are getting a little overgrown until I can find a new one. Hope you don't mind."

"I grew up on an Amish farm. Our gardens were for raising food and dumping pig slop, not strolling. I'm sure I won't notice a difference."

"I think we're going to get along just fine, Amish Boy," Fred said as he turned down a narrow country road.

"Please don't call me that. I hate being Amish."

Fred reached over and squeezed James's hand, sending electric charges up and down his spine in waves. "I'm sorry I keep bringing it up," Fred said. "I just can't help it. It makes you so much cuter."

"If you say so."

They drove a long, windy road through thick evergreen woods. The paved surface soon ran out, replaced with loose gravel. The woods began to thin, and they passed a carved wooden sign that read BILLINGSWOLD: PRIVATE PROPERTY. TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT.

That got a chuckle out of James. "Do you really shoot trespassers on sight?"

"Oh no," Fred replied. "That sign is left over from my great-grandfather's time. Eugene Billingsley. He was a big game hunter who hung out with Teddy Roosevelt. Grandpa Eugene was also a bit of a nut job. He died when one of his elephant guns backfired in his face. Not pretty."

"Wow. I don't know anything about my ancestors. The Amish don't believe in keeping family records past one generation. They say it's a sin of pride to do so."

"I thought the Amish believe *everything* is a sin," Fred mused. "At least that's the main takeaway I got from watching the movie *Witness*. That, and for a man as cute as Harrison Ford to be straight is a total waste."

James didn't say anything. He'd watched a few movies since leaving The Community, but *Witness* wasn't one of them. Though he'd heard plenty about that film from the other Amish runaways at the halfway house. They all thought it was a sappy crock of shit, not like real Amish life at all. For his part, James didn't want to watch movies about what it was supposedly like to be Amish. He already knew what it was like to be Amish, and truth be told, he wouldn't wish it on anyone.

The Mini finally pulled into a wide circular driveway in front of the biggest, fanciest house that James had ever seen. Well, it wasn't a house as much as it was a castle, complete with towers, arched windows, and turrets. "Well, this is it," Fred said, parking the car. "Home sweet home."

"Wow. This place is huge. Do you really live here all by yourself?"

"Not completely," Fred said, stepping out of the car. James opened the passenger side door and did the

same. "There's the butler, the housekeeper, the cook, the maintenance engineer, my private secretary, and a couple of paralegals I bring on board whenever my caseload gets busy. There's usually a gardener/groundskeeper too, along with his family, but I fired him last month. I caught him stealing cuttings from the family rose bed and selling them at a nursery in town. The Billingsley roses are unique, you know. Great-Grandmother Hazel even got some of them patented."

"You can patent a plant?"

"You can patent just about anything. You'll learn all about patents and trademarks in your second year of law school. I hate patent law, by the way. Boring as hell, though I hear it can be lucrative." Fred pulled the two shopping bags out of the Mini's tiny trunk, handed one to James. "Here, make yourself useful. Since I'm cooking, we'll go in the servants' entrance. That's the only way to get to the main kitchen."

"Why?" Having spent most of his childhood in his mother's rustic Amish kitchen, James found that unfathomable.

"Billingswold Hall was built in Victorian times, back when we aristocrats weren't supposed to cook, or even come in direct contact with the servants. I keep meaning to knock that damn extra wall down, but I just never seem to get around to it."

James followed Fred down a narrow stone path that wound through an immaculate rose garden. If it was overgrown, James didn't notice. In fact, it looked like something out of a Hallmark card: all climbing flowered vines and delicate rosebuds covering everything, mysteriously even now in the late-autumn chill.

"I have ground heaters," Fred said, as if reading James's thoughts. "I can keep things in bloom all the way past Thanksgiving if I want."

The garden path ended at a heavy wooden door. Fred fished a key out of his pocket, opened the door, and they went inside.

The main kitchen was a chef's dream, like something you'd see on a TV cooking show, or perhaps in a five-star restaurant. Thick granite countertops, Kraftmaid walnut cabinets, a stainless steel Viking range with at least twelve gas burners, and a matching double-oven mounted in the wall. Dozens of gleaming copper-bottomed cooking pots and pans dangled from a rack mounted to the ceiling. There were more racks mounted to the wall, filled with every cooking implement imaginable. It was a far cry from James's mother's rustic Amish kitchen, which contained nothing but a handmade butcher-block table, four chairs, an icebox, an ancient Frigidaire that ran on a kerosene generator for the eggs and milk the farm produced for local supermarkets, and a century-old wood-burning cookstove. His mother's cooking utensils had consisted of a few wooden spoons, a single ceramic mixing bowl, and three cast-iron pots. "This is amazing," James said, awestruck.

"Really? You think so? I've been thinking about replacing the cabinets. They're ten years old, starting to get a little out of style."

James scoffed. "Are you kidding? This kitchen looks like something out of a magazine. Don't change a thing."

"All right, I won't." Fred began to unpack the grocery bags, setting their contents on the granite countertop. "So James, do you know how to chop veggies? Or was that strictly women's work back on the farm?"

"I can chop. I used to help my mom a lot in the kitchen." *And got beaten for it ,too* , he added silently to himself. James's father hadn't taken too kindly to his eldest son doing women's work once he got past the age of six or seven, though his mother had always appreciated the help. James cherished the memory of watching his mother chopping onions, kneading biscuit dough, and churning butter in their tiny ramshackle kitchen, the strings on her starched white bonnet hanging loose while she worked. But he wasn't about to share that part of his childhood with Fred. Not yet.

He picked up a tomato and an onion. "So, uh, how do you want these chopped?"

"Chop them both fine, then mix the pieces in this," Fred instructed, handing him a heavy glass bowl. "Then do the same with the fresh basil, but keep that separate. Bring it all to me when you're done. I'll take care of chopping the garlic. I have to do it a certain way or the marinara sauce won't turn out right."

"Whatever you say." James went to work, chopping the veggies in the skilled, speedy fashion his mother had taught him from an early age. The tomatoes and onions were perfectly diced in no time.

Fred nodded his approval. "If I didn't know better, with that chopping arm I'd swear you were a chef."

"We Amish might be screwed up in most ways, but we know how to cook. At least, our women do. And our sissies, too."

"Sissies? Meaning you?"

"Yeah."

Fred sighed and shook his head. "You must have had a very hard time growing up."

James shrugged. "Most gay kids do, don't they?"

"Not me. Then again, I came from a very long line of randy old queens. My dad and grandpa were just as gay as me. They just happened to marry and reproduce for the sake of the family line."

"Coming from a long line of randy old queens who reproduce is about as weird as growing up Amish."

Fred laughed. "Touche. From one oddball to another."

"You got that right." James finished chopping the last of the basil and dusted off his hands. "Anything else I can do to help?"

"No, I can take it from here. Just sit back and relax. Dinner will be ready in about an hour. Would you like some wine? I've got some great 1998 Chianti."

James wasn't sure what 1998 Chianti was, but whatever it was, he was sure it was very good. And very expensive. Fred seemed to have ample supplies in both categories. "Sure, I'll try some. But go easy. I don't have much in the way of alcohol tolerance."

"Well, then, I guess it won't take much to get you drunk," Fred said. "I only drink the best Chianti, and the best Chianti will get you good and drunk in a hurry."

"You aren't *trying* to get me drunk, are you?" James said, a hint of mischief in his voice. He was finally letting a little of his guard down. Not much, just a little.

“Of course I am,” Fred teased. “But don’t worry, I’ll be even drunker than you in no time. I can only cook my chicken Parmigiano while under the influence.” With that, Fred opened a huge stainless-steel door that led into a walk-in refrigerated wine chiller, and came back carrying a straw-bottomed bottle of Chianti and two chilled glasses. “Nothing but the best for my guests,” he said, and poured them both brimming glasses. He handed one to James and clinked his own glass against it. “Bottoms up. It’s better when you shoot it.”

James hesitated. “You know, I’m not even twenty-one yet. Isn’t this against the law?”

“We’re on private property,” Fred replied. “What happens here, stays here. Just like Vegas.” He downed his Chianti in one gulp, then poured himself another. “Ah, that’s the stuff. But I’ll need at least two more shots before I’m sufficiently plastered to cook you my famous Parmigiano.” He downed a second shot, then a third. “Ah, and it’s going straight to my head. Perfection.”

James hadn’t touched his Chianti yet, though the deep woodsy-grape aroma tickled his nostrils with pure sensuality. James didn’t know much, but he knew he found Fred incredibly attractive. And he also knew if he downed that Chianti, he might end up doing something he wasn’t quite sure he was ready to do.

It was a risk he was willing to take. Imitating Fred, he downed the strong Chianti in one gulp. It burned going down in a strange, delicious way, making him feel slightly giddy. Before he knew it, his head was spinning.

“Would you like another?” Fred asked, already slurring his words. He poured him another glass without even waiting for an answer. “Drink up. I like whoever eats my Parmigiano to be at least as drunk as I am. Preferably more so.”

James shrugged, his whole body already warming from the first shot. “Sure, why not?” He was already in way over his head. Why not go even deeper? This time he sipped the Chianti, but that did little to delay what the strong wine was doing to his body. He watched Fred prepare the chicken as the room began to spin around him. His vision grew fuzzy around the edges, and before he knew it, he’d lost all concept of time and space.

James was drunk—*really* drunk—for the first time in his life. And not only that, he was alone with another gay man for the first time in his life. In a situation like this, things could only end one way.

Suddenly, James began to feel very sleepy. He settled back against his cushioned chair, thinking he’d take just a minute to rest his eyes. Before he knew it, he felt Fred tapping him hard on the shoulder. “James? You all right?”

He awoke with a start. The room was still spinning, though not quite so much as before. “I guess I dozed off.”

“Good. I thought maybe I managed to give you alcohol poisoning,” Fred said. “I was about to call the life squad.”

“I’m okay,” James stammered. “Just not used to drinking alcohol, is all.”

Fred guided him over to the kitchen table, which was draped in a starched white tablecloth and set with fine silver and Wedgewood. “Well, I think we just need to get some good food in that tummy of yours to soak up all that booze,” he said. “Dinner is served, and not a moment too soon.”

Fred whisked a china platter piled high with chicken Parmigiano, fresh fettuccine, and steamed asparagus onto the table, then served a hearty helping onto the Wedgewood plate sitting in front of James. There was a basket of fresh-baked rolls, a green side salad, an overflowing bowl of antipasto. James noticed the Wedgewood was a delicate white porcelain pattern ringed in twenty-four-karat gold, and the utensils were heavy solid sterling, not the rough handmade stoneware and the hand-forged iron utensils that had graced his mother's rustic Amish table. He took a bite of the chicken Parmesean, and the incredible mix of rich flavors—so unlike the bland Amish food he'd been raised on or the cheap dorm-cafeteria fare he lived on now—made his whole body shudder with delight. It was far and away the most sumptuous meal James had ever experienced.

But he and Fred barely had a chance to enjoy three bites of their meal before all hell broke loose.

A shrill alarm sounded, threatening to burst James's eardrums. Then there was the rapid, loud report of something that sounded a lot like machine-gun fire.

Fred jumped up, then leaped over the table and landed on top of James, sending his chair backwards as they both tumbled to the tile floor. "Hit the deck!" Fred shouted.

"What the—" was all James managed to get out before Fred clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Shh," Fred whispered. "We're gonna crawl to the panic room. We'll be safe from the gunfire there. It's bulletproof." As if on cue, a bullet shattered the main kitchen window. Shards of glass flew everywhere, settling into the melting mozzarella on the chicken Parmagiano, the wineglasses, the basket of rolls. So much for a finely prepared meal.

All the color drained from James's face. "*Panic room?* Jesus Christ! What the hell is going on?"

"I'll explain once we're locked in. I hope you can crawl fast. Follow me, and for God's sake, *stay down!*"

Chapter Three

After what seemed like an eternity of military-crawling along the cold marble kitchen tile, then a long carpeted hallway, they finally made it to the panic room. Not a moment too soon, either. Just as they turned the corner into the narrow passageway that led to a steel-reinforced cell with magnetically sealed doors, a stray bullet shattered another window, and lodged itself in the elaborately paneled wall just inches from James's head.

James had never been inside a bona fide panic room before. Hell, he only knew what a panic room was in the first place because he watched that old Jodie Foster flick *Panic Room* one night at the student center on campus. This panic room looked remarkably like the one featured in the movie, in fact.

"I modeled my panic room on the one in the Jodie Foster movie," Fred said, as if reading his thoughts once again. "Even had the set designer on the film consult with the security company who installed it. I love Jodie Foster. If I weren't gay and she weren't a lesbian, I'd totally do her."

James blinked twice. Here they were, dodging bullets in a steel-reinforced security cell, and Fred was talking nonchalantly about sleeping with movie stars. It was like something out of the *Twilight Zone*. The gay *Twilight Zone*.

"All right, so let me get this straight," he said. "You had a panic room built into your house so you could dodge bullets from crazy people, and you thought it would be nice to have it look like the same one Jodie Foster had? As if it's not *totally insane* to have a bulletproof panic room installed in your house in the first place?"

"Precisely," Fred replied, punching some numbers into the security keypad on the wall. A second, thicker set of steel doors slid shut over the first set, just like something you'd see in a science-fiction movie. "When you're in criminal defense law, you have to be willing to take certain precautions. That's another thing you'll learn about in your third year of law school, by the way."

"Who the hell are you defending? Drug dealers? Gangsters? What?"

Fred laughed. "A little from column A, a little from Column B. Plus the occasional murder suspect whenever I need to make a cool million or two."

James put his head in his hands. What the hell had he gotten himself into? What were the odds that the very first time he let a random guy pick him up, he'd end up in a Main Line mansion dodging machine-gun fire? Maybe he would have been better off closeted and miserable back in the Amish village where he grew up.

"You know, this sort of thing doesn't happen every single day," Fred offered. "This is only the second time I've had to use the panic room since I had it installed three years ago."

"*Only* the second time? Do you have any idea how many things are wrong with that statement?"

"All right, I'll concede that it's probably pretty wild to someone who isn't in the line of work I'm in. But most of us criminal lawyers have to deal with shit like this. They even have a seminar on bulletproof panic rooms and Kevlar vests at the Criminal Defense Lawyers Association annual meeting each summer."

The overzealous morals of James's Amish upbringing didn't rear their ugly head very often these days, but he was having a hell of a time getting past the idea of dating a man whose day job required extensive knowledge of bulletproof panic rooms and Kevlar vests. His devout Amish parents had taught him about forgiveness, but they'd also taught him that there were some things that were best left up to God, and forgiving people who dealt in machine-gun fire was definitely something best left up to God. "Does it ever bother you that you're defending murderers?" James asked. "Because somebody just tried to murder the two of us, you know. Was that one of your clients?"

Fred sighed. "Probably. Or rather, probably a colleague of one of my clients. I just defended a guy who ended up getting life in prison without parole, and he has some associates who aren't very happy with me right now."

"Life without parole, huh? And here I was thinking you were a *successful* criminal lawyer."

"*I am* successful. He was facing the death penalty. I got him a deal. Life in prison is a helluva lot better than dead."

"Obviously some people would disagree. Otherwise they wouldn't be trying to kill us right now."

“Technicalities,” Fred said. “Look, James, I’m sorry our date hasn’t exactly gone the way we planned, but we should make the best of it. I just triggered the silent alarm so the cops should be here eventually. But they might not show up right away, and even when they get here, the situation outside might take a while for them to defuse. So it’s conceivable we could be stuck in here for quite a while.” He shot James a wink. “Maybe even all night. Just imagine the things we could do together in here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t imagine much. I’m a virgin.”

“I intend to change that. Right now.” Without another word, Fred leaned forward, took James’s face in both his hands, and kissed him hard on the mouth.

James had never been kissed before. Not by a man. In his fantasies, yes. In reality, no. James was a shy, closeted gay man who didn’t really know what it was like to be gay. Until now. He didn’t quite know what to do, so he just leaned back, relaxed, and took it all in. Which was exactly what it seemed Fred wanted him to do.

Fred gently eased James’s mouth open with his tongue, then began to softly explore its depths. The tip of Fred’s tongue danced along James’s teeth, tongue, the roof of his mouth, the soft pink flesh of his inner cheek. James had never been penetrated by another person in any way before, and the feel of Fred’s soft, warm, wet mouth against his own made him delirious.

They kissed for a long time, until James finally had to push Fred away to catch his breath. His forehead broke out in sweat, his chest heaved, his heart raced. So much was happening at once. No wonder the Amish thought sex was a sin—the feel of another man’s mouth on his body was better than any drug. Mix that feeling with the adrenaline rush he’d just gotten from dodging bullets, and James was higher than a kite.

He could get used to this. He could*definitely* get used to this.

“Lean back,” Fred said softly, easing him down onto the padded panic-room floor. “Don’t worry, we’ll go slow. And if you ever want to stop, just say so.” With that, Fred began to unbutton the fly of James’s jeans. He had some trouble doing it, since James’s cock was so thick and hard against the denim that Fred could barely work the zipper. But he finally succeeded. The very moment that virgin cock popped free of its denim confines and headed straight for the sky, Fred seized his mouth hard and fast upon it. James felt himself transported to another dimension.

James had dreamed of this moment many a time as a plainly clothed Amish teen back in Loftstad, but he never once thought it would become a reality. Let alone that it would happen when he was locked in a bulletproof panic room with machine-gun fire rattling on the other side of a reinforced-steel wall. He’d come a long way from jerking off in his parents’ clapboard outhouse into a stolen copy of *Playgirl*, that was for damn sure.

The feel of another man’s hot, wet mouth on his cock beat the hell out of his own cold, stiff fingers in an unheated outhouse in the dead of winter.

James wasn’t jerking himself off now. He was getting a blow job. And even though he had nothing to compare it to, James knew it was probably the best damn blow job in the history of the universe. And just when he thought it couldn’t possibly get any better, it did.

Fred kept right on sucking and rubbing and blowing his cock, but he took things up a notch by bringing

James's balls into the picture. He kneaded James's balls with his free hand, seeming to know intuitively that they were backed up with almost twenty years' worth of unspent load. Growing up gay and Amish gave you a helluva case of blue balls, something Fred seemed to understand. James closed his eyes, threw his head back, and silently thanked God for letting him live long enough to experience this moment.

The sensations arising from his cock and balls were enough to make James believe once and for all that there really was a God, and that God loved gay men.

James's parents were wrong. Being gay wasn't a sin. It was a state of grace.

But alas, it was over all too soon. Just when James thought he could stay in that state of grace forever, he exploded, filling Fred's mouth with his seed. He came so long and hard, spilled so much of his essence that Fred almost choked on it. Fred had to pull away, take a few moments to compose himself—and yet, James's come kept right on coming, spurting out with such force that it decorated the ceiling.

Fred gasped at the sight, then laughed. "Well, I hate to think what my cleaning lady will think about that," he said.

James managed a laugh himself between his cries of ecstasy. "Wow," he said after his spasms had finally ceased. "Does that happen often?"

"James, honey, I've given a lot of blow jobs to a lot of guys in my time, and I have *never* had to clean come off the ceiling before. That has got to be one for the record books." Fred planted a gentle kiss on his forehead. "And by the way, congratulations."

"For what?"

"I just blew you, honey. So you're not a virgin anymore. Though you've still got a lot to learn. We haven't popped your cherry yet, if you know what I mean."

James knew exactly what that meant. In theory, anyway. Not so much in practice. "I'm not sure I want to go there just yet," he murmured.

"Don't worry, honey. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. It's only fun if you're ready for it."

They didn't speak for a long time then. James's body was still in a state of shock. Blissful shock, to be sure, but still shock. His body felt thick and heavy with the pure, leaden exhaustion that can only come from a perfect orgasm. He'd never gotten that feeling from any desperate, unsatisfying orgasm he'd given himself in his parents' outhouse, or in the designated stall in the communal men's bathroom back at his dorm. No, this was something entirely different. Something special. He needed some time to take it all in, to savor every tiny particle of this perfect moment in time.

Fred seemed to understand. He stretched out beside James, placed his hand softly on the younger man's chest, and kissed the inside of his ear. But that was all. Fred could have taken things further, could even have insisted that James return him the favor of the world's most perfect blow job. But he didn't. He just let James be. And at that moment, that was the greatest possible gift he could possibly give. He honored and respected that it was James's first time.

But not everyone shared that sentiment. The sound of gunfire shocked the both of them out of their state of bliss. And this time, that gunfire was right outside the panic room door.

“Good Christ,” Fred said, jerking bolt upright. “They’ve gotten inside.”

As if to confirm that statement, the heavy steel doors of the panic room began to shake. The left sliding door dented inward as if someone was trying to get in with a battering ram.

Fred dashed to the far side of the panic room and threw open a tall metal cabinet. Inside that cabinet were two assault rifles. He cocked them both, then handed one to James. “I hope you know how to shoot,” he said.

“I know how to hunt squirrels and rabbits with an air rifle,” James offered. “That’s all we were allowed to do back in The Community.”

“Good enough for me,” Fred said, cocking his own gun. “Because when that door breaks down, I want you to shoot like hell.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said a voice that squawked over a tiny loudspeaker mounted on the panic room’s security panel. “This is Officer George Grenwell of Philadelphia SWAT. We’ve got the situation under control out here. Just sit tight, and we’ll get you out of there in no time.”

“Hurry the hell up, goddamn it!” Fred shouted at the intercom. He kept his rifle locked and loaded, pointing the barrel at the steel double doors, which were getting decorated with more and more dents as time went on. “Somebody’s trying to bust down the doors!”

Several loud shots boomed just outside the panic-room doors, followed by silence. James stood stock still, clutching the assault rifle. He stared down at the heavy weapon, not understanding how or why he’d come to this pass.

“All clear!” shouted a voice just outside the dented steel doors. “Mr. Billingsley, this is Officer Grenwell. Your security password is Horny Toad.”

Fred carefully set down his rifle, then took the other one out of James’s hands. He punched a numeric code on the security keypad, unlocking the doors. They opened partway, but the dents made them stick. “Come on in, George,” Fred called out through the small opening. You’ll have to open the doors manually. The mechanism is stuck.”

Two thick, meaty hands appeared around the edges of the steel doors, and with a deep, manly grunt, those hands forced them open. On the other side of the doorway stood a barrel-like man in full SWAT gear. “Hello, Fred. Ya know, it’s a good thing you made that nice big donation to the Fraternal Order of Police last year. Otherwise my SWAT guys might not have been too keen about fishin’ mafiosos outta your house. Most cops don’t like mob lawyers much. Anyhoo, here’s your problem.” The SWAT officer pointed at the floor beside him with the butt of his own assault rifle. The bloody, bullet-ridden body of a middle-aged Italian man in an expensive suit lay at his feet. “Looks like Vito ‘The Onion’ Grenada wasn’t too happy about the plea deal you worked out for his brother. We got three of his henchmen out in the paddywagon, too. Full o’ holes, but all still breathin’.”

Fred sighed and shook his head. “I might have known he was responsible. Though it’s not usually his style to go out on hits personally.”

“Well, looks like he took his brother’s sentencing pretty damn personal,” the grizzled SWAT officer said, a thick East Philly accent drawing out the words. “In any case, he’s dead, which makes things a lot

easier for my Organized Crime team. With him dead and his top three guys in custody, we'll be able to round up the rest of his direct reports a lot easier now. And I'm sure that means you'll be defending at least a couple of 'em, too."

Fred's expression was ashen. "I don't know about that. Vito 'The Onion' was pretty high up in The Family," he said. "The fact that he got shot by cops on *my* property is going to put a pretty big target on my back."

"You know what? You're right. I didn't think about that." Officer Grenwell muttered into his shoulder radio. "Yeah, we got 'em out, no major casualties other than the gangster," he told the dispatcher. "But we're still gonna need some backup. And we probably got a 10-36 situation brewing."

"10-36?" James and Fred said in unison.

"That's cop speak for Witness Protection," the cop explained. He pointed a leather-gloved finger in James's and Fred's direction. "Looks like the two of you are gonna hafta go into it."

Chapter Four

James and Fred were in the back of a police cruiser, heading for the local FBI office. "I'm sorry to be turnin' you both over to the feds, Fred, but Witness Protection is outta my jurisdiction," Officer Grenwell said, still hunkered down in his heavy SWAT gear. "Don't worry, though. I know the guys that head up the Organized Crime unit over there, and they'll take good care of you. You won't have to worry about a thing. The Program will keep you both safe until you have to testify."

"Testify?" Fred squawked. "I'm a criminal defense lawyer for the mob, George. You know that. I don't testify for shit."

Officer Grenwell laughed. "Oh, you'll testify, all right. Unless you want to be disbarred and prosecuted for obstruction of justice."

Fred reddened. "George, I'm an attorney. I've never done anything that was in any way illegal, you know that. I've just provided legal counsel—"

"To crooks, mob bosses, and murderers," Officer Grenwell finished for him. "And the FBI is very interested in what you know about The Family. They're prepared to subpoena you, and if you refuse to cooperate, you'll be charged with obstruction."

"They can't do that!" Fred blurted. "Everything I know is protected by attorney-client privilege!"

The cop laughed. "I like you, Fred. Always have. And that's saying something, since I pretty much hate all lawyers. So let me tell you this. If you want to have any kind of a future as a lawyer in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, you'll cooperate. The Feds are good guys, they'll take care of you. Unlike The Family."

"The Family pays well, at least," Fred murmured. "Can't exactly say the same for the Feds."

James bit his lip and stared out the dingy car window. Everything was happening too fast. In one day, he'd managed to lose his virginity, almost get shot to death, and get carted off by the police. What could possibly happen next?

The police cruiser traveled up and down several dark, windy streets on the edge of town until it arrived at a long, low, nondescript building. It had no windows, signs, or other markings, and otherwise resembled an abandoned warehouse. The cruiser pulled into its abandoned, weed-choked parking lot and stopped. "Here we are," Officer Grenwell said. "Next stop's the funny farm, so you boys best get out here. Go right on in the front door, the feds'll be waitin' for ya."

"Aren't you going to follow us in?" James asked.

"Naw. We local cops don't set foot on federal territory if we can help it. Best of luck to you both." The cop popped open the rear passenger door of the cruiser with a lever and motioned for the both of them to get out.

Facing no other choice, Fred lumbered out of the cruiser, and James followed. Against their better judgment, they walked up to the plain white metal door that was the sole entrance into the long white building. "This better not be a setup," Fred muttered. "I'll never be able to live with myself if you end up dead the same day that you lost your virginity."

James didn't say anything. He'd been at a loss for words for quite a while now.

Fred raised his hand to knock on the door, but before he could, it opened of its own accord. A huge man sporting an FBI badge and a leather shoulder holster filled up the entire doorway. "Ah, if it ain't my two newest customers. We've been waiting for you. Come on in."

Fred breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, I guess it's legit," he said under his breath. James still said nothing. Everything he knew about police and FBI agents could be summed up in the four or five *Law & Order* reruns he'd watched back at the halfway house. He'd learned more about modern law enforcement in the past hour than he had in the entire rest of his life. And he had a feeling he wasn't going to escape the law's clutches for a long time to come.

They followed the huge man into the white building, which housed a state-of-the-art FBI surveillance headquarters. Scores of plainclothes agents sat at computer terminals, GPS tracking monitors, listening stations, or stood at large, high tables going over paperwork and wanted posters. None of them took any notice of James or Fred as they passed; the huge agent just led them both through the maze of hardworking G-men until they ended up in a small, airless office. The agent motioned for them both to sit down on two hard metal folding chairs.

"I'm Agent Chalmers," the beefy man said, extending his hand. Fred didn't shake it, but James did. Agent Chalmers reminded him of the Michelin Man; he was huge, roly-poly, pasty white, and didn't appear to have a neck. "I head up the Witness Protection placements for the Philadelphia district. My colleague, Agent Morrison, will be joining us in just a minute. Would either of you like some coffee? Soda? Twelve-year-old scotch?" He laughed awkwardly. "That last one's a joke. We're not allowed to drink on government time."

"I'd really like to get the hell out of here," Fred grumbled.

That got another laugh out of Agent Chalmers. "Well, Fred, you're more than welcome to skedaddle, but I have orders from the top to have you brought into federal lockup under obstruction charges if you

do. Or you can let us place you in the program until it's your day to testify. Your choice."

Fred muttered something unintelligible and stared at the floor.

James decided it was high time he spoke up. "I understand why you need Fred's cooperation, but why am I here? I haven't done anything. I've only known Fred for a few hours, for chrissakes. What could I possibly have done to make you keep me under surveillance?"

"Good question," said a statuesque blond woman who strutted into the room balanced on Italian stiletto heels. Between her gorgeous body and expensive tailored suit, she didn't look anything like an FBI agent, but she had a badge and a gun tucked into a dainty shoulder holster. "I'm Agent Morrison. I'm Chalmers's partner in Witness Protection. Your name is James Semerad, is it not?"

James blanched. "How did you know?"

"We've had a tail on the two of you ever since Fred picked you up back at Whole Foods," she explained. "We thought Fred might have been going into the city to meet up with one of his mob clients, so we followed him in, and kept you both under surveillance the whole time. We also have a bug in his car."

Fred jerked to his feet. "*Abug?* You have no just cause to bug a defense attorney's car! That's illegal!"

"Not anymore," Agent Morrison clucked. "The Patriot Act gives us all sorts of powers, and that's one of them."

"The Patriot Act is unconstitutional, goddamn it."

"The Supreme Court disagrees," was Agent Morrison's terse reply. "But don't worry, we didn't dig up anything good with that bug. At least, not yet. All we do know is, Fred, when you picked up your little Amish boy toy here, you put his life at risk."

"You think I don't know that already?" James snapped. "I just got done being shot at."

"We're not just talking about what happened today," Agent Chalmers put in. "We weren't the only people tailing you, Fred. The Family had a tail on you too. That's how they knew exactly when and where to hit you at Billingswold."

Now Fred was red in the face. "You mean to tell me that you *pigs* knew we were about to be ambushed, and yet you did nothing until after the fact? I could have been killed, goddamn it!" He made a fist, made a motion to strike.

Agent Chalmers held up both hands. "Easy now, Fred. Our guys couldn't keep a close eye on you in full view of the mob tail without blowing cover. We had to pull our guys out of there. But we called the local cops in right away. If the SWATs hadn't gotten there when they did, you two would probably both be dead now."

That seemed to satisfy Fred. But not James. "I still don't see why I'm mixed up in all of this," he said. "And furthermore, *I can't* be. I'm in college. I have papers due, and tests. I'll lose my scholarship if I don't complete my class work on time."

"Losing your scholarship is the least of your problems. The Family has marked you, James," Agent

Chalmers said. "We know that because we had a bug in the mob car that was tailing you, too. For some reason they think you're a member of the Gambini family out of New York, and this afternoon they swore out a hit on both of you. On Fred, for blowing the plea deal and also for associating with a Gambini. And on you, James, for supposedly being a Gambini."

"What the hell's a Gambini? I grew up Amish, goddamn it! I don't know anything about the Mafia!"

Agent Morrison sighed and placed a soft hand on his arm. "We know that, James. That's exactly why you both need to go into the program. And we also think that your Amish origins will come in very handy."

All the color drained from James's face. "What are you saying?"

Agent Chalmers sat down on the edge of the desk. "We know you ran away from the Amish, James, but we think now might be a very good time for you to go back. And Fred is going with you."

Chapter Five

"*What?*" James exploded. "No way! *Nofucking* way! I swore I would never go back, and I never will! I hate them!"

Agent Chalmers placed both hands on James's shoulders. "Calm down. We knew you wouldn't be happy about this, but it's frankly the only way to keep the two of you alive."

"I'd rather be dead than go back to the Amish," James snarled.

Agent Morrison sat down beside James, motioned for him to sit down beside her. "You might find this hard to believe, James, but the FBI has a very good relationship with the local Amish communities, the ones in Lancaster County especially. We've actually placed a number of people in witness protection in various Amish villages, always safely. Even in Lofstad, where you grew up."

"What? But—but that's impossible!"

"Think back, James," Agent Chalmers said. "Do you ever remember a time where someone from another congregation came to stay in your village for a time, only to suddenly leave again a few months later?"

The wheels turned inside James's head. Come to think of it, he *did* remember several people like that when he was growing up in Lofstad. They were always men, and they'd always spoken English only during their stays, because they supposedly came from Amish communities that spoke High German instead of the Low Swiss German dialects his own people spoke, and since the two dialects weren't mutually understandable, it was easier for them to converse in English. The deacons had always introduced them to the village during monthly services, and had always explained that they had gone back to their home villages after they had already left. It had all seemed plausible enough at the time, but—

"Oh my God," he sputtered, realizing. "Those—those people were sent to us by the FBI?"

"The Amish deacons have always been very gracious about accepting our witnesses, and have never blown their cover, either," Agent Chalmers said. "Your own deacon especially, James. Thanks to his cooperation, we've hidden more of our protected witnesses safely in Lofstad than anywhere else."

With that, James fainted dead away.

Fred stared down at his new lover's limp body in shock. "What the hell just happened?"

"Allow me to explain," Agent Chalmers said. "The Amish deacon of Lofstad is James's father."

* * * *

James came to in an empty room, lying on a battered Naugahyde couch. A cool damp cloth rested on his forehead, indicating someone had been in there with him recently, but now he was quite alone.

He sat straight up, saw the room spin around him for a moment while he got his bearings. Just as his feet hit the dingy linoleum floor, the door to the room opened. Fred, Agent Chalmers, and Agent Morrison all filed in. "Feeling better?" Fred asked. "You gave us all quite a scare back there."

James rubbed his temples and said nothing. The less he thought about how his own father was mixed up in this whole mess, the better.

"You're really quite lucky," Agent Morrison offered, placing her petite hand gently on James shoulder. "Not just for escaping the shootout alive, but for who your family is. Nobody can protect you better than they can."

James shot the slim young FBI agent a look that could melt lead. "You don't understand," he snarled. "I hate my family. My father especially. He made my childhood a living hell. Frankly, I'd rather get shot than go back to Lofstad."

Fred gazed at him tenderly. "Don't say that, James."

"You have no idea what we'd be getting into," he shot back. "Two gay men in an Amish village? Do you want to get beaten to death? Because I practically was as a kid. They hate us. They hate everything about what we are and what we represent. I know you modern-day types have this totally romanticized idea of what it's like to be Amish, but let me tell you, it's no bed of roses."

Agent Chalmers cleared his throat. "The FBI's relationship with your father goes back almost thirty years," he said matter-of-factly. "We've sent all kinds of unsavory characters to hide out in Lofstad, and your father never judged them, and has always kept their true identities secret. We've never lost a single witness left under his care. He's got the best record in the program by far."

"What do you mean, 'in the program'?"

Chalmers cleared his throat again, louder this time. "Your father has been on the FBI's payroll since the late 1970s," he said. "And like I said, we've never been disappointed."

James collapsed forward, sunk his head into his hands. All those years his father had lectured him about the importance of living completely separate from the outside world, of never taking handouts or charity or even being on another man's payroll. How his father had taught him that above all, the government was an evil entity that the Community would never, ever be involved with directly. The Amish were

forbidden to vote in elections, to send their children to public school, to take public aid, use public utilities, serve in the military, or otherwise engage with the government in any way. They never even called the fire department—far better to let a barn and its contents burn to the ground than depend on the outside world for anything. The Community paid their taxes as the law required, but that was the extent of their dealings with the government.

The Amish lived completely outside the larger world, or least they were supposed to. And James's father had espoused that view like no one else in the village. Yet this whole time, he had been a fraud. "I'm still having a very hard time with this," was all he could manage to say.

"That's perfectly understandable," Agent Morrison said. "But we have to get the both of you out of here. You're not safe from The Family's assassins here, either. And this is a secret installation. For all intents and purposes, this building is nothing but an empty warehouse. We need to get the two of you safely on your way before our own cover is blown."

Agent Chalmers grabbed James's forearm and forcibly lifted him to his feet. "Come on, you two. Agent Morrison will get the both of you to a safe house, where you'll be briefed and provided with appropriate clothes. Once you're comfortable in your witness personas, we'll get you both off to Lofstad."

"Witness personas?" Fred gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Agent Morrison will explain everything," the fat old agent replied. "Go on now, there's not much time."

Fred and James followed the lithe young woman down a series of hallways until they came to yet another tiny, dusty, airless room. She motioned for the two of them to sit on yet another set of hard metal folding chairs while she made a phone call. "Yeah, I've got them," she said into the receiver. "Yeah. Yeah. Uh-huh. They'll be there by tonight. Very good. Bye."

"It's all arranged," she said. "Fred, you will now be known as Levi Stoltzfus, an Amish man from a community in Maryland. Your community speaks only an obscure dialect of Low German, so that'll be your excuse for speaking only English."

Fred coughed. "How am I going to explain my Philadelphia accent?"

James laughed. "Nobody in my village has ever been more than ten miles from home in their entire lives. Nobody will know the difference. Trust me."

Fred cast a sidelong glance at James. "What about you? You ran away from your village. How are you going to explain why you've come back?"

"Leave that to us," Agent Morrison said. "We've already sent messages to your father that you're to be treated like any other witness under his protection. He won't betray you. The cover story we're going with is that you've decided to return to your home village to reflect on your sins and consider rejoining the Community as a fully baptized and confirmed member."

James choked. "I hope I'm not going to be held to that." "

You won't be. We'll get you both out of there as soon as it's safe for you both to come testify. And your father will agree to let you go. We'll make sure of it. We'll take care of things for you at Penn, too, so you won't lose your scholarship."

“You’d better,” James said, his voice as cold as shaved ice. “When do we leave?”

“Right now,” Agent Morrison said, adjusting her shoulder holster. “An armored car is waiting for you both outside. Someone from the Community will meet you a mile or so outside of Lofstad and provide you with appropriate attire for the village.”

James fingered his chin and glanced at Fred, who had gone pale. “We’re both clean-shaven,” he said. “That’s not accepted of men our age in the Community. How are we going to explain that?”

“We’ve already taken care of that, too,” she replied. “It’s a long drive out to Lofstad, so I suggest you use that time to educate Fred on how to behave like a proper Amish bachelor. Now get going, both of you.”

Chapter Six

Fred and James rode in the back of a sleek black armored Lincoln Town Car with government plates. The drive out to Lofstad would take about three hours, plenty of time for James to give Fred an introduction to Amish culture and manners.

But he wanted none of it. And neither did Fred. Each of them sat on opposite ends of the leather bench backseat, pressed against their respective passenger doors. It was hard to believe that just a few short hours ago, they’d been intimate. Now they both felt like the perfect strangers they actually were. Fred hated James for being his one-way ticket into Amish homophobic hell, and James hated Fred for getting them into this whole mess in the first place. The air between them was frosty as sleet. They couldn’t even bear to look at each other.

The car’s driver, a Secret Service agent in black sunglasses and matching suit, paid no notice to the miniature cold war going on in the back of the car. Nothing fazed Secret Service agents, be it drunken diplomats, sitting presidents frolicking with White House interns, or two gay men about to be plunged into a fundamentalist, ass-backwards prison-town. He drove his passengers in silence for the first thirty miles, then switched on satellite radio. “You boys want some music? I got three hundred channels. Your choice.”

“Do you have a Gay Techno Club channel?” Fred asked, his tone mocking. “If not, I’ll take some Barbra Streisand.”

The Secret Service Agent laughed. He fiddled with the knobs on the satellite radio unit until the throbbing techno bass sounds of Puretone filled the car. “Does that work for you?”

“Perfect.” Fred chuckled. “Now all we need are a couple of Blue Martinis and a drag queen and we’ll be good to go. Right, James?”

James shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I never go to gay bars.”

Fred snorted. “I don’t go to them either, honey. I’m just trying to be funny.”

“Well, you’re not. I hate all those gay stereotypes.”

“Behind every stereotype is a grain of truth.”

“Shut up.”

“You could at least tell me a little about how I’m supposed to act around your people,” Fred said. “Unless you really want me to walk around acting like the flaming gay mob lawyer I actually am.”

James rolled his eyes and kept on staring out the car window. “Here’s something I don’t understand,” he said more to the passing countryside than to Fred. “Why on Earth would the Mafia want to hire a flaming gay lawyer in the first place? Doesn’t the mob hate gays?”

“They do,” Fred replied coolly. “But they hate going to jail even more. Which is where I come in. Or at least, where I *used* to come in.”

“Somehow I think when this is all over you’re going to have to learn to practice another kind of law,” James remarked.

“You’re probably right. Or I suppose I could always open up another restaurant. Which reminds me. What are we going to be eating once we’re in Lofstad? I only eat organic. Anything else upsets my stomach.”

James laughed. “Well, everything there is as organic as you can get. The only kind of fertilizer we Amish use is cow shit. Or people shit, when we need to clean out one of our outhouses.”

“Outhouses? You have got to be kidding.”

“Nope. And don’t expect to enjoy any of the food, either. Amish food is made with fresh organic ingredients, sure, but it’s also about as bland as you can get short of eating cardboard. The Amish believe that enjoying food is a sin. And by the way, alcohol is forbidden.”

Fred put his face in his hands. “Good Christ. I’m not even going to last a day.”

“You’ll get used to it. I managed to survive there for sixteen years, so surely you can manage it for a month or two.”

“Don’t be so sure. If I can’t have my Chianti and Parmagiano I just might waste away and die.”

“Maybe. If I don’t kill you first.”

“What about living quarters?”

“Well, there’s no electricity, except for the generators we use to run the farm refrigerators that keep the eggs and cheese cold for market. No heat besides the fireplace. No running water.”

Fred reddened. “No running water? How will I bathe?”

“You’ll get a bath once a week in a washtub by the stove, need it or not. *Cold* water, by the way. And you’ll have to share the bathwater with at least two other people. If you get dirty in between, too bad. They’ll just send you out to work in the fields. My dad always said that sweat is the best cleanser.”

Fred turned green. "Disgusting."

"Now you know why I left. An Amish village is no place for a queer."

"I'm surprised you survived to adulthood."

James finally turned his face away from the window to look at Fred. His belly warmed as he gazed upon his accidental lover. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't stay mad at him. "There is one nice thing, though."

"What's that?"

"Since we're both single men, we'll probably get to lodge together. We won't be allowed near the opposite sex without proper supervision."

Fred brightened. "Really now? That might just make this all worthwhile."

"Don't get your hopes up too high. Even if it does work out that way, which it might not, my father will be watching us like a hawk. So do me a favor and turn down the flame meter about two hundred notches."

Fred shot James a wicked grin. "Well, then we'll just have to throw him off our trail. How do you suppose we might do that?"

"You could always pretend you're an Amish bachelor who came to Lofstad because you're searching for a bride. But we'd still have to be very, very careful. If we got caught..." James trailed off. He didn't want to think about what might happen if they were caught.

Fred pondered that for a moment. "Are the women in your village good-looking? Could any of them pass for decent drag-queen material at least?"

"Amish women are hideous. They're built like cows from working in the fields, and most of them have faces like horses' asses. It's the inbreeding. There's only so many of us, you know."

"Inbreeding, eh? Then how the hell did you end up so cute?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, then, I'll just have to pick the ugliest one of all and pretend I'm going to marry her. Then the whole village will think I'm a saint."

"No, they'll think you're desperate."

"As long as they don't think I'm gay."

"You and me both," James said. "My father almost beat me to death on more than one occasion, and he only suspected it. He never had any proof."

"Why would he? You were a virgin until six hours ago."

"Don't remind me. All I'm saying is, we have to be very careful. A lot of people on the outside have this

idea that the Amish are peaceful and idyllic people. They're not. Behind closed doors, they can be bigoted and violent. I can attest to that personally."

"Out of the frying pan, into the fire," Fred muttered. "If the Family doesn't kill me, then maybe the Amish will."

"Don't say that. Don't even think it."

The Secret Service agent glanced back at them over his shoulder, seeming to sense they needed some privacy. Without a word, he pressed a button on the dashboard and the soundproof divider between the driver's seat and the rear slid up.

"I wonder how much that guy's seen in his career," Fred mused. "He seems to know exactly when to fade into the background."

"I'm sure I don't want to know," James replied, noticing that Fred's eyes had already taken on a lascivious glow. It was at least another two hours before they reached Loftstad. They were driving along an abandoned country road, and the armored car had tinted windows that were impenetrable from the outside. With the soundproof barrier up between them and the driver, there was nothing keeping the two of them from engaging in some naughty acts. And James knew all too well that given his father's track record of gay-hating violence, it might be the last opportunity they would have to be intimate for a very long time to come. "You know, umm, we could do something back here if you wanted to," he said, almost afraid of the words spilling out of his mouth.

Fred's eyes twinkled. "You read my mind, honey. I'm so glad. I was worried you'd stay mad at me forever."

"Oh, I'm still mad. But I still want you to blow me."

"Then I will," Fred teased. "But only if you blow me first."

"But—but I don't know how!" James sputtered.

"Just do what comes naturally, honey. And take your time. If even half of what you've told me about your people is true, God knows when we'll get a chance like this again." Without another word, Fred unzipped his fly. His already-firm cock popped skyward, and he gently pushed James's head down towards it. "Enjoy it, sweetie," he said. "I promise to return the favor."

Before James knew what was happening, Fred's cock was in his mouth. He tasted the musky, salty taste of lust and pre-come for the first time, reveled in the swell of hard swollen flesh in his mouth as it slipped along his teeth and tongue, tickled the back of his throat, made him almost suffocate with desire. He wasn't sure what to do at first, but Fred helped teach him by raising his hips up and down, up and down, while simultaneously guiding James's head with both his hands, showing him how to match his rhythm. "Oh, James, that's so good," he groaned as they both picked up the pace, their bodies linked in perfect counterpoint. "Yes, yes, yes."

The sound of Fred's groans and cries just made James want to move even faster, even harder. His primal instincts took over; he wanted to make the older and more experienced man completely powerless under his spell, to make him putty in his hands. James had just learned a few short hours earlier what bliss it was to be made love to, but now he was learning it was far better to give than to receive.

He sucked faster, he blew harder, he moved faster and faster. Fred quickened his own pace in response, along with his breathing. He was panting hard now, his heart beating so hard that it visibly thumped against the soft cotton fabric of his polo shirt. He was moaning and crying, digging his fingers hard into James's short curly hair, grabbing it by the handfuls, threatening to rip it from his skull. "Oh, God!" Fred cried just as he came, spurting his seed into James's mouth so hard that all he could do was swallow it.

Fred collapsed forward on top of James, kissing the back of his neck and stroking his hair. "Thank you, honey," he whispered. "That wasso good. Oh my God, you'd never know that it was the first blow job you ever gave. You're a natural."

"Thank you," James answered, sitting up to face him. "It was fun. And I never thought I say this after sucking somebody's cock, but it tasted good, too."

Fred grinned. "Doesn't it, though? Cock is the spice of life, I always say."

"That's an absolutely filthy thought."

Fred punched him lightly in the shoulder. "Well, I'm an absolutely filthy boy. And now, so are you."

James reached out and caressed the side of his face. He had a five o'clock shadow now, and James loved the feel of the rough stubble under his fingers. "So, when do I get mine?"

"Give me a minute or two to catch my breath," Fred sighed, stuffing himself back into his pants. "I can't do the deed again five minutes after somebody blows me. I'm not as young as I used to be, you know."

James tried hard not to sulk. He was already hard, his balls had already gone well over to the blue side. He'd been waiting his whole goddamn life for a blow job, and even if he just had his first one a couple of hours ago, he wasn't sure how much longer he could wait for the second. Especially when the very thought of setting foot back in Lofstad turned his blood to ice.

But it was not to be. The soundproof divider between the driver's and passengers' compartment slid down. "We need to make a stop soon," the Secret Service agent said, his face like set iron, betraying no emotion. If he knew what had just gone on in his back seat, he made no sign. "We're entering Amish country. One of our undercover field agents is going to take over about five miles up, and ferry you both the rest of the way in to Lofstad. You'll make the rest of the trip by buggy, in Amish clothes."

James's heart sank. "But it's at least another two hours to Lofstad by car! How—"

The nameless, faceless government agent raised his hand. "I just got a new set of instructions from headquarters," he said, tapping the small white earpiece in his left ear. "Apparently we have a Mafia tail on us, a few miles behind. My instructions are that you are now to already be deep undercover by the time we cross into Lancaster County."

"Good Christ," Fred murmured. "They've already got a tail on us? There's no escaping The Family anywhere."

"They won't get into Lancaster County," the agent replied curtly. "They won't cross into Amish Country. My fellow agents will make sure of it."

“How?” James and Fred blurted in unison.

“The less you know about that, the better.” The agent switched off the satellite radio. Neither of them noticed; they’d both tuned out the thumping music long before. “Our undercover agent is already heading our way. He’s riding out in his buggy, and he’ll meet us before we cross the border into Lancaster County. He’s deep undercover, by the way. The Amish don’t even know he’s one of us. They know him as Abraham Schwartz.”

James sucked in his breath. “Oh my God. Abraham Schwartz, the mason? Abraham Schwartz, the Lofstad village elder? He’s FBI?”

“No, he’s Secret Service. Has been for more than thirty years. And I think it goes without saying, but Abraham Schwartz is not his real name, and he’s not really Amish.”

“But—but that’s impossible!” James shrieked. “He’s an elder! He leads worship meetings all over Lancaster County! He speaks our language perfectly! He’s lived here almost all his life, ever since he came from the Communities in Maryland to marry! He has a wife and children!”

The Secret Service agent laughed. “Yeah, I know. Like I said, he’s deep undercover. *Very* deep. He’ll get you coached on the rest of your cover stories, and he’ll get you safely to Lofstad. And on the off chance there’s any trouble, he’s armed. Not to mention well trained. He used to guard Presidents Nixon and Ford. Took a bullet for Ford, in fact, which is how he ended up out here.”

James slumped down deep into his seat and said nothing. How could he? His whole world was falling apart. Everything he knew about his people, everything that he’d been taught, everything he’d seen and believed as a youth—it was all a lie. The only question was how deep and how far that lie ran.

* * * *

The armored car turned off the main road and down a narrow gravel side road that was little more than a walking path. After the first few yards, the way was enclosed between layers and layers of thick evergreen trees. The Lincoln bounced and bumped along the rough gravel road for another quarter mile or so, then stopped. “We wait here,” the agent barked at them from the front seat. “Our undercover will be here shortly in his buggy to do the transfer, then you’ll continue the rest of the way to Lofstad on the buggy roads, where you can’t be followed. Except maybe on foot, and my contacts tell me that’s unlikely given the Family’s usual operating procedure.”

“The Family might abandon usual operating procedure in my case,” Fred offered. “In fact, they already have.”

The federal agent left that statement alone; he just fiddled with his earpiece and stared straight ahead.

“The buggy roads, huh?” James scoffed. “All the way to Lofstad? That’ll take all night.”

“It beats a mob bullet in your brain,” the agent remarked. “Do yourselves both a favor and stay in the car until the buggy gets here. This thing is bulletproof, so you’ll be safe inside.”

“Buggies aren’t bulletproof,” James growled. Nobody answered. Everyone just stared straight ahead.

The sun was nearly set. The woods were thick, and underneath the evergreen canopy the air was nearly pitch black; you couldn’t see much beyond ten feet. James peered out into the growing darkness and

could see nothing. Then, far off in the distance, two tiny lights appeared on the horizon. As they slowly grew larger, James recognized them for buggy lanterns. Abraham Schwartz, or the man who called himself that, was approaching.

It had been at three years since James had laid eyes on Abraham Schwartz, but he knew him well. Or thought he had, anyway. There wasn't an Amish man or woman in the whole of Lancaster County who hadn't attended one of Abraham's prayer revivals, or assisted him at a town bricklaying, or met him at a wedding feast or other social occasion. Abraham Schwartz had always been at the head of any and all business and goings-on among the Pennsylvania Dutch for as long as anyone could remember. Everyone had always thought it was because Abraham had been chosen by God to be one of their spiritual leaders. But now James knew it was because he was probably a secret government agent assigned with the task of keeping abreast of all the Pennsylvania Dutch's private business. He wondered how many more of his people might be tangled up in the secret undercover government witness protection program. He wondered how many of his own people might not even be Amish at all.

The buggy slowly made its way towards them through the woods. Almost a full half-hour after the lantern lights first appeared on the horizon, Abraham Schwartz and his buggy, hauled by two fine young black steeds, pulled up. As he watched their approach, James realized with a shudder that even though he'd only spent a couple of years in the modern world, it was going to take him a very long time to get used to the painfully slow pace of Amish life again.

Abraham Schwartz halted his horses and pulled the brake lever on his buggy, then disembarked and tied the reins to a hook on the side of the immaculate, old-fashioned vehicle, its coat of black paint as clean and shiny as a mirror. He wore the trademark black felt hat, gray homespun shirt, and blue overalls of a Lancaster County Amish man. His white beard covered only his chin; his mustache was clean-shaven off in homage to Amish tradition, which considered mustaches a symbol of godless military officers. According to another Amish tradition, his homespun shirt was kept closed with invisible hooks and eyes (buttons were a sign of vanity) and his suspenders were very plain, the same drab gray of his shirt, so much so that they were almost invisible. He looked much older than James remembered; his beard was snow white, his back stooped, his skin like old leather. But otherwise he was trim and reasonably fit, and moved with the swift, proud gait of an Amish man who has spent most of his life laboring hard in the fields and at his chosen trade of bricklaying. No one could ever have guessed he was really a Secret Service agent, least of all the Amish themselves—which James supposed was exactly why the government employed him. He strolled over to the government armored car and rapped on the window.

The agent rolled down the front window a crack. "I've come to pick up the two witnesses," Abraham said, his voice rolling with the familiar Pennsylvania Dutch accent that James had grown up hearing, the same accent he'd spent the past three years trying hard to lose. Either Abraham was an expert at affecting accents, or he'd acquired it unconsciously after decades of living among the Amish. James was sure he'd never know the truth about that, or anything else about Abraham Schwartz, for that matter. The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up at the thought he was handing his life and safety over to a man he now knew to be a fraud. But like it or not, he had no other choice.

Their driver muttered something into a microphone he kept hidden in his front suit pocket, then motioned for James and Fred to get out of the car. "Our undercover will take things from here. Godspeed to you both."

Without a word, James and Fred climbed out of the back seat and followed Abraham Schwartz towards his buggy. He reached behind the lone passenger seat and pulled out a bundle wrapped in black Amish homespun wool. "Your clothes are in here. I have a few extra pairs of boots stashed behind the seat. Try them on and see which ones fit you best. James, I trust you remember how to dress properly as

an Amish bachelor?”

James gave a single nod, keeping his eyes lowered. He couldn't look Abraham in the face. He just couldn't.

“Good. Show our friend here how to assemble himself. I have a false beard he can wear until his own whiskers grow in, too. We can glue that on when you're both dressed. James, you won't need one since everyone already knows you're coming back from The English as a prodigal son, but you'll need to grow your whiskers out eventually.”

“A false beard?” Fred sputtered. “Glue? Now wait just a minute—”

Abraham held up his hand. “You're under the government's protection now, sir, and as the government's main representative of the Witness Protection Program in Lancaster County, you'll do as I say. Go behind the buggy to change. And be quick about it. We don't have a lot of time before your mob tail figures out where we've gone and shoots us all through the skull.”

James grabbed the bundle and dragged Fred behind the buggy. “Strip,” he ordered him.

“James, this is hardly the time or place—”

“Not for nooky, stupid. We need to turn you from Philly mob lawyer into a devout Amish bachelor in search of a bride. Now strip.”

Fred obeyed. Despite the spring evening chill, he was down to his skivvies in less than a minute.

“The underwear, too,” James ordered. “You've got to be Amish all the way down to the skin. And that means you'll wear a wool union suit. A word of warning: it itches like hell. Especially around the unmentionables.” James selected the larger of the two handmade wool union suits—all-over full-body long johns complete with a trapdoor in the seat—and handed it to Fred. “Open the trapdoor, then step into the legs like you would a pair of pants. Then slip the trapdoor over your head and pull on the top part like a sweater. There's not a lot of stretch to this fabric, so do it carefully or you'll rip it.”

“That sounds pretty complicated just for a set of underwear.”

“There's a good reason for that,” James chirped. “The Amish like to make it as difficult as possible for people to get naked.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Fred shimmied out of his boxers and struggled into the woolen long johns. After multiple attempts, he finally got the thing on. “Itchy,” he said, scratching at his crotch. “And in the worst possible places.”

“Good. That means you're wearing it properly.”

Fred groaned as James handed him the rest of his Amish attire piece by piece. “Here are your pants. They're held up by suspenders that clip on underneath. The fly fastens with hidden hooks and eyes, same with the shirt. No buttons allowed in our village—they're a sign of vanity. And those hooks and eyes take a while to do, plus they can rip off if you pull too hard, so be careful.”

Fred mumbled something unintelligible as he tried to work the dozens of hooks and eyes on his homespun garments. “Do you people make everything this difficult?”

“This is nothing. Wait until we hook you up to a plow.”

James stripped down and changed into his own Amish garb quickly, his fingers flying over the tiny hidden hooks and eyes with the dexterity of someone who had grown up dressing himself that way on dark farm mornings, rising at four a.m. to milk the cows and feed the chickens. Two years ago he thought he'd left all of that behind forever. Yet here he was, next to a buggy in the middle of the woods, fastening homespun clothes in the dark and contemplating just what he was going to do now that he was back among the primitive people who had raised him, people who had been hiding a deep and sinister secret from him all along. He wondered how his father would receive him, the wayward prodigal son. He wondered what the rest of the people in his village would think, wondered if his brothers and sisters would be jealous that he'd managed to escape, or if they'd just sit in narrow-eyed judgment of him like everyone else.

He'd know soon enough. Once they were both dressed and decent, James led Fred back around to the front of the buggy. Abraham was waiting with a very realistic-looking false Amish chin beard and a jar of theatrical skin adhesive. He took Fred by the arm and bade him to lean against the side of the buggy. “Hold still while I glue this on. It'll only take a minute. It'll itch for a while, but that'll pass.”

James waited to hear Fred complain, but to his surprise, Fred kept silent. He seemed to finally accept of their not-so-pleasant situation. A fake Amish beard and itchy underdrawers might irritate; the notion of bland food, outdoor privies, and a townload of religious fanatics might be annoying—but it beat the hell out of a bullet to the head. At least for Fred, anyway. James wasn't so sure.

Abraham finished gluing on Fred's beard and came to stand close beside James. “You're to be shunned,” he said low into James's ear.

James's eyes flew wide. Shunnings were a rare event in Lofstad. “Shunned? Fully?”

Abraham sighed. “Yes. Fred—that is, Levi Stoltzfus—shall receive the usual village welcome for prospective grooms searching for brides, but you shall receive nothing. Fred will stay in your father's house as an honored guest. You'll be offered a place to sleep alone in your father's hayloft, and you'll take your meals there too, which will consist of kitchen scraps. Your father has made strict instructions that absolutely no one in the village—including Fred, who must play his role of Levi Stoltzfus to the hilt, which I'll help him do—is to speak to you or convene with you in any fashion until you make a full public repentance and ask for the village to accept you back into the fold permanently.”

“But-but that's impossible! The feds already said—”

Abraham placed a firm hand on James's shoulder. “Never mind what the folks back at headquarters said. This is about what it's going to take for you to have safe harbor in Lofstad. Your father is the head village elder, and what he says goes. I suggest you obey him, or else you'll risk blowing cover for your friend. Not to mention me. I've been deep undercover in Lancaster County for more than thirty years, and I'm not about to let anyone blow it for me now.”

James bit his lip and stared at the ground. “All right. Whatever you say. But when I have to go back to testify, I'm never coming back here.”

Abraham clapped him on the back. “And I wouldn't blame you one bit. Just play the game and keep your nose clean for now. Try to help your friend blend in whenever no one is looking. He's going to need all the help he can get.”

Chapter Seven

They drove on in the buggy late into the night, the horses moving at a snail's pace in the impenetrable blackness of the forested gravel road. The kerosene buggy lanterns did little to light the way, but Abraham seemed to know his way through these woods by sheer instinct. They sat in silence for the first half-hour or so at Abraham's insistence, to help the horses adjust to pulling the extra weight in the dark without getting spooked. Once the horses were settled and comfortable again, Abraham broke the silence. "Fred, your name is now Levi Stoltzfus. So you'll need to get used to answering to it."

"I can get used to anything that doesn't get me killed," he replied.

"Good. So tell me, Levi, what do you know about courting women?"

Fred laughed. "Uhh, nothing."

"So you've never done any courting, then?" Abraham asked.

"Oh, I'm done*plenty* of courting. Just not of women."

Abraham laughed heartily. "Fair enough. Boy, it's been a long time since anybody's openly acknowledged something like that to my face. I've been Amish for too damned long."

"Do you not like pretending to be Amish?" James asked. "That must be hard. You've got a wife and children and everything."

"My wife and kids aren't Amish, either," Abraham said curtly. "We're all undercover."

James gasped. One undercover Amish fraud he could deal with, but a whole*family* of them? It boggled his mind.

"We get paid very well to play our roles," Abraham went on. "And now it's time for the two of you to play yours. So Levi, you'll need to at least pretend to like women for a while. I'll coach you on what to do and how to behave. Amish courting rituals are very complicated."

"What about the women?" Fred—now Levi—asked. "I don't want to break any hearts."

"We've already planned for that," Abraham replied, tossing the reins, signaling the horses to go faster. "You'll be courting my two daughters. They're in on the ruse, but to the outside world it'll need to look like the real thing. We're going to play up the drama factor a bit, make it appear as if you can't choose between them. In the end, you won't be able to choose, so that'll give you an out and an excuse to leave the village. But in the meantime, I want you all to really play it up. High drama, passion to the fullest. Or what counts for Amish passion, anyway. The people of Lofstad don't have many social outlets, so courtship-watching is quite the local soap opera."

"Well, I love soap operas," Fred offered. "Always have. And I can be quite a drama queen."

“I don’t think my people will appreciate a queen very much,” James muttered.

Abraham nodded in agreement. “Yes, please don’t play the old queen routine in Lofstad,” he cautioned. “Unless you want the shit kicked out of you. Get in touch with your macho side. Play a role. You can go back to the city and be yourself once this is all over.”

“Fine. What do I have to do first?”

Abraham cracked his buggy whip, urging on the horses even more. “It’ll be well past midnight by the time we make it into town, so we won’t do anything tonight. But tomorrow afternoon there will be a village meeting in the town hall. That meeting will accomplish two things. First, we’ll formally announce that James has returned and shall be shunned, and also introduce you to the congregation as a seeking groom. All the eligible women will be introduced to you there. Do me a favor and make lots of google-eyes at my two daughters. My oldest is twenty, my younger one is eighteen. That’s prime marriage age among the Amish. Then we’ll take it from there.”

Fred rubbed his hands together. “A public wooing, eh? Well, if I can convince a judge to spring a double-murderer out of prison, this ought to be a cinch.”

“Don’t be so sure,” James said. “Amish women can be pretty high-strung. Not to mention stubborn.”

Abraham chuckled at that but said nothing more. They drove the rest of the way to Lofstad in total silence. The only sound was the gravel crunching under the rims of the buggy wheels. James sank down lower and lower in his seat, his belly clenching with dread. He didn’t want to face his father at all, let alone face him when he had publicly ordered the full village to shun him.

James had witnessed only a few shunnings when he was growing up. Almost all of them had been very brief, with the shunned always repenting and coming back into the fold quickly. All, save one.

That shunning, which had gone on for months, had ended in the shunned party running away from Lofstad and never coming back.

Never until now, anyway.

That shunning had been of James Semerad.

It had all started when his father caught James stealing an extra glance at another young man in the village. A glance that had been totally innocent—James had only been admiring the other young man’s new set of tall leather boots. The other young man was already married, not to mention pimply and more than a little paunchy, and James hadn’t found him physically attractive in the least. But his father had seen that passing glance, combined it with his own growing suspicions about James’s sexuality, and drawn his own conclusions.

That night, James had suffered the beating of his life when his father took the horsewhip to his bare backside until dozens of red welts rose up and bled. He bore the scars of that beating even today. But things didn’t end there. His father had called him out on the floorboards that Sunday during meeting, had proclaimed James “unclean,” soiled with forbidden, sinful thoughts and deeds, and ordered him shunned. For months he’d slept in the stinking horse barn, living on table scraps and sour milk, speaking to no one because everyone in town had been forbidden to have any contact with him. He’d had to bathe and wash his one set of permitted clothes in the stream because his mother wasn’t even allowed to heat water for him on the stove and bring it out to the barn for him. He wasn’t allowed to read anything but a tattered,

dog-eared German Bible, he couldn't go to village meetings or barn-raising or anything else, and the only pastime he'd been allowed was the care and feeding of the family's five pigs. The village children would point at him, whisper, and giggle as he chased after the pigs in the filthy pigsty. The busybody Amish wives had wondered aloud why he didn't repent.

But James wouldn't repent. He hadn't done anything wrong. All he'd done was admire another man's boots. He hadn't coveted them or wanted them for himself, he'd just admired them. He had carnal desires for other men, it was true, but he'd never acted on them. He kept those desires hidden away, deep in the pit of his stomach, and tried hard to pretend they weren't there. All he'd been guilty of was being a frightened, confused teenage boy who was afraid of what he might truly be. If he couldn't hold onto his innocence, what else would he have?

And when he knew he couldn't last another day, he'd gathered up his few belongings, bundled them into a wool horse blanket, stole fifty dollars from his mother's egg money jar that he knew she kept hidden under loose floorboards in the barn, and ran away.

James had endured the shame and humiliation of that brutal shunning for months when he was but a shy, budding teenager. It had almost destroyed him. James knew that if he hadn't escaped when he did, he probably would have wound up killing himself.

Now, like it or not, James was jumping right back into the untenable situation that had almost been his undoing. He knew from experience that his father held grudges like no one else on Earth. His father might be senior deacon of the village, but that didn't mean he was well acquainted with the Christian notion of forgiveness. If Amos Semerad had his way, his son James would be shunned—isolated in freakish, sinful misery—for the rest of his life.

James felt bile build up at the back of his throat. It was going to take all his strength of will to keep from throwing up.

* * * *

The buggy finally rolled into Lofstad just as dawn was breaking. Fred was dozing in the buggy seat beside him, and Abraham was struggling to keep his eyes open, but James was wide awake. The combination of fear, nausea, and anger that gripped his body and mind guaranteed that he probably wouldn't sleep for days.

James's gaze rolled across the shadowy outlines of the small group of wooden frame and half-brick, half-timber buildings that had been his home for most of his life. The town buildings were empty and dark at this early hour. Save for the Stenbergs', the village blacksmith family, and the Johannsons', who ran the mercantile, no one lived in the village center anyway—these buildings were only occupied during village meetings and festive occasions. Everyone else lived out on their farms, about two dozen of them, that were widely scattered around the town center.

The red iron water pump was still in the same place it had always been, and so was the whitewashed clapboard Amish schoolhouse that only went up to the eighth grade. Nothing had changed in the three short years he'd been gone. He'd hardly expected it to. Amish life was focused on never changing, never adapting, always staying exactly the same as it had when his people first came to this country more than two hundred years ago. His people were stuck in a stagnant rut, but that didn't bother them. The Amish thought progress was bad. Ungodly, even.

Abraham pulled the buggy to a stop in the center of the village green. He gently shook Fred awake, and

nodded at James. "Go into your father's barn and try to get a few hours' sleep in the hayloft. Amos may be kind and let you sleep in a bit before sending you out into his fields. It's my understanding that you'll be pulling the plow in his upper wheat field soon. On your own back too, by the way. No horses."

James sighed. He had no words left in him. There was nothing in him now but anger, shame, and sorrow. He climbed down from the buggy and started walking slowly towards his father's barn, which stood about a quarter-mile down the main village road

"James, you know I won't be able to say anything aloud from now on," Abraham softly called after him. "But no matter what Amos says or does, we're not all against you here. I promise you that."

Chapter Eight

James woke from his makeshift hayloft bed around eleven a.m. He didn't even need to glance at his modern-day watch to know the time; childhood experience had taught him how to read the time by the angle of the sunlight on the barn floor. When the sunbeams stopped just shy of the third horse stall, that meant it was an hour before noon.

Telling time by the sun was among many, many things James could do, thanks to his Amish upbringing, that most people couldn't. He could predict the severity of winter by the thickness of wheat chaffs. He could read deer, coyote, and bobcat scat. He could tell whether a lamb was too weak at birth to live. He knew what time of day was best to skim the cream off the buttermilk. He knew how to make a barrel without using nails. He knew how to saddle a horse in the dark, and shear the wool off a sheep in one piece using only a knife. He knew how far apart to sow seed corn for optimum growing. He knew how to slaughter a pig and put up all its meat for winter in less than a day. These were things he'd never wanted to learn, but he hadn't had any choice. They were things he never thought he'd need or want to know again, but now that he was here, lying covered with straw in the hayloft, they kept resurfacing in his mind.

He dusted off the stray bits of straw from his overalls, stood up, and stretched. His unwashed armpits smelled rank, but he knew he'd have to get used to that. No deodorant to be had here in Lofstad. Only one hot bath a week, and that was only if he was lucky. As long as he was being shunned, it would probably be stealing baths in the ice-cold stream for him again.

The Witness Protection Program had dumped him and Fred here for their own safety, but Lofstad wasn't exactly his idea of a safe haven. More like hell.

But there was no point in feeling sorry for himself. He needed to stick things out as best he could. And like it or not, the first step would be for him to go confront his father—Amos Semerad, respected village elder, brutal taskmaster, and shunning enforcer extraordinaire—face to face.

James chuckled as he climbed down the hayloft ladder into the main part of the barn. The fact that Amos had let him sleep so late on his first day back was typical operating procedure for him. Amos always liked to soften up his prey before moving in for the kill, whether it was a pig he was fattening up for the fall slaughter, or his wayward eldest son.

It would be best if he just got it over with. And if he wound up dead in the process, well, he supposed it

was fate. Either he wound up dead by his father's callused fists, or by a mob bullet in the head. At least his father's fists were a weapon he was familiar with.

Someone—his mother, he guessed—had left him a tin cup of water and a folded-up cloth napkin that contained some day-old bread spread with apple butter on the workbench just inside the barn door. He gobbled up the meager breakfast greedily. He hadn't eaten in a full day now, and he noticed for the first time that he was nearly faint from hunger and thirst. Not exactly the best condition to face his father, who hadn't lost a fight with man or beast since he came of age.

If he knew his father's daily schedule—it hadn't changed in fifty-odd years—he would be in the north field right now, inspecting the furrows. The corn would have been harvested a few weeks before, and now it was almost time to begin plowing for the winter wheat, which grew throughout the cold season for harvest in early March. His father would be walking up and down the field right now, gathering up stray rocks and debris to clear the way for the plow blade. James figured he'd be about midway down the furrows now, and would be finished just after noon.

Amos always walked the furrows alone; not even Jeremiah, his youngest and favorite son, got the privilege of doing it with him. At least if he and James had their confrontation out there in the field, no one else would get caught in the melee.

Thank Heaven for small favors, James thought as he trudged off toward the north field. As he passed his parents' house, he left the tin cup and empty napkin on the wooden ledge outside the kitchen window that his mother used to cool off pies after baking.

When he was halfway to the field, he glanced back over his shoulder, and saw they were gone.

* * * *

James was surprised when he saw his father was less than a third of the way down the furrows in the north field. He knew Amos was never slovenly when inspecting his furrows. If his father was that far off his usual schedule, it meant either he'd gotten a late start, or something was seriously wrong.

As James drew closer, he got an inkling of just what might be wrong. His father—who just three years ago had been tall, strong and fit as a youngster even well into his fifties thanks to a long life of hard labor and home-cooked Amish food—was now stooped, slumped-shouldered, and moving very, very slowly. James could see he walked with an awkward, lopsided gait too, as if one whole side of his body wasn't working properly.

A terrible thought crossed James's mind. He'd never known his father as anything but the picture of health. But now Amos Semerad, even from a distance, looked like a frail, weak old man. How could he have aged so much in just two short years? What had happened?

James almost turned away and ran. He didn't want to confront his father under any circumstances, let alone when Amos was facing his own mortality in the worst possible way. He even turned on his heel, took a first step back towards town, but then he froze. He took a deep breath, said a silent prayer, and strode out to meet his father.

Amos paused mid-furrow and stood stock-still. Even with his back turned to him, he seemed to sense the presence of his wayward eldest son instinctively. "James," he said gruffly in his heavily accented Germanic bass. "You have returned." He spoke English, which surprised James.

"I have," James replied in German. "*Guten tag, Amos. Gott sei mit Ihnen .*"

In a blatant insult to his eldest son, Amos did not return the traditional Amish greeting, which translated to "God be with you." Instead he just turned and stared down his long aquiline nose at his eldest son, even as he struggled to remain fully upright. James noticed that when Amos spoke, one whole side of his face seemed frozen, and the left side of his mouth was pulled downward, and shed little bits of drool.

"You've had a stroke, haven't you, Amos?" James said in English. It wasn't customary for Amish to be so forward with one another about their health, but when they did, they did so only in English, a language they deemed worldly and inferior. "Are you all right?"

Amos didn't answer. He simply looked off towards the horizon, which in the nuanced world of Amish communication, meant he wasn't all right. Not at all. In fact, gazing off at the horizon meant only one thing: that his father expected to die soon.

"I wish you a safe journey home, Father," James said, switching back to German. He hadn't addressed his father by anything other than his first name since he was a small boy. Parental monikers were a kind of intimacy he really wasn't entitled to anymore, especially now that he was an outcast. But who knew how many more opportunities he would have for it now? "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I'm surprised you remember your mother tongue at all," Amos replied in German. "Living among the English as you have for three years now."

Amos Semerad had always been an expert when it came to changing the subject.

"I'm studying German literature at university," James replied. "I read and speak it every day."

Amos scoffed and kicked at the dirt. "You'll ruin your mind with too many books," he growled, his voice like a sharpened plow blade. "*Gott im Himmel* . And your faith."

Amos's tone cut James to the bone. They were already at loggerheads, as they had always been. James had never gotten along with Amos, not even when he was a very small boy. He'd been shy, soft-hearted, effeminate, and his father had hated the very sight of him ever since he was seven or eight years old. Had hated James's bookish nature and desire for worldly education even more.

There was no point in trying to mend fences with his father. Not now, not ever. Amos Semerad would go to his grave despising his eldest son, and would face God's judgment for it. Not that he cared. Amos probably figured he had plenty of chits in his favor up in Heaven already, believing a little squabble with his ungodly faggot son would hardly do him any harm. So James cut straight to the point. "I understand I'm to be shunned," he said, still speaking hesitant German. The High German he spoke and studied at school was quite different from the rare Swiss Amish dialect his people spoke, and he found himself tripping over the words.

"*Ja.*" Amos said nothing more. He turned his back on James and returned to inspecting the furrows. Here and there he picked up a rock and tucked it in his front overalls pocket, but that was all. James knew Amos might never say another word to him for as long as he lived.

But he didn't care. His father could go straight to hell. And devout Amish deacon or no devout Amish deacon, he knew that hell was exactly where his father was headed. Amos Semerad was a violent, vengeful man who used faith as a weapon to beat people into submission. People like his son. And not just his son—his wife, all his other children, even each and every one of the townspeople of Lofstad. So

it had been ever since James was born. In Lofstad, Amos Semerad wasn't so much a man respected as he was a man feared.

"I want you to know something, Amos," he shouted in English at his father's back. "I'm not Amish. I've never been Amish, and I never will be. I hate everything about being Amish. I won't repent, because I haven't done anything wrong. You can have me shunned all you want, that's never going to change. The only reason I'm here is because the Witness Protection Program made me come. I know you're getting a fat little government paycheck out of it, too. Way to stick to the Anabaptist tradition of remaining separate from the world, Father."

At this latest jab, Amos's lopsided back stiffened, but he still didn't respond.

"I want you to know I'm getting the hell out of here the first chance I get," James hissed. "I am who I am, Amos. I am what God made me. You can accept it or not. I know you never will. Frankly, I don't give a shit."

James turned on his heel and stomped back towards the farmhouse. Amos didn't even turn to see him go.

After a few hard stomping strides, James broke out into a run. He needed to put as much space between himself and his father as possible. If only he could leave Lofstad altogether! But he couldn't, damn it. Not yet. He had Fred and his Mafia buddies to blame for that.

Was this whole mess God's idea of punishment for his sins? Had perhaps Amos been right all along? Was he really in a state of weakness, of uncleanness, of unforgivable sin?

His mind racing with a hundred terrible thoughts, he ran past the barn without stopping and almost ran smack-dab into his mother, who was hanging laundry on the family clothesline. She tossed waterlogged homespun linen sheets over the lines, along with trousers, hand-knitted socks, red woolen underdrawers. She held them in place with hand-carved wooden pins.

His mother, Abigail, turned to gaze at him with her tender gray eyes, her plain pale face far more drawn and lined than he remembered. The strings to her starched white bonnet hung loose, just as they always had, and flapped in the late autumn wind. She gave him a single nod in welcome, but she didn't speak a word. He knew she wouldn't. Like everyone else in town, she was forbidden to speak to James, her own son, because he was shunned.

"God be with you, Mother," James said in English. He couldn't bring himself to speak another word of German. Here in Lofstad, the words of his native tongue were like poison in his mouth.

He turned away from his mother and headed back towards the barn. It was high noon now, time to slop the pigs. Caring for the pigs had been his task for his first shunning, and it went without saying that they were his chief duty yet again.

Work waited for no one in an Amish village, not even the shunned.

Chapter Nine

The whole village of Lofstad was abuzz over the new arrivals. The busybody wives gossiped on the village green, gushing and speculating about why James Semerad, Lofstad's prodigal son, had decided to return home. The young unmarried women twittered and tugged at their white starched bonnets, giggling and blushing when they whispered to each other that there was a new bachelor in town, and he'd come seeking a wife. Which one of them would be the lucky bride? Abraham Schwartz's two blond-haired, gray-eyed daughters, both taller and slimmer than the other stocky, plain-faced Amish girls their age, listened to the twittering and giggling and smiled softly to themselves, saying nothing.

James watched the gathering storm from afar. Once he got the pigs slopped and settled, he ate his meager lunch of stale bread, apple butter, and cold salt pork (a pity gift from his mother, who was forbidden to speak to him but at least could see that he was fed) and set off on a walk along the village road. The road was little more than a dirt path, made up mostly of wheel ruts left behind by the buggies and wagons of the Lancaster County Amish as they traveled from village to village. It was two miles from the Semerad farm to the center of town, and James felt every inch of it hard against his ill-fitting, home-cobbled hobnailed boots. James would have given his right arm to have his modern-day Nikes back.

Some might find walking along an Amish country road romantic, but James didn't. The road was muddy, full of rocks and piles of stinking horseshit. And now he was going to have to sit through an old-fashioned Amish town meeting, complete with group prayers, calls for repentance, and public shunning. Not to mention Fred's—now Levi's—call for courting.

Of all the aspects of Amish life that James hated, he hated the traditional call for courting the most. There was nothing worse than sitting in a stuffy Amish meeting house for hours on end, the stink of unwashed bodies and full chamber pots standing in the air, sitting through boring German prayers and singing out-of-tune German hymns, all leading up to the moment when a handsome—by Amish standards, anyway—bachelor from outside the village announced he was in the market for a wife. All the giddy, horny single girls in the village would blush, fidget in their seats, twiddle their thumbs, and make eyes at the bachelor, all hoping they would be the ones who would get to ask their parents to plant an extra patch of winter celery for the wedding feast. The courting itself then would go on in secret, with the village only learning of the wedding feast and who the lucky bride was a week before it was to happen.

The wedding feast itself would present a rare opportunity for the single men and women of Lofstad to meet and socialize in public, hopefully sparking more marriages, though James knew that seldom happened. These days, the Lancaster County Amish had become so inbred that hosting courting calls for bachelors from Amish communities in other states had become commonplace, as had the splitting up of large Amish families and the moving of single men and women out to newly established Amish communities in states out west, like Iowa, Wisconsin, and Indiana. The inbreeding had gotten so bad that scores of Lancaster County children were dying of rare genetic diseases, being born with deformities, and all manner of other horrors.

The Lancaster County Amish desperately needed new blood. Suddenly, the town's top-secret alliance with the Witness Protection Program seemed to make more sense. Had Amos struck the deal with the feds in hopes that some of the witnesses under his protection would decide to stay on, become baptized Amish themselves, and breathe new life into the festering community? It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Accepting government money against Amish tradition in exchange for hope of widening the gene pool hardly seemed farfetched given everything else that had happened.

Fred would be considered quite the catch here in Lofstad, even if he was a randy old queen from the big city. He was handsome and fit, and James knew the Amish girls would find him dashing and mysterious.

They would be falling all over him in a matter of seconds. For all James knew, Fred would end up loving every minute of it. Hell, he could even end up going straight over it. Stranger things had happened, after all. Like the Amish getting into bed with the feds, for instance.

James hated to admit it, but he was jealous. Jealous and just plain mad. It was Fred who had gotten them both into this mess in the first place, and now Fred was going to end up being the one who had all the fun. Because courting time was the closest thing to fun that the Amish ever had.

James rounded the bend on the road that led into the center of town. A crowd had already gathered outside the meeting house. Some of the younger boys and girls saw him approaching, turned, and pointed, only to be scolded by their mothers. No wonder they were scolded—no one was supposed to look at, point at, speak to, or even acknowledge someone who had been shunned. Children, least of all.

However, James would still be required to attend the meeting despite the shunning. He would be given a seat alone in the back of the room, away from everyone else, but next to the farmers' muddy overshoes and the common chamber pots. It would be announced that James Semerad was to be shunned until further notice. He would be called out—in the third person, of course—to repent. And when he didn't, and wouldn't, every man, woman, and child would turn away from him and pretend he was dead. Because in their view, he was.

Since Fred—Levi Stoltzfus—would be required to play the role he'd been given to the hilt, James would be dead to Fred too. That stung most of all.

In less than forty-eight hours, James had gone from closeted gay Amish virgin to out-and-proud sensual gay urban man, and back again. The very same man who had opened James's eyes to his own sexual self was now being groomed to become his enemy. Fred would have to play the part of a devout, baptized Amish man and publicly condemn James along with everyone else in town, or risk blowing cover. James wondered how long it would be before Fred actually started believing the fire and brimstone that Amos would force him to spout.

Even if Fred managed to hold onto a small piece of his true self underneath the phony-baloney Amish act he was forced to put on, James wasn't even sure he liked the man very much. Sure, Fred might have been his "first love," so to speak—not that it had meant much—but the more James thought about it, Fred seemed like a pretty despicable person. He was a mob lawyer who helped spring murderers out of jail. He had almost gotten them both killed. Now he had dragged James from his new life in the big city back into the very hell he had spent an entire lifetime trying to escape.

James shuddered. *Boy, you sure know how to pick 'em*, he thought to himself. What were the odds that the first man James ever picked up in a public place would turn out to be *aconsigliore* caught in the middle of a mob war? Probably the same as the odds that a random young gay boy at Whole Foods was Amish.

The gathering crowd slowly filed into the meeting house. The old tin bell began to chime its hollow, flat tones from the belfry. James knew he couldn't avoid the inevitable any longer. Time to face the music.

Chapter Ten

James crept silently into the meeting house, hoping to escape Amos's notice. He sat on a tiny stool in the far back corner of the crowded room, sandwiched between a pile of discarded overshoes and a large pile of homespun woolen coats that smelled of manure, sweat, and dirt. Amos was perched behind a rough wooden lectern at the front of the room, leading the congregation in a *cappella* singing of a German hymn from the *Ausbund*, the traditional Amish hymnal. Like all Amish hymns, the song was long, the music slow, plodding, and almost toneless—it sounded more like a Gregorian chant than a hymn, and the low, droning sound of the chanting voices could lull listeners like a drug. This one was *O Gott, Vater, wir loben dich und deine Gute preisen wir*, the song that traditionally opened all Amish worship services. The words translated to “O God, Father, we praise you and your kindness we praise,” and it was a hymn that James and most other Amish knew by heart by the time they were five or six. James knew it so well, in fact, he had to stop himself from joining in the chant-singing—the low, droning German words seemed to flow from his mouth unconsciously, like someone singing tunelessly along with a familiar song on the radio without realizing it.

Singing an Amish hymn was the absolute last thing James wanted to do. But old habits died hard. Only the sick feeling deep in the pit of his stomach kept him from falling back into the trance-like state that befell all Amish when they sang and prayed together in the meeting house. It was a trance that helped keep the Amish under control, kept them tightly contained, locked into the spell of simple living, repression, and hiding from the world that was their trademark. Having been on the outside, James understood the Amish hymn for what it truly was: a form of mind control.

The hymn wound on and on. Amos led the congregation through all eight verses, just as he always did. James stole a glance at his stooped, slanting father, who still managed to look strong and commanding behind the wooden pulpit despite his rapidly deteriorating body. Amos's head was buried in the hymnal and he didn't seem to notice him. But James knew that like it or not, he wouldn't escape his father's notice for long. The old man had a sixth sense for detecting anything and everything that might be awry in his village, be it an overflowing outhouse, a rusty saw, or a wayward member of the congregation.

James shrank back against the wall, partially hiding himself behind the pile of stinking coats. He began to wonder if coming in here had been such a good idea. Not that he'd had many other options on where to go, but right now, wallowing in the mud and shit with the pigs held more appeal than suffering through a stinking, stuffy, fire-and-brimstone Amish prayer meeting.

As if on cue, Amos ended the hymn. “Brothers and sisters,” he addressed the congregation in English. “We have many tidings to bear this meeting day, both joyful and tearful. Let us begin with a prayer in English, out of respect for our outside guests.” Amos shot James a look, staring deep into his son's eyes. He had obviously known exactly where James had hidden himself all along, pile of musty woolen coats or no.

Amos pulled out an English-language version of the Amish *Prayer Book for Earnest Christians* and selected a benediction. He spoke the first few words aloud alone, then the whole congregation joined in unison. All save James, who kept silent, locking gaze with Amos despite his misgivings. Even though he felt nothing but hatred towards his father, he couldn't bring himself to look away from him. James found Amos's decrepit state and self-righteousness oddly compelling; in some ways, he saw his father as an older version of himself, a foreshadowing of where a life led in repression could lead. Now that James was back in Lofstad for God knew how long, he wondered how long it would take for him to look just like his father did now. Somehow he thought it wouldn't take as long for him to age here as his father had.

The opening prayer came to a close. Then there were the usual prayer requests for the old, the sick, the otherwise infirm, to which Amos responded in kind. There were announcements: the Kurtzes had a new

baby, the Sternvelds had two extra cows they were looking to sell or trade, the Wilkoms were hosting a quilting bee the Saturday after next. A few more prayers, then Amos closed his prayer book and hymnal, dusted off his hands, and looked up over the congregation, scanning the back wall of the meeting house with his tired gray eyes. His gaze came to rest once more upon James, but only for a split second. Almost as quickly as his father's gray eyes met his blue ones, Amos turned his face away, his jaw set in a hard line, signaling to everyone present that his firstborn was dead to him.

"There are two newcomers in our midst," Amos said, continuing to speak in his heavily accented English. "Levi Stoltzfus has come from the Old Order Amish communities in Maryland. He speaks only Low German, and does not understand our own Pennsylvania Dutch, so please converse in English with him. Levi has come to Lofstad in search of a bride. Please, make him welcome." Amos gestured to someone sitting in the front row, who stood up. A tall man in a freshly pressed black wool suit—of a slightly different cut and style from the ones the Lofstad wore, showing he was from a different community—stood. The man wore a wide-brimmed, low-slung hat, and wore a full, thick, mustache-free traditional Amish beard. He was tall, trim, fit, and had chiseled features and striking dark eyes. A collective gasp went up from the women in the room as they took in such a fine figure of an Amish man.

James stared hard at the tall, imposing figure. He knew it was Fred underneath all that Amish garb, but he was astonished at the transformation. Fred seemed to have beefed up his disguise significantly since last night, to the point that James could barely recognize him. There was no chance anybody would think Fred was anything other than Levi Stoltzfus, a Maryland Old Order Amish man in search of a bride in Lancaster County. No trace of his flaming-queen mob-lawyer persona remained.

Fred opened his mouth to speak. "Greetings, and God be with you," he said in halting English. He was putting on a phony accent, thickening his native Philly twang to the point that it sounded vaguely Germanic, but only James, his father, and Abraham Schwartz would know that. "I am Levi Stoltzfus. I have come from Verstad, a small Amish community outside Baltimore. There are very few eligible brides in my village, so I've gone elsewhere in my search for my God's intended. I hope I find her among you."

With that, Fred went back to his seat, moving stiffly, yet gracefully. James had to stifle a laugh. James knew Fred had been coached, and likely had rehearsed that little speech at least a dozen times. But James wondered if perhaps he'd been coached a little too well.

The meeting house was abuzz now. The air had taken on an electric charge, and James swore the temperature had just risen ten degrees thanks to all the horny young Amish women's newly ignited lust. He could understand their lust, he really could. Fred was a man who could probably inspire lust in inanimate objects. Mere mortals—let alone pent-up Amish women in serious need of sex—didn't stand a chance in his presence.

Amos seemed to understand that, too. He took his cue from the red-faced young women in the audience and cut the service short, preparing to deliver the final benediction before the women's collective libidos set the place on fire. He even picked up his prayer book and thumbed to the proper page, and seemed almost ready to deliver the final prayer. Almost, but not quite. One more order of business remained.

"Some of you know that my eldest son James has returned to the village," Amos said gruffly. "He is shunned, and will remain so until he repents and rejoins the church. That is all. Go in peace, serve God." He clapped the prayer book shut; there would be no more open prayer that day.

The congregation began to file out of the meeting house. Not a single one of them glanced in James's direction, not even when the men collected their heavy woolen overcoats from the pile sitting next to him. Amos's words on the matter had been very brief, but there was no need for him to elaborate. Every

Amish man, woman, and child knew what it meant to be shunned. No explanation was needed beyond announcing the shunning. The rules were universally understood and unspoken. The rest just happened by itself.

James had to wait until the meeting house was empty before he could leave. Now that the shunning was formally announced, he couldn't cross the field of vision of anyone else in the village, unless it was to publicly repent and ask to be brought back into the fold. James and everyone else knew that would probably never happen, so he was relegated to the deep fringes of Amish society for the duration of his stay in Lofstad. He'd have to spend his time hiding in the barn, or slopping with the pigs, or pulling the plow alone in the fields. No one would speak to him, socialize with him, or even notice he was there. For all intents and purposes, in Lofstad, James was nothing but a dredge animal now.

And Fred was a rock star.

The meeting house was almost empty now, save for James and one other person: Fred. Fred had hung back from the crowd when the others left, and hid himself in the tiny parson's room at the back of the building so it would appear as if he'd gone out with the others. When he thought the coast was clear, Fred stole to the back of the room to the tiny nook where James had been hiding. "Hi," he said, still putting on a bit of the phony accent.

James sighed and stared at the floor. "You aren't supposed to be talking to me," he said. "I'm shunned."

"Kiddo, that whole shunning thing is a total load of bullshit."

"Yes, it is. But as long as you're pretending to be Amish, you have to buy into it, like it or not," James snapped, not lifting his gaze up from the floorboards. "Now get the hell out of here before somebody catches you talking to me."

"James, I'm not going to totally ignore you the whole time I'm here."

"You have to."

"That's crazy."

James scoffed. "Well, I hate to be the one to inform you of this, but being Amish is crazy in general. Why the hell do you think I ran away?"

Fred sighed. "Look, James, we've already been through this. You hate being Amish. You don't want to be here. Hell, *I* don't want to be here. But we're stuck here whether we like it or not. We might as well try to make the best of it."

"You're obviously making the best of it already."

At that, Fred actually laughed. "Don't tell me you're jealous."

James didn't answer. He just blushed and looked down at the floorboards.

"James, you know this is all fake. Even the Schwartz girls are faking it. We'll be out of here in two weeks, a month, tops. In the meantime, we both just have to stick it out. We can start over when we get back to Philly."

“Frankly, I’m not sure I want to start over with you,” James seethed. “I’m not sure I want to do anything with you ever again. I don’t even think I like you anymore.”

Fred reddened. James’s words had stung him, stung him hard. “Whatever, kiddo. I guess it was fun while it lasted. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some horny Amish women to turn on.” He turned on his heel and stormed out.

Well, James had managed to hurt his feelings, at least. He’d done it because he thought it would make him feel better. But it didn’t. It just made him nauseous.

He sat there on the hard wooden bench for another twenty minutes before he found the strength to get up and leave the meeting house.

Chapter Eleven

Lenny “The Elbow” Morazzini and Tony “Fatlips” Provenzano were lying facedown on top of a grassy ridge overlooking the village of Lofstad, gazing at the tiny Amish town through high-powered binoculars. Lenny was wearing one of his expensive sharkskin suits that he had custom-made at his favorite Italian tailor’s shop in West Philly, oblivious to the mud puddle beneath him that ruined the luxurious imported silk-cashmere blend. He ruined suits almost every day in his line of work, after all—why worry when he could just call up Luigi at the tailor’s and order a dozen new ones tomorrow? Money was nothing to Lenny, and neither was imported silk-cashmere that cost forty-three bucks a yard.

Lenny and his sharkskin suit stuck out like a sore thumb in rustic Lancaster County, but Tony was a veteran mob gun-for-hire who knew how to blend in wherever he went. He wore a set of castoff Amish homespun and a wide-brimmed black felt hat he’d picked up at a tourist-trap souvenir shop in the county seat. While the folks back in Philly gave their old, outgrown clothes to the Salvation Army, the Amish pawned them off on tourists. Which suited Tony just fine. The homespun wool and linen hugged his body like a second skin, and the litany of old sweat stains and hand-sewn repairs just made him look like a dyed-in-the-wool Amish farmer who’d returned from a hard day’s work in the fields. He’d even rolled around in the mud a little to make the clothes seem more “lived in.” If anyone asked how he got so dirty, he’d just tell them he did it putting in a crop of winter wheat back at his village in Western Pennsylvania this morning, then hopped a van driven by “an English” to Lancaster County for today’s errand. Should he run into any of the locals before he had a chance to find a safe hiding place for him and Lenny, his cover story was that he was here from the newer Amish communities in Western Pennsylvania to buy a set of new plow blades from Lofstad’s renowned blacksmith, and Lenny was just “the English” who had driven him here.

Tony had come up with that one himself. He wasn’t particularly proud of it, either. To him, cooking up a creative and believable cover story was just another day at the office. As a mob hit man with almost twenty years’ experience in the field, he was a master when it came to cooking up cover stories. In his long and storied career of murder-for-hire, he’d been everything from a short-order cook in Fresno to a casino manager in Reno to a long-haul Southern truck driver. He could slip on the trappings of another place, another life, like he could a set of warm flannel pajamas. He could execute his missions with pristine accuracy, too—in more than twenty years and over three hundred kills, he’d never once been caught. Tony was so good at his job, he was invisible even to the cops—he’d never even taken the slightest bit of heat. It was why he commanded the highest prices of any hired gun on the Eastern

Seaboard.

“Do ya see anything?” Lenny the Elbow asked.

“Naw,” Tony replied. “But they’re there. Our tail watched ’em go in, an’ I got a mole on the inside keepin’ me informed.”

Lenny laughed and elbowed Tony in the ribs. His trademark gesture that had earned him his street name. He jerked his head in the direction of Lofstad. “You got a mole *inthere*? Seriously?”

Tony adjusted the focus on his binoculars, searching for something. “Aw, Lenny, I got moles everywhere.”

“How the hell’d ya manage that?”

“Money talks. Even Amish guys gotta make a living.”

“I know dat. But how’d ya do it widdout getting*caught*?”

Tony cleared his throat, signaling an end to this line of questioning. “*Inever* get caught.”

“So, ahhh, is dat why they call ya Fatlips?”

Tony “Fatlips” Provenzano set down his binoculars and shot Lenny the Elbow a look that could dissolve steel. “Naw. *This* is why.” And he punched Lenny the Elbow square in the mouth.

* * * *

Jacob Semerad was the third child of seven. With one older brother who had run away only to come back as a shunned outcast who had sent his father into violent fits of rage at the dinner table, a younger brother who suffered from asthma and a host of other genetically predisposed autoimmune disorders, and a gaggle of sisters who were forever tittering and gossiping about everything, nobody noticed him. Nobody had*ever* noticed him.

If Jacob played his cards right, that was about to change.

Jacob had always played the part of the good son. He wasn’t sickly like his kid brother, Jeremiah; he was strong and fit. He wasn’t a degenerate faggot like his older brother James was, either. He did more than his share of hard physical labor on the farm, especially now that his father was half crippled from the stroke. He always played the part of a devout Amish boy, too, and he’d carried that mantle forward now that he was just shy of being a man who would soon grow out his beard and seek out a wife of his own. He was a model, obedient Amish son who would soon grow up into a devout Amish man, sure to take his father’s place as village deacon and*de facto* leader one day. Despite all his admirable attributes, nobody ever took any notice of Jacob, because the ultimate desire of every devout Amish man and woman is humility so deeply ingrained that it almost renders one invisible.

Jacob had played all his assigned parts perfectly. A little too perfectly, in fact. Because underneath that pure, snow-white exterior lay a man who was so full of sin that his soul had become an inescapable black hole. Jacob Semerad was a man lost, a man who if he died tomorrow, would go straight to hell and would never come back.

And he liked it that way.

It had started out small. When he was eight, he decided to start stealing flour out of the family barrel just to see if anyone would miss it. He started out with tiny half handfuls, and when nobody noticed that, he graduated up to full handfuls. When nobody noticed that, he got a bucket. The flour barrel was almost empty before his mother wondered aloud if something was filching their flour. “It must be the rats. Or raccoons. Or maybe that badger that bothered the cows last year is back,” she’d surmised in her clunky German. It never once crossed his mother’s mind that the animal who was stealing the family flour supply was of the human variety, and her middle son to boot. The same thing happened when Jacob moved on to stealing grain, nails from his father’s shed, even a couple of sheep from a neighbor’s farm (the neighbor assumed the sheep had been lost to coyotes, not to Jacob’s wheat scythe). After all that stealing with nary a scolding or an accusation thrown in his direction, Jacob figured he might as well be invisible.

When Jacob got bored with stealing, he moved on to far more dangerous crimes, like sneaking away in the middle of the night and catching a ride with Dave Sawyer, the “English” boy who lived in a trailer on the outskirts Lofstad. They would ride together in Dave’s ancient Dodge pickup truck under the guise of going to pick up an emergency something-or-other from the Lancaster village midwife for his mother. Of course, pretty soon Jacob figured out that Dave was just as much of a secret juvenile delinquent as he was himself, and before too long, Dave became his partner in crime.

The first few times, Dave and Jacob tried breaking and entering into the cheap Amish tourist shops in downtown Lancaster, the ones that sold apple butter made by Amish teenage girls and knockoff Amish quilts that were really mass-produced in China. At first they would break into the tacky shops without taking anything, just to see if they could do it. Dave would jimmy open the door locks and Jacob would walk around the store, pick up cheap trinkets, set them back down, sometimes re-arranging them as a gag. Jacob would even look in the cash drawer, inspecting the potential haul without taking or disturbing anything. Dave would then lock the place back up and they’d spend the rest of the night sniffing glue in the alley. After breaking in like that a few more times, they finally robbed the place blind. The police had no suspects, because who had ever heard of Amish teens robbing Amish-owned tourist shops?

Things only went downhill—or uphill, depending on how one looked at it—from there. Last spring Dave proposed that Jacob become his drug deputy in Lofstad. The “English” of Lancaster County knew the wanton abandon of Amish teenagers during *Rumspringa* was legendary in Lancaster County, and a ripe market for drug abuse. Though you’d never get an Amish elder or deacon to admit it, crystal meth and oxycodone were popular recreational drugs among Amish teens, which presented a rampant underground drug problem for the rustic community—or rather, as the enterprising Dave and Jacob saw it, an opportunity. Dave cooked meth in a shed behind his trailer with his parents’ full knowledge and cooperation since they were avid meth users themselves, and also made trips into the outskirts of Philly twice a month to get oxycodone, Xanax, and other controlled prescription drugs on the black market. Whatever Dave couldn’t sell at his high school, he sold to Jacob at a discount. Jacob resold it to wayward Amish teens all over Lancaster County, who paid for it with money they’d earned raising hens for eggs or selling apple butter to tourist shops, and pocketed a tidy profit. After six months or so of this, Jacob had built up quite a stash for himself—he had a cheese barrel containing almost eight thousand dollars in cash hidden in the storm cellar by the barn. He wasn’t entirely sure what he wanted to do with that money. All he knew was he wanted more of it.

An opportunity for more cash soon presented itself. Dave’s drug-dealing had acquainted him with some mid-level gang executives in West Philly who were interested in expanding their market share into the Amish communities. After some wheeling and dealing, Dave negotiated terms last month that gave him exclusive drug-sale rights throughout Lancaster County, provided he handed over twenty percent of his profits to The Family.

Of course, that left Jacob out of a job. But there was still something in it for him—if he wanted the gig.

Apparently the Philadelphia mob had some interest in whether certain members of their criminal organization ever turned up in Lancaster County hiding among the Amish. The Family had long ago figured out the feds planted their protected mob witnesses among the Amish, thinking they would never be found there. That strategy had worked for the feds for a long time, but the jig was finally up. The Family had figured out that if the feds could secretly pay the Amish to be their moles for them, The Family could do the exact same thing. And Jacob Semerad was The Family's first man on the inside.

He'd gotten a message out to Tony "Fatlips" Provenzano hours after James and the fake Amish bachelor they called Levi Stoltzfus arrived in town. Jacob knew the Stoltzfus dude was fake, because he'd already received a digital photo of Fred Billingsley on his iPhone from the Family, with orders to be on the lookout for him (the Family kept Jacob well stocked in forbidden "English" technology as well as cash).

He was on the lookout for him, all right. But when his older brother James showed up at the same time Fred Billingsley did, you could have knocked Jacob Semerad over with a feather. James's appearance really threw a wrench into the works. Because whether he liked it or not, if those two were somehow connected, when he handed Fred Billingsley, aka Levi Stoltzfus, over to The Family, it meant he'd have to hand over his older brother too. Jacob hadn't been on The Family's payroll for long, but he still knew enough about how they worked to understand that they didn't like complications. They preferred to sweep complications under the rug—preferably by shooting those complications and burying them in a toxic waste dump someplace.

Jacob Semerad might be an Amish teenager with only an eighth-grade education, but he wasn't naive. He couldn't be. Now that he'd decided to embark on a life of crime, being naive would just get him killed.

In theory, Jacob had figured it would be easy to hand over his eldest brother to The Family. James was a faggot, a disgrace to both the Semerad family and the Amish community who'd been officially shunned—which in effect, made him already dead. In theory. Not in reality.

In reality, Jacob wasn't sure he had the balls to do what he had to. He'd signed up for this himself. No one had *made* him do it. He'd thought he had what it took to be ruthless and cold in the same way that his father Amos was ruthless and cold, whether it came to dealing with the feds or his own family. But now he was having second thoughts. Maybe it wasn't as easy to be ruthless as his father had always made it seem.

But no matter. Jacob figured he'd just have to grow a set and get down to business. His brother never should have come back here after running away in the first place. Jacob rationalized that whatever happened to James now that he was back in Lofstad was his own damn fault just for showing up.

Even so, Jacob decided he'd take his sweet time telling Lenny and Tony when to make the next move. He needed some more time to get his mind wrapped around this whole thing.

He needed some more time to figure out if maybe he'd just made the biggest mistake of his life, too.

* * * *

Fred was playing the role of a horny, straight Amish man, and loving every minute of it. He'd always

thought that straight guys were stuffed-up and boring. And Amish straight men—well, they were all straight, weren't they? Except for James, of course—would have to be the most stuffed-up and boring of all. In theory, anyway. In practice, it was another thing entirely.

Red-faced, panting young women were following him around like puppies, hanging on his every word, reaching out to touch him on his arm, his wrist, his shoulder. Nothing too obvious, of course—they were still Amish women, after all—but whatever kind of touch they could steal without being scandalous, they did. It wasn't the kind of touching that turned Fred on sexually, but it was still very, very exciting.

Fred had become a trial lawyer for the same reason that he'd become a top New York restaurant chef: because he loved being the center of attention. Whether it was getting five stars in the Zagat restaurant guide, getting his world-famous melon prosciutto dish written up in *New York* magazine, or making headlines in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for his unconventional defense tactics in high-profile mob trials, Fred Billingsley loved the limelight. He almost had to—being larger than life was ingrained in the Billingsley DNA, after all. Generations upon generations of Billingsleys had craved the spotlight that success and a glittering social scene could afford them if they took proper advantage of it, and Fred was no exception. He'd even spent some time working as a drag queen at a seedy Boston nightclub when he was at Harvard, though he'd never admit it to anyone now. He might have been a lousy drag queen who convinced no one except maybe for the half-blind busboy that cleared tables at the club, but he'd had the time of his life nonetheless.

And he was having the time of his life now. Because unlike his time as a drag queen, the part of an eligible Amish bachelor was one role he could play to a T.

"Lofstad is such a beautiful village," he cooed to the gaggle of assembled women, making a point to thicken his upper-class Philly accent as much as possible. "The hills and woods around here are so different from what we have back in Maryland."

The gaggle of women and girls erupted into delighted giggles, followed by nervous whispering amongst themselves. "Tell us about Maryland!" one of them said in halting, heavily accented English.

Fred bit his lip. He'd have to improvise on this one; he'd only been to Maryland once, many years ago on a weekend trip to Baltimore. "Oh, it's lovely in its own way, I suppose. Very flat, and green. And people like to eat a lot of seafood."

Seafood? That sent a titter through the assembled women. "But our Amish brethren in Maryland live nowhere near the ocean," a thoughtful, dark-haired woman with a face like a horse said carefully. "And we would never think to fish on the lands of the English."

"I meant to say that the *English* of Maryland like to eat a lot of seafood," Fred quickly added, which seemed to satisfy everyone. "We Amish, of course, don't partake of it ourselves. We prefer our own farm-fresh ham and bacon, of course. Freshly prepared by our wives." He paused, and winked at a petite, pimply blonde, who blushed a deep crimson. "Maybe one of *you* can cook my bacon for me one day."

At this, the gaggle of giddy women practically melted.

Nice save, Fred thought to himself, just as a scowling Amos Semerad crossed his path.

"We will speak now," Amos barked at him. It was an order, not a request. At the sound of it, the Amish women knew instinctively to give him a wide berth, and scattered.

When the women were gone, Amos walked over to a tall poplar tree and motioned for Fred to join him beneath it. "You are like my son, yes?" Amos said to Fred in a cryptic tone once they were underneath the heavy bare branches.

"In what way?"

"In the sinful and unclean way. You sleep with men, despite the orders of Our Lord."

Fred was taken aback. He hadn't expected the subject to be breached at all when he was in Lofstad, let alone so bluntly. "If you must know, Amos, yes, in the modern world I am a gay man, just as your son is." He cleared his throat. "With all due respect, sir, being gay is not a sin."

"The Scriptures disagree."

Fred's inner lawyer rose up, ripe for an argument. "Only the Old Testament says anything about it, in Leviticus, the same book that says it's okay to stone your wife to death, to own slaves, and to burn witches. Do you agree with any of that?"

Amos's gray eyes hardened and his teeth ground together, making a loud grating sound like nails scraping a chalkboard. "We are not here to discuss the word of God," he growled, an inelegant way of avoiding Fred's question entirely. "We are here to discuss your proper conduct while you are our guest here in Lofstad."

"Of course."

"I saw you conferring with my eldest son in the meeting house when you both thought no one was looking," Amos seethed. "That is unacceptable. He is shunned, and as such no one is to speak to him. Ever."

"But—"

"And you are not to engage in any of your unclean relations with anyone while you are under my care," Amos said. "Least of all with my son."

Fred blinked. "I think that goes without saying. I assure you, as far as your son is concerned, there's no danger of that happening any time soon. If ever."

Amos nearly turned purple. "What do you mean?"

"I mean your son doesn't seem to like me very much anymore. There wasn't much between us to begin with, but whatever it was, it's over now. So you don't have anything to worry about."

Amos held up his hand. "I don't want to hear any more about it. I am acting at my best as your host and protector, and you do not want to see me at my worst, Levi Stoltzfus."

"My name is Fred."

"As long as you are under my protection, you are Levi Stoltzfus. And Levi Stoltzfus, I am giving you an order. Do not even infer anything regarding your sinful, unclean ways in my own or anyone else's presence as long as you are among us. If you do, I will no longer provide you or James secure

protection, and you will be at the mercy of whatever foul, degenerate people who want you both dead.” Amos turned to leave, but stopped short at the last second. “Though I doubt this world would miss either of you very much if you were both gone from it. May God have mercy on both of your souls.”

With that, Amos stomped off, his lumbering, half-paralyzed body dragging to the right.

Fred blew out a long breath and shuddered. If that was how Amos acted on his best day, he cringed at what the man was like at his worst. Small wonder that James had run as far away from him as he could.

Amos Semerad was a tyrant, a bully, and a holier-than-thou iconoclast. He was also Fred’s jailor and protector. There was little Fred could do but swallow the man’s bitter pill whole.

Fred was due to make a courting call at the Schwartz home in a half hour. It would be staged, of course, with even the Schwartzes in on the gag. It was just one of the many motions he would have to go through to keep up appearances as long as he was here. At one level, courting the Schwartz girls would be a tedious chore. But at another level, it was something new, different, even a bit exciting. Fred knew how to flirt with men—he was a master at it, in fact—but he didn’t really have a clue about how to flirt with women, even if he’d be faking it. Or at least, he’d thought he didn’t have a clue until five minutes ago. He’d been flying by the seat of his pants with those Amish women, and yet he’d had them all eating out of his hand.

He was good at this. Almost *too* good, in fact. For the first time in his life, Fred found himself questioning who and what he really was. Was it really possible that he could find happiness with a woman? It was something he’d never even considered before now.

Fred hated to admit it, but flirting with women was fun. More fun than he’d had in a long time. Even though his body wasn’t excited at the notion, his mind sure as hell was. Which just confused him even more.

Chapter Twelve

James was in the barn, slopping the pigs. His stomach rumbled from lack of food, but he ignored it. As a man shunned, he could eat only when someone deemed him worthy enough to receive nourishment. He had to rely on the charity of others, something he hated more than almost anything else in the world.

Almost anything. Right now, the two things James hated most in the world were his father, and Fred.

James had never broken up with anyone before today. Unless you counted his Amish family, of course. But Fred was James’s first love—if you could even call him that, since their romance lasted less than twelve hours—and now, he was his first heartbreak, too.

The old rock-n-roll song was right. Breaking up *is* hard to do. It’s even harder to do when you’re Amish and gay.

James’s head ached, his chest burned, and he felt sick to his stomach. He felt like he’d been run over by a horse and buggy. Telling Fred off had felt good at first. For about thirty-five seconds. Now the only thing James felt was a gaping wound deep in the middle of his heart.

If this is how love felt when it was over, James wasn't sure he wanted to know what love was at all.

Being shunned had never really bothered James much. Sure, it was humiliating, but it paled in comparison to the misery he'd felt as a closeted gay man all alone in a hostile, backward Amish world. But now that his tender heart was broken, he felt the sting of the shunning more deeply than he ever thought he could.

He finished slopping the pigs and slumped down onto the hard-packed dirt floor of the barn, his back leaning against the ancient splintered wood. James's great-great-great (who knew exactly how many greats) grandfather had built this barn nearly two hundred years ago. There was no greater symbol of Amish life than the barn, built in community barn-raising that involved every man, woman, and child of the Amish community. James had helped build dozens of barns as a boy and a teen, and now he knew he never would again. The barn-raising was the symbol of belonging in the Amish community. Yet, now the Semerad family's barn, one of the oldest in Lancaster County, served as his prison.

James sat in his muddy, miserable spot by the pigsty for a long time. He closed his eyes, let his mind wander. He was exhausted, but he was too upset and angry for sleep. He remembered the days of his childhood and early adolescence, spent mostly in his mother's kitchen or in the barn with the animals, cleaning stalls and currying manes and tails—all considered women's work. He'd been ridiculed for his effeminate tastes almost from the time he could walk, but in those idyllic days before he reached the age of twelve or thirteen or so, his mother had sheltered and protected him, and had just let him be who and what he was: a shy, bookish, peace-loving boy who loved nothing more than cooking and chatting with his mother and spending quiet time with the horses. His mother had never judged him, had even found ways to comfort him whenever she could without Amos ever finding out about it: slipping him cornbread and cold salt pork when his father sent him to bed without his supper, putting witch hazel on the stinging welts he suffered whenever Amos took the strap to him, even secretly wiring him a hundred dollars through a trusted "English" friend when he was staying at the halfway house in Philly.

Abigail had never judged James. As a passive, obedient Amish woman, she had always lacked the power to protect her eldest son from his father's wrath, but all the same, she had never judged him. Abigail loved her eldest son unconditionally, and showed it in whatever small way she could without betraying herself. Abigail Semerad was James's best friend. She actually embodied the Christian values that so many others in the village only pretended to, with their plain clothes and simple lifestyle but hard-hearted, mean-spirited ways.

James felt the air stir just beside him. He opened his eyes and looked up. His mother stood over him, her soft, slight smile half-hidden in the shadow of her starched white bonnet, an answer to his prayers. She was forbidden to speak to him directly now, James knew, but she'd still risked Amos's wrath to steal a few moments with him. She carried a hand-woven straw basket, of the same kind that they two would sometimes weave together out of dried willow stalks every spring and summer. Without a word, she handed him the basket, which was covered with a plain, faded cotton cloth, a scrap cut from one of Amos's old, worn-out Sunday shirts. He took the basket, and their hands touched for the slightest of moments. Abigail gasped and jerked away, knowing that to touch a shunned man, even her eldest son, was expressly forbidden. She turned away and took a few quick steps towards the barn door, but stopped short. She relaxed and turned back to her son. She placed a hand tenderly on the top of his head, tousled his hair just as she had done when he was a boy, passed a fingertip softly along his cheek. Then she scurried away, back towards the house and her never-ending bundle of chores.

James stared at the basket for a moment. He knew it contained food, and a lot of it. He could smell his mother's bland, yet hearty cooking through the threadbare cotton wrapper, and it was heavy in his hands.

But there had to be something else besides food. His mother could have just sent him some bread in a napkin, and even that would have been more than any resident of the village was obligated to do for him, even his mother. After a moment's hesitation, he tore open the wrapping cloth and looked inside.

Inside the basket was a tin plate heaped high with roast pork, potatoes, cornbread, even a slice of his mother's blackberry pie, James's favorite dessert from childhood. There was a small pewter stoppered bottle full of fresh milk. He lifted both out of the basket, and found there was more underneath. And not food, either.

There were several books, moleskin-bound, similar to the kind that James knew you could buy at bookstores in the city, books with blank lined pages that could serve as journals and diaries. There were several letters in envelopes, all addressed to him, all unopened. At the very bottom of the pile was a scrap of paper folded in half, with James's name scrawled in pencil in his mother's cramped, slanting hand.

James set the books and letters aside and unfolded the note from his mother. Written in German—his mother had never learned to read or write in English—was a short note:

Dearest Son---

You are to begin plowing the north field. You will pull the plow yourself, no horse. Begin soon, or Amos will be angry. Here is food to make you strong.

You are not alone in the village. Wait, and another shall find you soon.

Your Beloved Mother, ABIGAIL

James folded the note and slipped it into his pocket. *He was not alone?* What was that supposed to mean? His mother's cryptic way of saying she loved him, surely. There was no other possible explanation.

He gathered up the journals and letters and hid them behind a loose board in the barn wall. He gobbled up the food almost too quickly, then set off for the tool shed, where he knew his father stored the plow and tackle. There would be time for reading and dawdling later. Right now he had work to do.

Chapter Thirteen

Fred stood outside the Schwartz family home, dressed in crisp, pressed new Amish homespun, hastily sewn especially for him by Abigail Semerad on an ancient Singer foot-treadle machine for the occasion. Today was to be his first courting call at the Schwartz household. Ruth and Sarah Schwartz were on the other side of the rough-hewn pinewood front door of the clapboard Schwartz home, eagerly awaiting his visit. A small gaggle of giddy local girls had followed him down the village dirt road on the way here, and they were watching him intently, giggling and tittering, from behind a large oak tree. Abraham had given him strict instructions earlier in the day not to dissuade onlookers, but rather to encourage them. The more people watched the courting go on, the more people would believe it. And the more people believed it, the safer Fred and James would be while they were here. Or so Abraham said.

Of course it was all just a show for the neighbors. The Schwartzes were all in on the undercover ruse that had brought Fred here as Levi Stoltzfus, lonely Amish bachelor, in the first place. Fred wondered what would really go on once he was on the other side of that door. Would they all just stand around staring at each other? Would they shoot the breeze about Abraham's good old days in the Secret Service guarding presidents? Or would they carry the old Amish courting ritual out in its every intimate detail?

There was only one way to find out. Fred banged loudly on the Schwartzes' front door with the back of his fist. After a moment, a tall, slender, middle-aged woman in somber gray and black Amish homespun opened it. "You must be Levi," she said, in an Amish German accent so convincing that Fred had a hard time believing she was really an undercover agent. "I'm Maria Schwartz. I bid you welcome. Please, come in. Ruth and Sarah are waiting."

Fred followed the older woman inside the house. The interior of the home was rustic, even more so than the Semerad home. The first floor appeared to be one large room, with a single narrow door leading somewhere off to the left and a rickety wooden staircase leading up to a primitive sleeping loft. The clapboard walls were rough and unpainted, and most of the furniture was little more than sawn-off logs used as chairs and tables. There was a large enamelware farmer's sink with a hand-operated water pump, an ancient cast-iron cook stove, and an old-fashioned wooden icebox. There was nothing decorating the walls short of a cheap paper calendar that advertised a Lancaster animal-feed company and a tattered, yellowed Currier and Ives lithograph. Handmade plain Amish clothes hung from hand-carved wooden pegs driven into one wall near the door, and a wooden trough nailed into the floor held several pairs of muddy overshoes. The Schwartzes might be undercover federal agents, but by the looks of their home, they lived the rustic Amish life to the fullest.

Maria motioned for Fred to sit down on the only upholstered chair in the room, then disappeared through the swinging door.

A moment later, the two gangly, fresh-faced Schwartz girls appeared on the creaky wooden staircase, both dressed in their Sunday best: plain blue cotton homespun dresses and new, freshly starched white bonnets and aprons. They both smiled at him timidly, then sat down on opposite log stools, their hands folded demurely in their laps. Fred wondered if these two girls really were Abraham and Maria's natural children, or merely government-paid actresses playing a part. Whatever they actually were, you'd never know at first glance that these two girls weren't really Amish.

Maria reappeared, carrying a wooden tray laden with a teapot, teacups, and small cucumber sandwiches. Abraham came down the stairs, smoking a corncob pipe. "Hi there, Levi," he said. "How are you settling into things here in town?"

It took Fred a moment to realize that Abraham was talking to him. He still wasn't used to answering to his new name. "Oh, fine, I suppose," he said. "It's just a lot to get used to."

"Indeed it is," Abraham mused, puffing on his pipe. "I've been here thirty years, and I'm still not used to it. My girls were born here, and they're not used to it, either. Isn't that right, girls?"

The two Schwartz girls blushed deeply and said nothing.

That just puzzled Fred even more. If the Schwartz girls were born and raised here, did that mean that they thought themselves as more Amish than anything else? If they'd never lived out in the real world, how could he be so sure they were really on his side? How could he be sure that he would still be safe here? Fred shifted uneasily back and forth in his seat. Ancient upholstery springs creaked underneath

him, a sign of his misgivings about the whole situation.

Maria poured tea into the old, chipped teacups and handed one to Fred. "The girls know we're not like the others in Lofstad," Maria said. "We explained everything to them as soon as they were old enough to understand. They've never given us away. If anything, having had the girls born and raised here in the village just makes us and our protected witnesses safer."

Abraham finished puffing his pipe, then set it on the rough-hewn log table beside him. "True. Though I'd sure as hell like to get out of here one day. I'd like my girls to have real lives someplace else, too. Isn't that right, girls?"

The girls blushed deeper and said nothing.

Abraham laughed uneasily. "It's times like these that I wonder if I made the right decision, coming out here all those years ago. With that bullet in my back, there wasn't much I could do in a regular Secret Service job. This sounded like a good opportunity at the time."

"It was either this or Siberia," Marie quipped. "And that was at the height of the Cold War, mind you. Neither of us were too keen on that idea. I grew up not far from here, and thought this might be a good fit for us, especially since we wanted to raise a family."

"It was Marie who finally convinced me to take this assignment," Abraham added. "We'd both done deep undercover on plenty of other assignments, and in far more dangerous places. But whenever you do deep undercover for an extended period, you always run the risk of losing yourself to the assignment. I think we all lost ourselves here in Lofstad long ago."

Nobody said anything for several minutes. After a long and painful silence, Fred figured it was up to him to break the ice. "So, um, what exactly am I supposed to do? Regarding this whole courting thing, I mean. What's the, ahhh, procedure?"

Abraham looked up. "Nobody briefed you?"

"Not beyond what you told me on the way here. James isn't allowed to talk to me. Even if he was, he wouldn't talk to me, anyway. He pretty much hates my guts right now."

"What about Amos? He was supposed to prepare you for this."

"Amos doesn't seem to like me very much, either. He helped me out with the little speech I gave back at the meeting house, but that was about it. Amos's wife barely even speaks any English. In fact, she hardly speaks at all. And the other Semerad kids seem to be afraid of me."

"The Semerad kids are afraid of everybody," Abraham grumbled. "Growing up in Amos's house can do that to a person."

"That's obvious," Fred replied. "Amos Semerad doesn't strike me as a very nice guy."

"Amos is a very complicated man," Marie said as she passed out plates of cucumber sandwiches. "He just does whatever he thinks is right. He means well, even if he can be hard sometimes."

"I just have a very difficult time getting past how he treated James when he was growing up, is all," Fred said. "And he seems to know it. Which I'm sure is why he can't stand me."

"I wouldn't go that far," Abraham said. "Amos is a very hard man, but I don't think he genuinely hates anyone. As my wife said, he's just a complicated man."

"Father," the younger of the two Schwartz girls interrupted. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

Abraham stood up and laughed. "Of course. Where are my manners?" He motioned towards the younger girl. "Levi, this is Ruth, my youngest. And this spritely young redhead here is Sarah. Though you'll never see that red hair uncovered. Sarah is by far the more devout of my two daughters. Isn't that right, Sarah?" Sarah just giggled and looked at the floor.

Abraham's expression turned from jovial to solemn. "But seriously, Levi. It's absolutely crucial that to the outside world, this courting looks real. That *you* look real, too. My daughters are as Amish as they can get without actually being Amish. They've never lived anywhere but here, and they know instinctively how young Amish women should and do behave. You need to match your behavior to theirs as much as possible."

"I'll certainly try," Fred replied. "I just don't have a clue how to do it."

"I think you're doing a wonderful job so far," Sarah said, speaking up for the first time. "Especially this afternoon in town. Every girl in the village believes you're an Old Order Amish man from Maryland. You have all of us spellbound." She paused, bit her lip. "Including me."

Fred raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

Sarah blushed again and fiddled with her hands.

"Now don't go falling in love, Sarah," her father ordered, his tone half mocking. "You know Levi is only staying with us for a short time. He'll have to go back to the city when it's time to testify, just like all the other witnesses we've helped over the years."

"I know," Sarah murmured. "It just seems different this time, is all."

"Sarah loves Levi!" Ruth sang to the tune of the old playground song. "Sarah loves Levi!"

"Hush, Ruth!" Marie said sharply. "Forgive Ruth for her rudeness, Levi. She doesn't know how to mind her manners. Forgive my Sarah, too. She's at that age where she finds everything incredibly romantic. She'll grow out of that soon enough."

"But *it's* incredibly romantic!" Sarah protested.

"Being on the run from the mafia isn't romantic at all," Abraham snapped. "Neither is trying to stay alive when somebody wants you dead badly enough that they put a price on your head."

Fred leaned forward and gasped. "Excuse me?"

Abraham sighed. "I meant to tell you earlier. Not only is there a hit sworn out on you and James, my sources tell me that The Family has apparently hired a professional to handle it. I've been getting reports that their hired assassin may already be somewhere in the area. We'll need to be very careful over the next couple of days."

“Does that mean the courtship thing is off?”

Abraham went and stood before the room’s only window. “Absolutely not. We need to act like everything is perfectly normal. On the outside, at least. Between you and me, I’ve put a call out for additional undercover reinforcements from the Service. There will be a few more Amish strangers coming to town next week who will act as extra security. The cover story we’re using is that they’re coming to participate in a special Amish elders council hosted by yours truly.”

“Who else will know about this besides us?” Fred asked.

“Just Amos. He’ll lead the council meetings himself. He’s done this sort of thing for us a few times in the past, so it should go off without a hitch. In the meantime, you and the girls here will need to turn up the drama. We’ll start by having you take long unsupervised walks up and down the main village road with each girl. Together at first, then separately. You’ll come by the house each evening after supper, too. Make sure you get at least a few girls in town to follow you. After a week or so of that, Marie and I will make a big show of planting a patch of winter celery right in front of the house. We’ll all need to drop a few hints around town about it ahead of time, to make sure enough people come by to see us do the planting.”

“Celery? What’s the big deal about planting celery?”

“In Amish tradition, the main dish served at a wedding feast is celery,” Marie explained. “If someone is courting you, you don’t publicly announce that a wedding is coming up, since that would be too forward. But you can announce it indirectly by planting a big patch of winter celery, in preparation for the wedding feast.”

“I guess that beats registering for a bunch of crap at Macy’s,” Fred mused. “Which one of you do you think will be the lucky bride? Fake bride, anyway.”

Ruth and Sarah exchanged looks. “Does it really have to be fake?” Sarah asked. “Because I’d really like to get married before I get too old.”

Marie guffawed. “Sweetheart, you’re only twenty. You have plenty of time.”

“Not as long as I live here, I don’t!” Sarah burst into tears and ran from the room.

Nobody said anything for a long time. Finally, Fred swallowed hard and spoke. “Are you really sure this whole phony courtship thing is a good idea?”

Abraham scoffed. “Do you have a better one?”

* * * *

James pulled the plow in the north field, scraping fresh furrows for winter wheat. The leather plow straps dug hard into his back and shoulders, leaving stinging welts in his skin. The frozen ground resisted, making every inch the plow blade cut an epic struggle. His muscles screamed with exertion, and his heart pounded hard in his chest. Despite the frigid temperatures, his whole body was drenched with sweat. Yet he’d only managed to plow one half of one furrow.

James glanced over his shoulder at the sweeping expanse of unplowed field before him. Three years of living on the outside had left him out of shape. He was in no condition for hours upon hours of hard

manual labor, even if he did work out in the campus gym three times a week. An hour in the gym didn't exactly equal plowing frozen fields by hand. Not by a long shot.

His father had devised this punishment for him on purpose, James knew. It would take him days and days of dawn-'til-dusk backbreaking labor to finish this task, and even then, he might not get it finished in time for winter-wheat planting. He couldn't hook the plow horses up, either, since the shunned were forbidden any assistance of any kind from man or beast. Even if he wanted to break with tradition and do it anyway, his father had locked up the plow bridle and tack, and never let the key out of his sight.

When it came to supervising shunning, Amos Semerad was a master planner.

James was thankful for the hearty meal his mother had sneaked him earlier. He'd burn at least five thousand calories a day out here, and he couldn't do it on bread and water alone. But God only knew where his next meal was coming from, and he had a hell of a long way to go before he could sleep.

He finished plowing the furrow and decided to take a break so he could refill the pewter pitcher his mother had given him with water from the pump. He knew there were a few canteens hidden in the barn; he'd fill those up too. He'd have to have plenty of water to get him through the rest of the afternoon. Maybe if he was lucky, he'd be able to plow three whole furrows before he collapsed from exhaustion.

He set down the plow, detangled himself from the leather pull-straps, and headed for the barn. He took the pewter pitcher from the ledge where he'd left it empty after lunch, and climbed the ladder to the hayloft, where he knew he could probably find a few leather canteens stashed in the tool pantry. He was in luck; there were in fact three of them, all with long leather carrying straps. He climbed back down the loft ladder so he could fill all the containers from the pump outside.

The outside water pump was old and rusty, and half frozen shut. It was almost as hard for James to get it going as it was for him to plow the frozen fields. By the time he'd filled all four containers with water, he was hot, sweaty, and exhausted once again.

He just couldn't catch a break no matter what he did.

James's eyes scanned the horizon surrounding the Semerad farm. There was nobody around, nobody watching him to make sure he was doing what he was supposed to be doing. Everyone was either off running errands in town or hard at work on their own chores. He figured might as well take a rest break while he had a chance.

James went back inside the barn and slumped down against the cold, splintery barn wall. On a whim, he uncovered the willow basket full of journals and letters that his mother had given him that morning. He selected a sealed letter at random from the pile and opened it.

The postmark was dated three years ago, about three months after James had run away. There was no return address, but the postmark was from somewhere in Western Pennsylvania. Inside the envelope was a single piece of yellowed onionskin paper, the kind that dated from the days before computers. Scrawled in pencil in a cramped, deeply slanting hand was a letter, written in a barely literate mixture of English and German. It translated roughly as follows:

Dear James Semerad:

I heard about you from my brother. I heard that you are gay. I am gay too. I heard that you left. I want to leave too. Please help. I live in Waltham, near State College. Please write back soon. Just

address it to Isaiah Walz in Waltham, Pennsylvania, and it will reach me.

Isaiah Walz

Stunned, James stared at the letter in his hand. He'd always thought he was the only one, that there couldn't possibly be another gay Amish man anywhere. He'd always thought he was a freak of nature, a mistake, a misplaced person who'd never really belong anywhere in the world. But right there in his hands was proof none of that was true.

James's vision blurred, and two tears fell onto the flimsy onionskin paper, soaking it through.

He opened a second letter, then a third. They were both from other closeted gay Amish kids, and read much like the first one had. There were other letters, too: one from an Amish mother who had lost a son to suicide after he was caught in another man's embrace, another from an Amish woman who was miserable in her marriage and thought she might be in love with another Amish woman in her village. There was a typewritten letter from a social services agency in Pittsburgh that worked with runaway Amish youth. There was even a letter from another gay man like himself who had run away from the Amish as a teen and was now living in New York City. James read that one several times:

Dear James:

I don't know if this will reach you or not. I don't have an address for you, so I'm just sending it care of your village post office, general delivery, in the hope that someone will have the heart to forward it on to you somehow. I'm friends with a nurse who helps some Lancaster County Amish women who are having complicated pregnancies, and she heard about your story through someone that lives in Lofstad. She thinks that person might actually be your mother, but she's not sure. Anyway, I just wanted to congratulate you on getting away and finding a new path for yourself. It's not easy for us, whether we're back in the Community or in the outside world. I know what you're going through because I've been through it myself. I know what it's like to feel like you don't belong anywhere. I know what it's like to feel trapped, and I know what it's like to wonder if you are ever going to be truly happy in the real world.

I wanted to let you know that no matter what you're going through now, you're going to be fine. You made the right decision to leave the Amish and rejoin the world. There are a lot of other people like us out here, too. Not just runaways from Rumspringa, but people like you and me who left for the same reason. I grew up in an Amish community in upstate New York and I ran away fifteen years ago to New York City. I went to college and became a stockbroker. If you ever need help, moral support, or even just need to borrow a few bucks, give me a call.

Timothy Stoltzfus

212-555-8975

James crumpled the letter into a ball in his fist and wept until he thought his body would split in two.

Chapter Fourteen

Lenny “The Elbow” Morazzini and Tony “Fatlips” Provenzano were hiding out in an abandoned grain silo on the outskirts of Lofstad. They’d been waiting there for word from their mole for three days without any reply, and they were running out of patience.

“Why cantchya get us a place to stay width one o’ dem Amish?” Lenny drawled in his obnoxious Philly Italiano accent. He pronounced “Amish” as “AIM-ish.” His sharkskin suit had seen better days, too. There were permanent sweat stains under both of his pudgy arms, and the cloth at the elbows and knees was starting to shine from the strain of his enormous, reeking girth. “I need to take a bath, goddamn it.”

“You don’t exactly blend in,” Tony quipped. “An’ the Amish don’t bathe all that much, neither. Hot bathwater’s more precious than gold round these parts.”

“Don’t know how I ended up on this crappo assignment in da first place.”

“You’re on it ’cause The Family wants you on it. Don Cappio is a made man, you ain’t. Ya really wanna go against the orders of a made man? Ya wanna get shot to pieces?”

Lenny made a face. “You ain’t a made man, neither,” he whined. “You ain’t even a boss.”

“That’s right, I ain’t a boss. I’m an assassin. Wouldn’t want the job of a boss if ya paid me ten trillion dollars, neither.”

“I wanna be a boss someday,” Lenny croaked, pouting.

“Well, then I suggest you shuddup and do what I tells ya.”

“All right. Whatcha wanna do, *boss*?”

“Wait. Wait and shuddup.”

“Fine.” Lenny settled back against the rusty metal wall of the silo and stared off into space.

Tony rolled his eyes. “You could at least make yourself useful while we’re waitin’.”

“Whatcha want me to do, boss?”

Tony pulled a rolled map from his inside jacket pocket. “Study this. And stop callin’ me *boss*. I hate bein’ called that.”

“But you’re the boss o’ *this* job, boss.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Just don’t say it out loud. I got a reputation to maintain, ya know.” He unrolled the map and spread it out on the dirt floor in front of Lenny. “This here’s a map of Lofstad and the surrounding area. We need to know every inch of it like the back of our hand for when we do the big ambush.”

“What big ambush, boss—I mean, Tony?”

“Just got word from the Family a coupla hours ago that we’re gonna have a slight change in plans. The feds’re bringin’ in a large undercover team over the next coupla days that’s gonna cover the whole area. They’re all gonna be armed. If our mole don’t deliver Fred Billingsley and the Gambino to us real soon,

we're gonna have to just go in and take 'em by force. The Family don't want us going up against a buncha feds alone, so they're sending in some reinforcements."

"Reinforcements? What kinda reinforcements?"

Tony tucked a lock of his greasy black hair behind his ear. "That remains to be seen. Hopefully they'll at least send some guys that'll know how to at least *sorta* blend in around here. Unlike you."

"I take personal offense to that."

"Yeah, well, I take personal offense to *you*, Lenny. If you're the future of mob bosses, we might as well shut down the whole goddamn operation right now."

Lenny grumbled something unintelligible and buried himself in studying the map.

Tony walked over to the far side of the silo and squinted through a tiny peephole someone had drilled through the corrugated metal wall. He couldn't see much, but it seemed the surrounding area was deserted. For now, at least. Another few days, and the whole place would be crawling with feds. Tony had never drawn any heat of any kind in his entire career, and he didn't expect to start now. He needed to speed things up a bit.

He pulled his mobile phone out of a pocket hidden in his overalls, scrolled through his contact list until he found the mole's number, and dialed.

Jacob Semerad answered on the third ring. "Yeah?" he answered in his peculiar Amish accent.

"Jacob, it's Tony. What the hell is goin' on?"

"Uhh, well, uh—"

"We've been waitin' out here for three days. Where's our guys? You said you'd get 'em over to us lickety-split."

Jacob hemmed and hawed, then finally managed to speak. "There's ah—, there's a bit of a complication."

"The Family don't like complications," Tony barked. "May I remind you that everyone on The Family's payroll is expected to follow orders?"

"Yes, Tony, I know that, but—"

"Well, I *order* you to bring me dose two clowns to the abandoned silo on the west end of town no later than eight o'clock tonight. Otherwise, heads are gonna roll, if ya know what I mean."

Jacob let out a tiny shriek. "No, uh, sorry Tony, I don't know what you mean."

Tony let out a long, low, sinister laugh. "Pardon me. I keep forgetting yer aim-ish and don't know jack shit about how the real world works. Let me just spell things out for you. When I say that heads are gonna roll, I mean *that people are gonna die*. People like you, Jacob. 'Cause that's what happens in The Family when our employees don't follow orders. I should know. I'm the guy that The Family sends to kill 'em, after all. Bye, Jacob. See ya at eight."

Tony ended the call and tucked the phone back into his pocket. And that was that.

Tony liked being in total control of things. That was why he was such a good mob assassin.

* * * *

Jacob Semerad stared at the dead cell phone in his hand, shivering and shaking all over. Tony had disconnected the call almost five minutes earlier, but Jacob was frozen solid where he stood. He couldn't even muster the strength to put the phone back in his pocket.

He was in his favorite hiding place, in the storm cellar underneath the cow barn on the far east side of the Semerad property. He was all alone save for the lowing cows above—James was harbored over by the horse barn on the far opposite end of the farm, over by the north field—yet he knew he was being watched. The Family was watching him, watching him closely. And The Family did not like what they saw.

Jacob was in way over his head, and he knew it. He'd thought this whole mob thing would just be easy money, with no strings attached. He never even imagined he'd get his hands dirty, let alone send people to their deaths. He'd gotten away with so much for so long, Jacob had come to believe he was untouchable. But he wasn't. Not by a long shot.

He would hand his faggot brother and the turncoat mob attorney over to The Family. He would. He just needed to find the right time and place to do it. Things like this had to be handled delicately. This was Amish country, not West Philly. Things were different here, that was all. Somehow he'd have to make The Family understand that.

He needed to figure out a way to buy some time. He'd go out to the silo himself right away and explain that he needed to bring his brother and the fake Amish bachelor in during the dead of night, when nobody was around. He didn't want to disrupt the routine of daily life in the village. That would arouse way too much suspicion. If the newcomer and the shunned were to slip away in the night, perhaps even leave a note explaining why they suddenly had to go away, that would be something the locals would just shrug their shoulders at. They wouldn't shrug their shoulders at a newcomer and a shunned that suddenly went missing together without explanation. They'd start asking questions, and with questions came trouble.

Jacob knew The Family didn't like trouble. The Family liked to keep things quiet as much as possible. Violence and bloodshed were always a last resort, and even then it was something best swept under the rug. The Family didn't need a pile of dead bloodied Amish as collateral damage in its mob war, no matter what its grudge with Fred Billingsley was about. A pile of dead bloodied Amish wasn't exactly something that would be easy for The Family to hide.

Jacob would explain all of this to Tony, and in terms he could understand. That should buy him at least an extra couple of days. Hopefully.

If it didn't, he would just have to figure out something else.

Chapter Fifteen

James was back in the north field, pulling the plow. He only had a couple of hours of daylight left, yet he'd only managed to plow five furrows so far. Meanwhile, his back muscles were on fire, his skin covered in welts and blisters, and his legs could barely hold his body upright from all the exertion. His eyes were red and swollen from sobbing over those letters in the barn. Yet despite it all, he finally could finally grasp at a feeling that felt just a little bit like hope.

His mother had faithfully collected and saved all those letters for him over the years. It seemed she'd even helped spread his story around Amish country in hopes it might help others like him. James had never conceived of the notion that there might be other young Amish men and women going through the same struggles that he had, yet his simple, naive, barely literate mother had. It was really a miracle of sorts. James believed it was God at work. A kind, compassionate, inclusive, and forgiving God, not the hateful, fire-and-brimstone God whom Amos prayed to. The God his mother served was the true God, and the God whom Amos Semerad served was really the devil.

In that brief shining moment in the barn, James's faith in God, and in himself, had been restored. His mother's kind and selfless act was almost an act of God in and of itself.

He'd glanced at the leather-bound journals before returning to the fields. They contained his mother's careful daily record of the entire three years he'd been gone from Lofstad, written in obvious hope that he might return someday. The entries weren't exactly riveting reading; they mostly recorded his mother's menial daily chores, like "Laundry today," or "Churned three quarts of butter," or "Pulled nine carrots from kitchen garden." But the mere fact that his mother, who was barely literate in German and could read or write no English at all, would undertake such a monumental task for his sake, and do it completely in secret, lest she incur Amos's wrath, touched James very, very deeply.

One of the sentences in his mother's original note stuck in James' head: "You are not alone in the village." What exactly had she meant by that? Did she mean she was watching over him from afar? Or did she mean there was another man in town who was closeted and afraid, just like he was?

James stopped pulling the plow mid-furrow and took a moment to rest and think. He stared up into the overcast sky, searching for an answer in the heavy gray late-fall clouds. Of course, there was none. He put his arms back into the leather plow straps and began pulling again.

Then, almost as if in answer to his prayers, someone appeared beside him.

"Hello, James."

James stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder. A young man stood there, wearing the somber black-and-gray garb that every man in Lofstad wore. His hat was straw, his boots were old and worn. He was clean shaven, which showed he had no wife yet, and wasn't even looking for one. James found his face vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite put a name to it.

"I'm Samuel," the young man said. "Samuel Wilkom. You probably remember me as a kid. I was just fifteen when you left, though I hadn't hit my growth spurt yet, so I looked like I was twelve."

James laughed. "Samuel! Of course! I remember you now! Wow, look at how you've grown up!" It took him a moment before he realized they were conversing in English. Perfect English, in fact. Samuel didn't have even a trace of an Amish accent. "You speak English really well," he remarked. "I remember you weren't very comfortable with it before."

Samuel smiled. His teeth were pearly white, neat and even. "I've been practicing," he said. "I sent away for some books. I have to sneak to do it since Mother and Father won't speak it at home. I finished school four years ago now, so I don't get much chance to speak English anymore. But now that you and the bachelor Levi are here, I'll have more of a chance to practice."

"You sent away for books, huh? How'd you know where to send away for them?"

Samuel looked down at his muddy boots. "Um, that's kind of a long story. Embarrassing, too."

"Try me."

Samuel took off his straw hat and fidgeted with it for a moment. "I met with a social worker who came to town not long after you left," he said. "Secretly. The social worker came here pretending to be from the upstate New York Amish communities. He told everyone he was here to look at some farmland to buy for his son, but he was really a former Amish man who ran away from his village because he was gay. He was looking for other gay Amish men to help, to help them improve their English skills so they'd have a better chance of surviving if they chose to leave." Samuel paused and swallowed hard. "He found me."

The world seemed to swirl around James for a moment. So this is what his mother had meant! There was another like him, right here in Lofstad. Another confused, lonely, frightened gay Amish man. James looked into Samuel's kind gray eyes, and saw himself.

"You did a brave thing, coming and talking to me about this," James said. He reached out and touched Samuel's hand. "A very, very brave thing."

"You're the bravest of all," Samuel murmured. "You left."

"And now I'm right back where I started. I'm not so sure that's such a brave thing at all."

"Why did you come back? I mean, really."

James sighed as he detangled himself from the plow straps. "It's a very long and complicated story," he said. "Unfortunately, I'm not really in a position to give any details. Not right now, anyway."

"That's all right," Samuel replied, fidgeting with his hat some more. "I was just, umm, wondering..."

On instinct, James gently lifted Samuel's chin with his index finger and stared deep into his deep-set blue-gray eyes. "Yes?"

Samuel's breath caught, and he returned James's gaze. No words passed between them, but the message was clear.

"Let's go to the hayloft," James whispered. "There's no one around. No one will see us. I'm shunned, so everyone's avoiding me anyway."

"Not me," Samuel whispered.

They walked in silence to the Semerad horse and hay barn. The horses were gone now; Amos must have hitched them to the buggy and taken them somewhere. All the better. For James and Samuel were about to take a terrible chance. A terrible, wonderful chance. Together.

“Climb up the ladder,” James whispered. When Samuel hesitated, he said, “I’ll go first, then help you up.”

James scurried up the old pinewood loft ladder, the same one he’d been climbing almost since he could walk. Samuel followed him timidly, his hands and feet unsure at the creaks the old wood made under his weight. James reached a hand down to help him up through the small hole cut in the loft floor, then raised him up to stand. They just stood there looking at each other for a few moments. Then without thinking, James seized Samuel’s shoulders, pulled him close, and kissed him hard on the mouth. Samuel stiffened with shock for a split second, then relaxed, opening his mouth to receive James’s tender, probing tongue. They kissed like that for what seemed like hours, then they sank slowly down to their knees on the hay-strewn floor. Hands flew this way and that, tearing at hooks and eyes, suspenders, collar lacings. Before either of them knew what was happening, they were both naked. They collapsed onto the floor, rolling back and forth in the warm, dry hay as their hands grasped and fumbled over one another’s bodies, two inexperienced young boys having their first full-on sexual experience.

James had never been totally naked with another man, had never felt the incredible sensation of another man’s skin touching every inch of his, covering him like a soft, warm cloak in wintertime. Getting a quickie blow job from Fred might have been bliss, but it had been nothing like this. The touch of lips against neck and nipple, the feel of a rock-hard throbbing cock pressed hard against his thigh, the sensation of hot, panting breath against his cheek—it was all more than either of them could fathom. Both men had both once thought they’d go their entire lives and never experience any of it. Yet there it was.

James reached down and began to gently stroke Samuel’s cock. Samuel groaned, his face tucked into the space between James’s neck and shoulder. He whimpered softly as James stroked him harder, harder, harder, faster, faster, faster. The younger man came almost instantly, spilling his hot, creamy seed onto James’s belly. On instinct, James cast a finger through the slick wet puddle on his skin, and brought it to his mouth to taste. It was salty, sweet, musky, heavenly—the very flavor of love.

What James and Samuel were sharing in that dusty old hayloft was beautiful, more beautiful than anything else in the world. It was not a sin. It was never a sin, no matter how many Amish elders might declare it so.

Samuel was sated for a few moments following his orgasm. He curled up in James’s arms and dozed for about fifteen minutes, but he soon wanted more. James did, too. On sheer instinct, the virginal young boy turned his body to face away from James, and he lifted his buttocks slowly up, presenting himself for the taking. James gave a little gasp of shock as he realized what Samuel was asking him to do.

“I...I...” he stuttered. “I’ve never—I don’t know how—“

“Please,” Samuel begged. “Please. I need this. I need it so bad.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” James whispered. “I’ve never done that before.”

“It’s all right,” Samuel whispered back. “Neither have I.”

Again acting on instinct, James reached between Samuel’s soft white buttocks until he found the tiny rosette within. He rubbed his finger back and forth across it, softening the delicate tissue, preparing it for what was to come. Nobody had ever taught him this; it was something his body seemed to know deep within its very cells. Samuel instantly relaxed, sighed, raised his rear up even more, preparing to be penetrated. Soon James had worked his finger inside him, pushing gently, stretching him little by little,

feeling the tight, hot channel loosen bit by bit. Samuel groaned in pleasure, began muttering little love phrases in German. "*Ich liebe dich*," he said. "*Ich liebe dich so sehr, mein Schatz*." Soon James had worked two fingers inside him, then three. Samuel cried and moaned as if it were the end of the world.

But it wasn't. It was only the beginning.

James's cock was rock hard, hot, throbbing, begging to thrust itself deep inside Samuel. He'd never done this before. He'd had only imagined it, and on the vaguest of ignorant notions at that. But just as his body had known how to prepare Samuel's delicate rose with his gentle probing fingers, he also knew when it was time to make their two gasping, sweating bodies into one. "You're ready now, aren't you?" he asked Samuel. It was more a demand than a question.

"Mm-hmm," Samuel groaned. He lifted his rear up high, braced himself on his forearms. Yes, it was time.

James took his cock in one hand, spread Samuel wide with the other. He matched the tip to James's rosette, and paved the way with his fingers. He worked the tip in slowly, swirling the tip round and round, back and forth, pressing gently, until it found purchase inside and took hold there. Then, with Samuel begging for more, more, more, he thrust forward.

James and Samuel cried their joy in unison. Their bodies were joined now, joined in the most incredible way, naked and glorious before God. James thrust faster and faster, harder and harder, until the sound of flesh slapping and grinding against flesh was the only sound in the universe. They grunted like animals, cried like babies, sighed like angels. This was pure heaven, it was bliss.

It was over all too soon; James spilled his seed hard into James after only a minute or two. But those few scant minutes were like an eternity, a rare intersection of galaxies and stars that had almost seemed to stop time and space.

James collapsed down onto Samuel's curved, sweaty body. He stayed inside him for as long as he could, but at last they had to separate. James pulled out of him and lay down in the soft hay underneath them, which had been made warm and soft from their coupling, and pulled Samuel down to lay beside him. They spooned their bodies into one another, resting, basking in the afterglow made all the more magical by it being the first time for the both of them.

Samuel nuzzled James's neck and gave a soft sigh of satisfaction. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you so much."

The lay there intertwined, and soon they both fell asleep for a while. It could have been ten minutes, it could have been two hours, James had no idea, but they awoke with a start at the sound of clomping horse hooves in the main barn below.

Amos had returned.

James sat bolt upright. Samuel still dozed beside him. He reached over and shook the younger man awake. "Wake up!" he half whispered, half shouted. "Amos is back! Get dressed! Hurry!"

Samuel groggily rubbed his eyes. "Wha—?"

"Get up! Amos is back! If he finds the two of us here like this we're both as good as dead!"

James had already managed to get on his wool union suit and was half into his pants when Amos began to shout in the barn below. "James! *Wo bist du? Warum haben Sie nicht mehr Ihre Arbeit?*"

By now James was almost dressed, but Samuel was still curled up in a groggy ball on the floor. Making matters worse, Amos had heard stirring in the loft above his head, and was starting to climb the ladder. Thankfully he moved up the rungs at a snail's pace thanks to his partial paralysis, but that still didn't leave that much time. James spied an old horse blanket hanging from a nail on the wall and threw it over Samuel just before Amos's head appeared through the hole in the floor.

"Hello, Father," James said in English, and put his black felt hat back on his head in a gesture of old Amish respect. "Were you looking for me?"

Amos grumbled something unintelligible in German, then switched to his heavily accented English. "Why aren't you working in the north field?" he demanded. "There's only an hour of daylight left."

"I pulled a muscle in my back," James lied. "I came up here looking for some liniment."

"We keep the liniment in the kitchen pantry," Amos snarled. "You know that. Why would you be looking for it up here?"

"I was going to use the horse liniment," James added, making things up as he went along. "You used to keep it in the tackle cupboard." Which was true. As if to prove his point, James went to the tackle cupboard mounted on the wall and found a bottle of his mother's homemade menthol horse liniment, which was ten times stronger than the kind she made for Amos and the rest of the family to use.

Amos eyed him suspiciously, but that seemed to satisfy him, at least for the moment. If he'd noticed the lumpy horse blanket left inexplicably in the middle of the loft floor, he made no sign. James silently prayed the old man's vision was failing him. "Horse liniment, eh? Isn't that a little strong for you? Especially now that you've turned to a soft-bodied English man?"

"It is all that is available to me," James replied, pretending shame. "I am shunned, Father. I am not permitted to enter your house. You are not supposed to be speaking to me at all, either."

Amos's jaw set hard; James could hear the old man's teeth grinding. "Very well," he muttered. "Get back to work." With that, he disappeared back down the ladder.

James stood frozen until the fading sound of his father's hobnailed footsteps showed he was well out of earshot. He finally breathed a sigh of relief and pulled the old horse blanket off a now-trembling Samuel.

"Is it safe?" the younger man asked, who was now painfully aware of his nakedness in the late-fall chill. He held two hands over his crotch.

"He's gone," James replied. "But maybe not for long. You need to get dressed and get the hell out of here before somebody sees you."

Tears glimmered in the corners of Samuel's eyes. "I—I'm sorry," he said, his voice breaking.

James reached out and caressed the side of Samuel's face. "Don't be. I'm not. I just don't want you to get hurt, is all." He went over to the porthole-sized loft window and peeked out. "The coast is clear for now. I'll go down first. Watch out that window. Once I'm safely out in the field, you can sneak away. Make sure you use the back entrance of the barn, and cut across the far western end of the north field. If

anyone sees you, just tell them you're cutting across fields to shorten your walk to town." He gathered up the rest of Samuel's discarded clothes and tossed them at him. "Hurry up getting dressed."

Samuel gave him a sad, frightened look. "Is it always like this?" he asked.

"I don't know," James replied. "You were my first."

And it was true. Because Fred didn't count anymore.

James climbed down the loft ladder, taking the rungs two at a time.

Chapter Sixteen

Jacob Semerad trudged along the muddy village path towards the abandoned grain silo. Lenny and Tony were waiting for him there. He'd called ahead to tell them he'd be coming alone. They weren't happy about that, of course. But he had a plan.

Jacob Semerad always had a plan.

The rusty old silo finally came into view. It stood as an empty, decaying hulk next to the ruins of the old Selz place. It hadn't been used in years, ever since the last surviving members of the old Selz family died off, their land divided up among the rest of the townspeople. Most people in Lofstad had forgotten about it, except for the village elders and mischievous children looking for a secret place to play. And Jacob, who used it as a meeting place for his clandestine dealings. It was the only place he'd known of in town where the two mobsters could hide out undetected, at least for a little while.

He finally arrived at the rusty metal structure and knocked on the detachable metal plate that served as a door. There was a pause, then a reply.

"Who's there?" came Tony's thick-accented, familiar voice, muffled slightly by the metal walls, and echoing.

"Jacob. Jacob Semerad."

Tony pulled the metal plate away and Jacob crawled through the small opening that led inside the silo. "I gotta bone to pick with you," Tony seethed. He stank of sweat, grease, and bad food. "Who da hell do ya think ya are, not doing as The Family bids? Huh?" Tony jammed his meaty finger into Jacob's chest once, twice, three times. "A made man? Huh?"

Jacob raised both his hands in surrender. "I don't mean any disrespect to The Family, Tony," he said, trying hard to flatten his Amish accent. "I really don't. But things are different out here in Amish country. You can't just go around doing whatever you want, with guns blazing. This isn't the city. There's nowhere to hide out here. You'll bring a lot of heat out here in a hurry if even the slightest thing seems out of whack."

Tony backed off a bit. "Whaddaya mean?"

“We Amish live a life of carefully scripted routine. Nothing about our lives has changed in more than two hundred years. If even the slightest thing changes, it raises suspicion. The only way they were able to sneak my bro—I mean, the Gambino—and Fred Billingsley in here was to pretend they were both Amish bachelors looking for wives. We would never let just anybody stay here, or just hide out for no reason. We’re completely cut off from the outside world.” Jacob paused, swallowed hard against those last words, which were about as far from the truth as they could possibly be. “Or, at least, we’re supposed to be.”

Tony still wasn’t convinced. He eyed Jacob balefully, and Lenny had already run out of patience. “I say we just shoot da bastard and get outta here,” Lenny growled, fingering his gun.

“Chill out, Lenny,” Tony barked. “Let him finish what he has to say.”

“We Amish are suspicious of the government, or anything organized under any kind of centralized power,” Jacob went on. “We’ll let a barn burn to the ground instead of calling the fire department. If crimes occur in our community, we usually deal with it internally, without going to the police. Usually, but not always. The village elders have always drawn a line at assault, or murder. They’ll bring heat in here in a hurry if they even suspect it. Especially given that my village has a long history of doing something that no Amish are ever supposed to do.”

An invisible light bulb winked over Tony’s head. “Harboring witnesses, ya mean.”

“Exactly. Ever since my father and the other deacons agreed to do witness protection, it’s put the whole community at unnecessary risk. They’ll call the authorities in here way before any other town in Lancaster County because of that. So if you’re planning any foul play, you need to have a carefully orchestrated plan in place first. A cover story that will make Fred and the Gambino’s sudden disappearance plausible to the Amish. That’s where I come in.”

Tony’s shoulders relaxed; he even took his hand out of his left pants pocket, where he’d been fingering his own gun. “Go on.”

“I’ll devise an excuse to send Fred and the Gambino on an errand to another village in another county,” Jacob said, his stomach getting bitter butterflies as lie after lie, deceit after double-sided deceit flew out of his mouth. “Then I’ll arrange for a message to be sent back that they’ve both decided to leave the Amish community for good. That way, they can both disappear, and none of us Amish will be the wiser. Except for me, of course.”

“Of course,” Tony quipped. “Sounds like a halfway-decent plan. But how will The Family know if we can trust you to keep your trap shut about it once it’s all over?”

“You have my word as a righteous Amish man,” Jacob said, almost choking on the words.

Tony and Lenny both guffawed. “And what da hell good is that? You ain’t exactly righteous, ya know.”

“Neither are you,” Jacob shot back. “And unless you want me to call the feds in here right now, I suggest you take the deal. Honestly, which one of us do you think the feds would believe, anyway? Me, the good Amish kid and favorite son of the village deacon, or you?”

Tony sighed and stared at the dirt floor of the silo. He’d lost this round; he knew it. “All right, kid. You got yourself a deal.”

They shook on it, and Jacob turned to leave. But Tony stopped him with a hard, meaty hand on his shoulder. "But it ain't over yet," he barked. "The Family is sending in a team of mob soldiers tomorrow night. You got less than twenty-four hours to bring those two in, or my orders are to use whatever means necessary."

Jacob blanched, and he felt his heart skip a beat, then two. "Twenty-four hours?"

"Yep," Tony growled. "I suggest you get busy." He half guided, half shoved Jacob through the tiny cubbyhole of a door, and dusted his hands. He didn't mention the fact he already knew the feds were planning to show up no matter what James or anyone else did. He didn't have to.

"Poor kid," he said after Jacob was long gone. "He'll be dead within a week."

* * * *

It was early evening. Fred was heading for the Schwartz homestead for the third evening in a row. Each day for the past three days, he'd taken an early supper with the Semerads—tense, wordless suppers of bland potatoes, overcooked vegetables, and unseasoned roast chicken---then headed over to the Schwartzes for courting. He'd walk Ruth and Sarah up and down the village path, one of them holding onto each arm. Then he'd take each of them out for walks separately. Ruth always insisted on going first, even though she was the younger of the two. She seemed very bored with the whole business, and always spent the entire walk jibber-jabbering about how much she wanted to get away from Lofstad and go to college, how much she wished she could wear preppy modern clothes instead of coarse Amish homespun, how much she wanted a radio and a TV and a television. All typical teenage-girl talk, only that teenage girl was stuck living in the nineteenth century when it was really the twenty-first. It drove Fred bananas.

He was always too glad to drop Ruth back off at the house after their walks, and Ruth was always just as thankful when they were over as he was. Sarah was always waiting for them at the door with bated breath, as eager to begin her walk as Ruth and Fred were eager to end theirs. Sarah's mother had been spot-on when she had described her elder daughter as a hopeless romantic.

Sarah took her courtship walks with the Amish bachelor Levi Stoltzfus very, very seriously. She hung tightly onto Fred's arm, gazed up into his eyes with a gaze that betrayed her heady lust for him, her sharp desire to see this phony courtship through into something real. She loved saying his "name," Levi, over and over again. She peppered him with questions about his life back in Philadelphia, which he responded to as cryptically as he could. The only information she'd pried out of him so far was that he was single, worked as a lawyer, and came from an important Main Line family. Fred hadn't mentioned a thing about his work as a high-priced criminal defense lawyer to the mob, nothing at all about his days as a famous New York chef. And he certainly didn't tell her he was gay. Hell, he never told *anyone* he was gay. He'd never had to. People always found that obvious, after all. Most of them, anyway.

Not Sarah.

Fred thought that Sarah was like a character in a Jane Austen novel. Rosy-eyed, naive, and swept away by her distorted notion of Amish romance. She would babble on and on about what kind of farmhouse she wanted to keep, her thoughts on Amish housekeeping and animal husbandry, even her ideas about Amish theology. She spoke at length about the qualities she looked for in an Amish husband, and ticked off on her fingers all the ways that Fred suited her perfectly. She wondered out loud just when their wedding might take place, what kinds of special celery dishes they might serve, even where they might spend their wedding night. Fred, in the meantime, cringed—and did his best to tune her out.

Fred figured either Sarah was the most accomplished Amish role-playing actress since Kelly McGillis in *Witness*, or she had gone so far over to the other side that she no longer thought herself as anything but a young Amish girl hopelessly in love. With him.

This can only end badly, Fred mused to himself while Sarah jabbered on and on. Now she was gushing about whether it made more sense for them to move to his Amish community in Maryland—a community that did not exist, since Abraham Schwartz had made it up as part of his cover story—or here in Lofstad. “There’s some spare land out on the far end of town,” she said. “It’s owned by the Community now, but I’m sure we could convince the village elders to sell it to us.”

“Uh...” was all Fred managed to get in edgewise before Sarah’s mouth started running once again.

“I’m sure they’ll give us a good price,” Sarah went on. “Nobody’s really used that land since the original family that owned it died off several years ago. The families that have been leasing it say the soil’s rocky and doesn’t yield much for farming, but I think it would be an ideal place to raise livestock. Like sheep, or goats. Maybe even a few dairy cows. What do you think, Levi?”

Fred stopped short. He couldn’t let this go on any longer, he just couldn’t. “Sarah, you know I’m not really Amish, don’t you?”

Sarah laughed. “Of course I do. But I’m not really Amish either. That hasn’t stopped me from wanting an Amish life. I’m planning to be fully baptized into the congregation just as soon as I can get married. It’s always best for a girl to be married first before taking the full Anabaptist vows before God.”

Fred’s breath caught. “You’re really serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. Do you really think I want to be an old maid?” “

But—but won’t you go back to the real world whenever Abraham decides to leave?”

Sarah just laughed harder. “Please. Abraham is never going back to the world. Nor my mother, either, no matter how much the two of them might talk about it. We’ve been here far too long to go back now. I was born here. I don’t know anything else.”

Fred shifted back and forth on his feet. “Well, you should do whatever makes you happy, Sarah,” he said. “But we need to establish something right now. This courtship is not real. I *amnot* going to marry you. I’m not ever going to marry any woman, ever.”

She stared up at him, innocent and disbelieving. “Why, of course you will. Every man wants to get married someday. It’s the natural thing to do.”

Fred stifled a laugh. How sheltered this poor girl was! The only kind of men she’d ever known were Amish men, men who married young and sired children purely out of duty. Men not unlike several generations of Billingsley men, in fact. But Fred Billingsley wasn’t like the generations of Billingsley men who had come before him. He didn’t do anything he didn’t want to do. And marrying a woman, let alone an Amish woman, was at the absolute bottom of his list. “Look, Sarah. You’re a lovely young woman. You’ll make some man very happy one day. But not me. Never, ever me.”

Sarah’s lower lip quivered, and her face began to crumple. “Wh-what do you mean?”

"I'm gay, Sarah. Do you know what that means?"

Sarah looked puzzled. "You mean, you're happy?"

Fred laughed out loud. "No, no. In the more modern sense of the term. I—I like men. Romantically. If I ever marry someone, it will be another man."

Sarah looked as though she'd just been hit by lightning. "Surely not. What you say is expressly against Scripture."

"So are a lot of things," was Fred's noncommittal reply. "Like eating pork, for example. Yet you do that."

Sarah reddened. "That's hardly the same thing."

Fred sighed. He'd painted himself into a corner here. "Look, Sarah, this courtship thing is all for show. You knew that from the very beginning. Your father told you that up front, and you went right along with it. I honestly don't know where all this is coming from."

Sarah pursed her quivering lips. Tears brimmed in the corners of her eyes. "Haven't you ever wanted to escape the world completely?" she asked, her voice breaking. "Haven't you ever wanted to do the thing that was least expected of you, and to live the rest of your life on your own terms?"

Sarah's earnest words were far beyond her years. She looked up at Fred with her young tearstained face, and Fred suddenly found her quite beautiful. He'd never found any woman beautiful before, ever. Yet there it was.

Had Fred ever considered running away from the world forever? Sure, plenty of times. Could he ever be happy living a settled, primitive life among the Amish, married to a much younger woman, a woman like Sarah, who was earnest, kind, and pure of heart? Possibly. After the events of the past few days, nothing seemed impossible anymore.

There was only one way to find out.

Fred leaned forward, took Sarah's face in his hands, and kissed her long and hard on the lips. He kissed her like he'd never kissed anyone before—and he'd kissed hundreds of men in his life, and even a few women when he was in his teens. He kissed her hard and with something he hoped was passion, and he felt—

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He might as well have been kissing a wooden board.

Well, that settled that.

Fred broke away from Sarah, apologized profusely, and excused himself. He ducked his head into Abraham's house and told him he was through with this whole phony courtship thing. In fact, he was through with the Amish altogether.

Fred was leaving for Philly in the morning. If that meant he ended up dead, then so be it.

Chapter Seventeen

The residents of Lofstad weren't aware of it yet, but they were being invaded.

Federal agents disguised as Old Order Amish were amassing just to the west of the village. They pulled up in horse-drawn buggies the federal government had procured from a movie set. More of them followed in FBI vans and armored cars a few miles out of town. Their clothes were borrowed or made by government seamstresses, who had gotten some of the details wrong, but were still close enough to the real thing for them to blend in with the surroundings.

The agents were here for two reasons. One, to serve as additional security for their two protected witnesses who were hiding out in Lofstad and for the Amish themselves. Two, to root out the mob assassin whom they now knew for sure was hiding out somewhere in the area.

What the feds didn't know was that said mob assassin had company. *A lot* of company.

On the far east side of the village, mob assassin Tony "Fatlips" Provenzano was assembling a small army of his partners in mob crime.

There was Lenny "The Elbow" Morazzini, of course. And Paulie Delgado, a mid-level *capo* in The Family's army of thugs. And there were two dozen street-level wiseguys who Tony knew only by their street names: names like Two-Face, Tightlips, Bicep, and Glock. Tony didn't need to know their real names, either. All he needed to know was that he could count on them to do what he needed them to do. Namely, shoot to kill. With silencers.

Tony was still in his Amish garb, but his team of helpers were still wearing their West Philly mix of sharkskin, gold chains, and tacky silk charmeuse. But he already had a plan in place to take care of that. He had just sent one of his deputies to the tourist-trap shops in downtown Lancaster with orders to buy out their entire stock of imitation Amish clothes.

Tony wasn't going to bother waiting for Jacob Semerad to get his ass in gear. He was going in to take those two renegades in himself. By force. Lots and lots of bullet-ridden force.

Even if he and his boys had plenty of firepower.

The one thing they didn't have was a plan to deal with the feds who were amassing on the other side of town, because they didn't have a clue that they were there in the first place. Tony hadn't been expecting them to show up for another twenty-four hours, and he had no reason to doubt his own self-assurance.

The feds, on the other hand, already knew they were facing a hostile mob army. They just didn't know exactly how many of them there were. Their estimates were ranging from as few as one to as many as five—a far cry from the actual twenty-odd mob soldiers that were actually out there. Since the feds actually had to obey gun-control laws, they were not only outmanned, but outgunned.

The battle was brewing. The only question was, when would it explode?

* * * *

James was in the hayloft, just waking up from a spending long, frigid night sleeping in the barn, when

Fred appeared out of nowhere.

“C’mon, James, we’re getting the hell out of here.”

James rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. When he saw Fred standing over him, he thought he was still dreaming. “Wha?”

“Get up. Get dressed. We’re leaving. We’re heading back to Philly.”

James gave Fred a blank look. “What do you mean, we’re going back to Philly? We can’t. We’ll get shot.”

“Frankly, I don’t care if we get decapitated,” Fred seethed. “I’ve been walking around all night thinking about it. I didn’t even stay with your parents last night. I don’t know how we’ll get out. All I know is I can’t stand another minute in this place.”

James rolled his eyes. “Well, it didn’t take you long, did it?”

“What do you mean?”

“It didn’t take you long to figure this place out isn’t at all like what they showed in that old Harrison Ford movie. Reality bites, doesn’t it?”

“I never said I thought the Amish were like the ones in that movie.”

“Maybe not, but I’m sure you *thought* it. Especially since you’ve got such a crush on Harrison Ford.”

“Well, Jesus H. Christ, James, *whodoesn’t*?” Fred sighed, pulled off his felt Amish hat, and ran a hand through his hair. “God, I haven’t washed my hair in more than a week,” he said. “My whole scalp feels like it’s moving.”

“Boo-hoo.”

“Look, I thought you’d be happy about this. You never wanted to come back here in the first place.”

James glared at him. “I never wanted to get shot at, either.” “

I’m sorry about that,” Fred said. “Really, really sorry. I’m sorry about the whole goddamned mess. But I can’t stay here anymore. Not just for my own reasons. There are other people who are being hurt by us being here just as much as we are. Did you know that Abraham’s daughter Sarah is in love with me? She actually thought I was going to marry her For real! And when I told her that was never, ever going to happen, I broke her heart. I really don’t want that on my conscience!”

“Funny, I didn’t think you had a conscience in the first place.”

“That’s not fair.”

James tossed aside the scratchy horse blanket he’d slept under and stood up to face Fred toe to toe. “You know what isn’t fair? The fact that the very first guy I ever went out on a date with dragged me into a mob war, almost got me killed—in fact, *maystill* possibly get me killed. Not only that, you’re the sole reason I am stuck here, sleeping in a freezing cold hayloft with nothing but a flea-ridden horse blanket,

eating bread and water and pig slop, breaking my back plowing a frozen field so that my dad won't beat the living shit out of me. And furthermore—“

Fred held up his hand. “James, we have been over this and over this. Lay off the guilt trip, will you?” He reached out, placed a gentle hand on James's shoulder, a peace offering of sorts.

James jerked away. “How about you lay off *me*?”

Fred sighed. “All right, fine. I was hoping to leave things on some sort of good terms between us, but obviously that's out of the question. Goodbye, James, and good luck. Maybe when this is all over, we can meet up again in Philly and have a beer or something.”

Fred turned on his heel to leave, but James cleared his throat, stopping him. “How exactly were you planning to get back to Philly, anyway?” he asked. “Walk?”

“I'll call a cab,” Fred said.

James laughed. “Well, good fucking luck. Nearest cab service is fifty miles away, and they don't come out here. You'll have to find an English to take you.”

“Oh really? And how do you suggest I do that?”

“I suggest you walk out on the main road about five miles or so, then try to hitchhike. That's what I had to do when I left this one-horse dump of a town. You might get lucky, you might not. Only four or five cars pass by on that road in an entire day.”

“Fine. I'll do that.”

Fred stomped towards the loft ladder exit, but before he could make a move to climb down, shots rang out. *Machine-gun* shots. A string of bullet holes flowered on the far side of the barn. A bullet whizzed past James's ear, missing him by inches.

“What the—“

Fred dropped to the floor. “James, get down!”

James obeyed. “Jesus H. Christ, Fred! Does The Family follow you everywhere?”

“Looks that way,” Fred quipped, cowering behind a hay bale. He grabbed some stray boards and a few pieces of scrap sheet metal and hastily built a makeshift shelter. And they needed shelter in a big way. Bullets were flying everywhere.

James military-crawled over to the spot where Fred was hiding. “How many times do I have to risk getting killed because of you?”

“Just this once, kiddo,” Fred replied, and kissed James firm on the lips.

“Fred, this is hardly the time. Or place.”

“Oh, come on,” Fred teased as more shots rang out. “You love living on the edge. You think it's sexy. Admit it.”

"The only thing I'll admit to is being absolutely nuts for going out with you in the first place," James snapped. But even as he cowered from the passing bullets, he was starting to feel more than a little aroused. He hated to admit it, but living on the edge *was* sexy. Risking life and limb for the sake of another was, too.

James felt himself blushing. Fred noticed right away. "I knew I could still get under your skin, kiddo," he said.

"Why don't you worry more about *saving* my skin right now? And yours, too."

"We should probably wait for them to stop shooting," Fred joked. "They'll run out of bullets eventually, then we can make a clean getaway."

James rolled his eyes. "You're not actually serious." As if to prove his point, the barn's loft porthole window shattered from gunfire.

"Yes, I am. I've worked with The Family for a long time. I know how they operate. They only bring as many bullets as they think they'll need. If we can hold our own for a while, eventually they'll have to leave and go get more ammo."

"That's a pretty big *if*," James said. "We're lucky we aren't chopped liver already. They've probably already managed to kill half the town by now."

"Collateral damage," Fred remarked.

James scoffed. "You're as callous and immoral as they are, aren't you?"

"No. I'm just thinking about it in their terms."

"Whatever you've gotta tell yourself."

The machine-gun fire rattled on and on. Soon almost every surface in the barn was riddled with bullet holes. The pigs and horses below were screeching and screaming, then the screeching and screaming came to an abrupt halt. "Looks like they took out the animals," Fred said. "Maybe that'll satisfy them."

"Or maybe they'll just climb up here and kill us in cold blood. I think that's far more likely." James's whole body was shaking now, and his heart was threatening to thump right through his chest. But his cock was rock-hard.

Fred shot James a wickedly mischievous look, and gently walked his fingers up James's dusty, hay-covered thigh. "Or we could just take advantage of a golden opportunity to make out."

"How can you think of sex at a time like this?"

Fred grabbed James's rock-hard crotch. "Hey, you were *already* thinking about sex. Here's the proof." He gently began kneading the hot, firm flesh through the rough woolens of James's long johns. James writhed with pleasure, coming dangerously close to the edge of the makeshift bulletproof shelter. A stray bullet grazed the skin of James's left elbow, tearing the fabric of his long underwear and leaving a stinging welt on his skin. "Oww! Jesus H. Christ, Fred! You're going to get us both killed!"

Fred laughed. "At least we'll die happy."

With that, Fred unbuttoned James's fly, pulled out his cock, and began to suck it. Hard. Fast. Harder. Faster. Fred sucked, blew, kneaded and rubbed James's cock and balls until they were hot and blue. James had to fight hard to resist the urge to buck his hips in response to Fred's movements. If he did, he'd move past the level their tiny makeshift bullet-barrier and get the both of them killed. Or at least, Fred would get killed. He'd get shot in the head. James would just get his dick shot off.

James came quickly, and the bliss ended all too soon. He didn't even have a chance to return the favor to Fred, because as soon as they were finished, the gunfire intensified even more.

"I don't think they'll be running out of ammo anytime soon," James mused as they both flattened themselves against the hay-strewn floor as much as possible. Their makeshift shelter of boards, corrugated tin, and hay was taking the brunt of the fire now; it couldn't possibly hold for much longer. "If this keeps up we won't make it."

"I think you're right, kiddo," Fred whispered back. His face was bone-white; James noticed that for the first time since he had met Fred, he actually seemed frightened.

James reached out and took Fred's hand in his, and squeezed it hard. "If we don't make it through this, hopefully we'll see each other on the other side," he said.

"I hope you're right, kiddo. I hope you're right."

All of a sudden, the shooting stopped. Silence settled around the shattered, pockmarked barn like a veil. James and Fred lay beside each other on the hayloft floor for several minutes, not moving, barely even breathing.

"Well, looks like they finally ran out of ammo," Fred said.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, they stopped shooting, didn't they?"

That didn't exactly convince James. "Maybe they just stopped to reload."

Fred scoffed. "They all use magazine-loading automatics and semi-automatics, the kind of weaponry that only takes seconds to reload. If they've stopped shooting, it's because they're out of ammo. Either that, or they figure we're already dead."

James laughed uneasily. "Who knows, maybe *we* are already dead! Neither of us knows what heaven is like. Or hell. Maybe this is it."

"If we're really stuck here in Lofstad for an eternity, I'm going with hell," Fred muttered. "I would hardly be surprised. I've always been a terrific sinner."

After almost a half-hour of total silence, Fred and James figured they were at least in the clear enough to take a peek out of the now-shattered window. James crawled across the bullet-strewn floor to the window ledge, and peeked one eye out. The barn, farmyard, and the surrounding hillsides were completely torn apart from relentless gunfire, but also completely deserted.

“Coast looks clear from here,” he said.

“All right,” Fred replied, gingerly sitting up from behind their makeshift foxhole. “Let’s see if we can tiptoe out of here. But you’d better let me lead the way.”

“Why should I let you lead the way? You don’t know your way around here like I do.”

Fred sighed. “Fair enough. But I’ll stay right beside you. I know The Family’s battle tactics. You don’t.”

They scoped out the safety of the barn’s lower level through a couple of bullet holes in the loft floor. Like its surroundings, the barn appeared deserted, though the Semerad family livestock was all dead, lying in congealing pools of their own stinking blood and feces. The bullet-ridden loft ladder barely held their weight as they scurried down; the last two rungs collapsed completely under their weight. They tiptoed around the barn, skittishly avoiding the dead animals and their pooled blood, and peeked outside through one of the many bullet holes pockmarking the barn. The coast appeared clear—for now, at least.

“Let’s go,” Fred whispered. “And let’s be careful.”

“Where exactly are we supposed to go?” James whispered back. “I’m shunned. There’s no safe haven for me anywhere in town. As long as we’re together, you’re shunned too by association.”

Fred rolled his eyes. “Somehow I think they’ll bend the rules under the circumstances.”

James scoffed. “Hardly. There are only two ways to end a shunning. Repentance, or death. As in, *my* death. And I can guarantee repentance will never happen.”

“Well, let’s hope death doesn’t happen, either. Though at this point I think we’ve only got a fifty-fifty shot.”

“That’s comforting.”

They cooled their heels against the bullet-ridden barn wall for a moment, then Fred started to get impatient. “Isn’t there anyplace in town we can go hide out for a while?” he asked.

“The only place I can think of is an abandoned grain silo out on the far edge of town,” James said. “But before we go out there I think we should at least take a look inside my parents’ house and see if they’re all right. My mom, and my sisters. I don’t think my father is home. Not that I’d care much if he kicked the bucket at this point.”

Fred winced. “Fair enough. Let’s go.”

They picked their way across the farmyard, which was littered with bullets and spent shell casings. As they closed in towards the Semerad farmhouse James noticed with dread that almost all the first-floor windows were shot out, and even a couple of window shutters had become dislodged from gunfire. The house was dark and deadly silent; there wasn’t any sign of life anywhere. James felt his stomach clutch and his heart skipped a beat at the very real possibility that his mother and sisters had been killed.

James climbed the three rickety wooden porch steps and let himself in the front doors. It was unlocked, of course—the Amish didn’t believe in using locks or keys. He stepped into the familiar whitewashed front parlor, its sparse furnishings destroyed by gunfire. A mirror lay shattered on the floor, a threadbare upholstered chair was torn to pieces, its springs and stuffing poking through. One of his mother’s many

rag rugs, made from the tattered scraps of his family's worn-out clothing, was ripped to shreds by bullets.

Amish villages were supposed to be peaceful places. James knew from experience that wasn't always true, but at least then the violence was well hidden. Not now. The rustic Amish home where he'd grown up was now a war zone. His beloved mother and his innocent sisters might be dead. And it was all his fault.

James picked his way across the bullet-strewn floor. "There's no way anybody would have survived this," he said in a very small voice. "Not if they were anywhere on the first floor."

Fred placed a gentle hand on James's shoulder and squeezed. "Is there a hiding place they could have gotten to?" he asked.

"The storm cellar, maybe," he said. "But the only entrance is on the outside of the house. If they had a chance to sneak out the back door and get down there. But . . ." James's voice trailed off, and he choked back a sob.

Fred took James tenderly in his arms. "Where's the storm cellar?" he asked softly. James was too overcome to speak, but he managed to point down the short hallway towards the kitchen. The trapdoor to the storm cellar was just outside the rear kitchen door to the house.

Fred gave James another firm squeeze and headed out the back door. He found the whitewashed storm cellar doors on the mossy ground just to his left. One of the doors was slightly ajar; he pulled it the rest of the way open and slowly made his way down the steep limestone steps down into the storm cellar.

It was pitch black down below, the feeble late-fall sunlight from above didn't seem to penetrate the darkness at all. The cellar smelled like old damp earth. There was no sound at all. Fred was just about to give up when he heard a slight scratching directly to his left. "Is someone there?" he asked.

A woman's voice said something in a language he didn't understand. Then as his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he saw the shadowy figures of a stout middle-aged woman and four young girls, ranging in age from about eight to about sixteen, cowering in a corner next to some ramshackle shelves that were filled with jars of home-canned vegetables. He figured they had to be James's mother and sisters, but he didn't recognize Abigail's voice, and it was too dark to see. The middle-aged woman said more words he didn't understand, but then one of the younger girls, Rebecca, spoke up. "Hello, Levi," she said. "My mom wants to know if the shooting is over."

"I think so," Fred said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, we're fine," said the girl. Fred now recognized the middle-aged woman as Abigail Semerad, who was apparently too frightened to speak English. She rambled on some more in her native German and her daughter translated again. "Mom wants to know if James is all right."

"Yes, he's fine. He's upstairs. He'll be very glad to hear you're all safe. But I think you should all stay down here for the time being, until we know the coast is clear." Fred's eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness by now, and he saw the cellar was well stocked with food and even some fresh milk. "It looks like you'll be able to stay down here for a while just fine. Wait until we come for you. And lock the storm doors from the inside if you can."

The younger girl whispered to her mother, who nodded, then spoke some more German. Even in the semidarkness Fred could see her eyes were glistening with tears. "My mom says to tell the shooters that

we forgive them,” the girl said. “She says to tell them they are blessed and loved by God.”

Fred gave them a simple nod, then climbed the steep cellar steps back into the frigid afternoon. He was too overcome with emotion to say another word.

Chapter Eighteen

Jacob Semerad had never been so frightened in his entire life.

The Family had betrayed him. They had ignored his advice, and had marched right into Lofstad anyway, guns blazing. For all he knew, everyone in his family was dead now. And it was all his fault.

Jacob felt something deep in the pit of his stomach that felt a lot like regret. He’d never regretted anything before, and up until now had never thought he would. Jacob had really believed that he was a cold-blooded, calculating criminal genius whose true gifts would never be appreciated by his Amish brethren. But he’d been wrong. In truth, Jacob Semerad was just a snot-nosed kid who’d gotten in way over his head, and now people were going to end up dead because of it. *Really* dead, not just dead in his imagination or in the movies that the Amish weren’t even allowed to watch. He’d been hurting people with his selfish criminal acts for years now, but never had that hurt hit him so close to home. Now it was real. Now it was something he could no longer live with, even though it was too late.

Jacob Semerad had brought The Family into Lofstad. And The Family was shooting everything in sight. The Family wanted his brother dead, wanted the fake Amish bachelor Levi Stoltzfus dead, and for all he knew wanted Jacob Semerad dead too. The latter would hardly be a loss now, because Jacob Semerad truly wanted to die.

He figured it wouldn’t be long now. If The Family hadn’t heeded his advice, it meant they no longer had any respect for him. Jacob knew that when you lost The Family’s respect, losing your life wasn’t far behind. The only questions were when, and by what means.

It was clear The Family had the village surrounded. He wasn’t going to be safe anywhere. But he wasn’t going down without a fight.

Jacob Semerad headed for the abandoned silo. He had a score to settle. And if he was really lucky, he just might have a way to win.

It was a long shot, but he had to try.

* * * *

James and Fred stole their way across the village towards the abandoned grain silo. There weren’t many places to hide, but they did their level best, slipping from tree trunk to tree trunk, farm shed to farm shed, boulder to boulder. After almost an hour of walking stealthily, the abandoned silo came into view. Only it wasn’t abandoned. It was surrounded.

At least two dozen men in ill-fitting Amish clothes stood on the trampled, muddy ground surrounding the silo. James didn’t recognize any of them, but Fred did. “The Family sent out its best and brightest trigger

men out after us,” he observed in a low voice. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Yeah, holy fucking shit is right,” James whispered back. “If you’re scared of your own people, I know we’re in trouble.”

“Let’s just stay out of sight for a while,” Fred said. “Who knows, the problem might just take care of itself.”

“What do you mean?”

“In order for The Family to have infiltrated an Amish village like this, they had to have someone working for them on the inside.”

James gasped. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely sure. They wouldn’t be here if they didn’t already know the lay of the land pretty well. And it could very well be that their inside man has betrayed them. Or maybe they’ve betrayed him. Or there’s some other kind of internal disagreement and all hell’s about to break loose. They could just end up dividing into factions and shooting the crap out of each other. I’ve seen it happen.”

James shuddered. “Who among the Amish would get in league with the mafia anyway?” he whispered, half to himself. “It just doesn’t make any sense.”

Fred clasped both of James’s hands in his. “It could be anyone,” he said. “Frankly, I don’t think the Amish getting in league with the mafia is all that different from the Amish getting in league with the feds. The motivation is the same: money. Money makes the world go round, after all, no matter what part of it you live in.”

James pondered that for a moment. Even though what Fred said made a lot of sense, he still had a lot of trouble believing it. But then he saw a sight that turned his already shattered world upside down.

James watched as his middle brother, the devout, obedient, and passive son Jacob Semerad, marched out of a copse of trees and walked right up to one of the mafia soldiers, who clapped him on the shoulder in a seemingly friendly and familiar greeting. James felt his stomach turn sour, his breath to bitter ash. “Oh my God,” he whispered.

“Well, there’s your inside man,” Fred observed, who apparently hadn’t recognized Jacob from this distance. “Anybody you know?”

“My brother,” James whispered, barely audible.

“Your brother?” Fred squinted, then slowly recognized Jacob for who he really was. “Jacob! Oh my God! To think I sat at the same dinner table with him every night for the past week!”

“Funny you couldn’t recognize a two-faced mafia bastard even when he was right under your own nose,” James seethed. “Especially considering you’re one yourself.”

“That’s a cheap shot,” Fred growled. “And suffice to say that once I testify against them in court, my days working for The Family are over. I’ll be lucky if I get out of this alive. And frankly, so will you. So how’s about you stop hurling insults and give me a chance to figure out a way out of this mess?”

James held up his hand. "Fine. Do your worst. I'm going to go hide underneath a rock now."

James got up to leave their hiding place behind a half-rotten piece of old farm equipment, but Fred placed a firm hand on his back. "No, you stay right where you are. I can't risk you running off and getting shot."

"Why, what would you care if I got shot?"

Fred gazed at him tenderly. James was stunned to see tears in the corners of his eyes. "I would care very much if you got shot, James. In fact, I'm not sure if I could live without you at this point."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Honestly, I thought you would have figured that out back at the barn."

James fiddled with a few stray pieces of dry grass. "I didn't really know what to think back there," he admitted. "I don't know what to think about any of this. I'm pretty confused right now."

"Perfectly understandable, kiddo. But no matter what happens between us down the road, I just want you to know that I've got your back. Okay?"

"Okay." A warm, tender feeling enveloped James all over. Even here in the midst of all this danger, he suddenly felt perfectly safe for the first time in his entire life. He wondered if this was what it felt like to know that he was loved. Even if it wasn't, he'd take it. It was the best damn feeling in the world. "So what do we do now?"

"We lie low and wait," Fred said. "If there's a mob army here, I think an army of feds probably can't be far behind. Especially since they've got a Secret Service agent in town already. Abraham's probably already alerted them to what's going on. They may even be here already, and are just waiting for the right moment to sweep in?"

"What if they're not? What if Abraham is dead? What if—"

"Well, then we're in deep shit. Our only choice then would be to just make a break for it and try to hitchhike the hell out of here."

"Oh, that's just great. We probably wouldn't even make it forty yards."

"That's why we need to take our chances here." Fred pointed to the scene on the hillside just in front of the abandoned silo. "Look! Something's happening over there."

The formerly friendly exchange between Jacob and one of the mob soldiers seemed to have grown hostile. A couple of beefy-looking guys surrounded Jacob and began pushing him around. Jacob gave back as good as he got, but it wasn't a fair fight. Soon two of the mob soldiers grabbed Jacob by each arm and dragged him inside the silo. Most of the other mob soldiers followed them inside, leaving only two to stand guard outside.

James's breath caught. He knew he'd probably just seen his middle brother alive for the last time.

"This can't possibly end well," Fred mused, reading James' thoughts.

“No,” James whispered back. “No, it can’t.”

* * * *

The two nameless, faceless mob soldiers threw Jacob to the damp dirt floor of the silo. He didn’t know their names, and nobody else did either. The Family preferred to keep the identities of those who did its dirtiest work completely anonymous. One of them beat his face to a bloody pulp with a set of iron knuckles, while the other kicked him over and over again in the ribs with his heavy motorcycle boots. James felt one rib snap, then two, then three. He wouldn’t last long this way. The Family wasn’t going to give him the privilege of a quick, clean, easy death. They wanted him to die as slowly and messily as possible.

Lenny the Elbow and Fatlips Tony watched the beating from their perch on a metal ledge jutting out from the metal silo wall that had once held sacks of grain for market. They laughed and joked as they watched, enjoying every blow, every sock to Jacob’s jaw, every broken bone and knocked-out tooth. James knew it didn’t matter if he tried to fight back against his two brutal attackers. There was no way out of this. He was already dead. He knew it, Lenny and Tony knew it, everybody knew it.

But Jacob knew something nobody else who had shoved their way into the abandoned silo through its sole tiny entrance did. Jacob knew something that could end this whole thing once and for all, and perhaps somehow give him one final chance to make things right.

Jacob couldn’t take back what he had done. He couldn’t take back the horror and carnage that had happened in his quiet, sheltered Amish home that day, either. But he could still make things right. With one flip of a switch, he could make sure The Family never disturbed peaceful, tranquil Lofstad Anabaptist Community ever again.

With every ounce of his remaining strength, Jacob dodged his attackers’ final blows, the ones intended to finish him once and for all. He dragged himself over to one side of the silo, reached for a rusty metal switch that jutted from the wall, and pulled it with all his might.

A loud grating sound erupted from the silo’s metal ceiling. A ceiling that wasn’t really a ceiling at all. It was the catch bed for the silo’s cache of dried grain, the emergency seed wheat that the village elders kept stashed here in case of catastrophic crop failure.

Twelve tons of it.

The catch bed gave way, and twelve tons of grain fell from the sky in a matter of seconds, crushing everyone in the silo to death. The two sentries posted outside heard the commotion inside the silo and scurried inside its tiny doorway only to be crushed themselves as the last ton of grain rained from above and spilled out the opening in the wall in a massive avalanche.

With his dying breath, Jacob Semerad said a silent prayer: “Forgive me, O Father, for I have sinned. I offer my soul up to Your mercy.”

And thus ended The Family’s reign in Lofstad.

Chapter Nineteen

James and Fred watched, gape-mouthed, as nearly two dozen men, including James's own brother, were buried alive in the abandoned silo. Neither of them spoke for a long time. When James finally found his voice, he was stunned at the hopelessly mundane and inappropriate sentence that tumbled out of his mouth. "I never knew anyone still stored grain in there," he said.

"Well, somebody sure did," Fred replied, his tone softened by deep condolences for James's loss. "And my money is on your brother. I think he just might have saved us all."

"I think you're right," James said. "I knew there was no possible way he'd gone over to The Family. Not completely, anyway. Jacob was always way too good a kid."

James choked up then, and began to cry openly. He took off his felt hat and twisted it in his hands, overcome with grief for a brother he'd barely known, a brother he didn't know he had loved until he was gone.

Fred wrapped his arms around James's waist and pressed hard against his back, comforting him the way he would a baby. "It's okay, kiddo," he soothed. "It's okay. He's gone to a better place, I think."

James slowly managed to get hold of himself. "Do you think there are any more of them? Mafia people, I mean."

"I think chances are pretty good they all got buried alive in the silo. Your brother did a very brave thing, James."

"Hardly. He committed suicide and mass murder simultaneously."

Fred sighed. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it. But I think most people would look at it as a completely selfless act done for the greater good. Do you know how many street thugs and mid-level mob managers he managed to do away with in one fell swoop? The feds will probably give your brother a medal. Though The Family will probably call him a turncoat and a rat who got exactly what he deserved."

James wiped the last few tears from his eyes and stood toe to toe with Fred. "Fred, I am only going to say this once. You will not disrespect my brother. You will not say things like that about my brother, not to me, not to anyone. My father least of all. Whatever he might have done when he was alive, he's dead now, and he deserves the proper respect."

"Of course. James, I was just—"

"I'm not finished." James thrust his index finger in Fred's face. "For all intents and purposes, this conversation never happened. What we saw before the silo collapsed never happened. My brother not only died a hero, *he was always a hero*. My mother and father, my sisters, the Lofstad villagers, not even the feds—*none of them will ever know what we know*. Never. Got it?"

"Got it."

They shook on it.

A caravan of a half dozen white windowless vans marked “FBI” and several unmarked police cars appeared on the horizon, kicking up clouds of dust as they made their way down the unpaved road that led through town. “Speaking of the feds,” Fred said, “look who just showed up for the party.”

Fred and James climbed up to the top of the hillside overlooking the dirt road and waved to the oncoming armored cars. The lead one pulled up and parked on a bare piece of earth just behind them, and the other vehicles slowly filed in alongside it. Their old friends Agent Chalmers and Agent Morrison jumped out of the lead van, both in full Amish garb.

Well, a very poor imitation of Amish garb, at least. James stifled a laugh at Agent Chalmers’s ill-fitting white shirt, suspenders, and black pants that were all at least four sizes too small, and had (forbidden to Amish) buttons and zippers to boot. Agent Morrison’s getup wasn’t much better: a hastily constructed Amish dress in blue polyester, and a *Little House on the Prairie* -style sunbonnet.

Agent Morrison strode right up to them and shook both their hands. “Nice work, guys. You two should really go into witness protection more often.”

James and Fred exchanged looks. “Do you already know what happened here, then?”

“Yep,” Chalmers said, clapping them both on the shoulders. “I gotta tell ya, James, what your kid brother Jacob pulled in there was brilliant. He managed to take out a significant chunk of the Philadelphia mob in less than ten seconds without firing a shot. Now that’s what I call bravery. I’m gonna personally recommend that he gets awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I watched the whole thing on the monitor in the surveillance van. You know that the top of that silo is open? We could see everything. Incredible, just incredible.”

“We have aerial satellite surveillance over the whole area,” Agent Morrison explained to James’s and Fred’s bewildered expressions. “Our pals over at the NSA have been keeping an eye on the situation here ever since the big shootout happened over at the Semerad place. I only wish we could have gotten here sooner. Maybe then your brother...” She trailed off. “I’m very sorry for your loss, James. I’ve gotta be honest—for a while the FBI thought Jacob might be working for The Family, but after what just happened, we know that couldn’t possibly have been true.”

“No, it wasn’t true,” James said, his voice clipped. “My brother was a hero.”

“Indeed he was,” Agent Chalmers said. “He’s not the only hero, either. If your father Amos and our operative Abraham Semerad hadn’t tipped us off when they did, we might not have been able to get your mom and sisters into a safe place in time.”

“What do you mean?” James asked.

As if on cue, Amos and Abraham emerged from one of the unmarked armored cars. They came to stand behind the two federal agents. Abraham was beaming, but Amos looked pensive. Instead of meeting his son’s eyes, he stared over his head out onto the horizon.

James noticed tearstains on both of his father’s cheeks. *He already knows*, James thought. *He’s grieving*.

Those two tearstains were the only public sign of grief Amos Semerad would ever show for his beloved middle son. But James knew that seeing his father shed even one tear was exceedingly rare. It was something he’d never seen in his entire life, in fact.

Until today. Today, his father was a much changed man. James could see it in his eyes.

“James, your father was instrumental in getting the federal authorities here on time,” Agent Chalmers went on. “He saw some unusual things going on in the village when he went out to check on the flock of sheep he keeps in his eastern pasture, and got in touch with us right away. Lucky for us, your dad gets up well before sunrise. He was able to get your mother and sisters into the storm cellar under cover of darkness, well before any shooting started, and he sent your brothers Jeremiah and Jacob out to warn everyone else in the village. Then he and Abraham rode out to the far edge of Lancaster County to meet our agents and escort them as they came into town.”

Agents Chalmers and Morrison were all smiles, but it seemed they hadn’t picked up on one tiny detail. Amos Semerad had taken care to make sure his wife, other children, and the rest of the village was safe from the impending gunfire, but he hadn’t done anything to warn James. Not a thing. James could have been killed, and Amos had known it. Yet he had done nothing.

Why? Because James was shunned. Because for all intents and purposes, James was already dead. Why protect the dead?

James didn’t say anything. He just stared at the dried-out grass. After a while, he asked only one simple question. “Can Fred and I leave now? I’d really like to go back to Philadelphia. I need to get back to class before I fall behind.”

The two federal agents exchanged looks. “I think we can probably arrange that,” Morrison said. “Though we’ll probably assign a couple of agents to stand guard on both of you twenty-four seven until you testify. But the risks for both of you are greatly reduced thanks to what just happened in that silo over there.”

“I won’t be safe until the Don is in prison,” Fred said. “I can testify against him until the cows come home if that’s what it takes.” He glanced over his shoulder at James. “And I think you’ll need enough agents to cover the both of us at the same time. I don’t intend to let James here out of my sight for a very long time. Isn’t that right, kiddo?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” James said. He reached out and took Fred’s hand. He didn’t give a damn who saw him do it, either—not the feds, not his father, nobody.

“Sounds good to us,” Chalmers said. He directed some of the gathering agents to check out the silo and secure the surrounding area, and seemed ready to go about the rest of his business when Amos Semerad brought the whole scene to a standstill.

“I will speak now,” Amos said in his halting, heavily accented English.

All eyes turned to Amos, who stepped forward and came to stand just a few paces away from his eldest son. “I have sinned today,” he said. “I have sinned greatly. The greatest sin of my whole life. The sin of false pride, and false prophecy.

“My whole life I have been disappointed in James. I was disappointed because he was not the son I wanted him to be. But that was my false pride. James was not the son I wanted him to be because God wanted me to have a different kind of son. This was a test that God sent to me. A test that I have failed.

“Today I decided to do something that is a very great sin. The sin of false prophecy. My false prophecy

was that if I did not warn my shunned son James of the imminent danger, then God would see fit to remove him from this world. This is what I thought was right and just. I thought that to wish my son dead did not matter, since he was shunned and therefore already dead to me. I was wrong, as every sinner who misjudges God is wrong.

“God proved me wrong. God proved me the false, prideful sinner that I am. He protected my son. He protected my son’s friend. In doing so, God has shown me His mercy and forgiveness. And if God can forgive me, then I must forgive my son.”

Amos Semerad kneeled—actually *kneeled*—in front of James and bowed his head. “I have lost one son today,” he said. “But God has seen fit to let me gain another. James, my eldest son, you are no longer shunned. You shall never be shunned again. You are free to live as the man that God made you. I ask your forgiveness.”

Overcome with emotion, James laid a hand on his father’s bowed head. “You have it, Father,” he whispered. “You don’t even have to ask.”

With that, Amos rose, and both men embraced. And wept.

It was a day that would be remembered in Lofstad, and in Philadelphia, for a long time to come.

Epilogue

Philadelphia, one year later

James stood on a ladder at the Jacob Semerad Memorial Center, putting a second coat of paint on the freshly plastered ceiling. He made a few finishing touches, then climbed down from the ladder and took a moment to admire his work. He smiled to himself as he remembered how much Jacob had enjoyed whitewashing the Semerad family house and barn every spring. It had always been his middle brother’s favorite chore. James gazed at the freshly painted white walls and ceiling and chuckled softly when he noticed a few stray drops of white paint that had dried on the freshly sanded hardwood floor. *You probably would have liked this place, Jacob*, he thought to himself. *Though you probably would have done a better job of painting it.*

The Jacob Semerad Memorial Center was a converted six-story brownstone near the Penn campus that Fred had purchased with some of his trust fund. It served as a halfway house for Amish youth who were joining modern society for the first time. But unlike the rundown, underfunded, and roach-infested place where James had spent time upon first arriving in Philly, the James Semerad Memorial Center was completely remodeled, well furnished, spotlessly clean, and had a full-time live-in staff of eight, including five specially trained social workers, a clinical psychologist, and a set of full-time live-in “house parents” who had years of experience among the Amish.

Namely, Abraham and Maria Schwartz, who had spent nearly thirty years working as undercover Secret Service agents among the Amish of Lancaster County. Only now that they’d finally retired from the Secret Service, they went by their real names: Brian and Mary Tompkins.

Their daughters Ruth and Sarah—Ruth and Sarah Tompkins, now—had accompanied their parents to

Philadelphia and lived in the halfway house, too. Only they didn't necessarily live there out of filial piety. Having spent their entire lives living among the Amish themselves, Ruth and Sarah needed just as much help and support as the half dozen other young men and women who had recently left the Amish communities of their birth and now made their home at the center. Ruth, Sarah, and the others were the James Semerad Memorial Center's first clients.

Fred and James had left the village of Lofstad a year earlier as deeply changed men. They weren't the only ones. James's father, Amos, had been deeply affected by what had happened during those few short autumn weeks, too. So much so that when he learned Fred and James were making plans to establish a halfway house in Philly for Amish youth in Jacob's memory, he donated all the money he had earned over the years from helping the feds towards the project. Amos had never touched that money in all the years he and Lofstad had been on the federal payroll, instead depositing it all in a small community bank in Lancaster. Between the principal and thirty years' worth of compounded interest, it had added up to almost a million dollars.

Between Fred's remaining trust fund and donations from Amos Semerad and other Amish communities Amos himself had rallied for support, the Jacob Semerad Memorial Center had enough money to keep operating, and growing, for decades. And more donations were pouring in every week. Timothy Stoltzfus, the former Amish stockbroker from New York who had written James a few years earlier, had personally donated fifty thousand dollars, and was now the president of the Center's board of directors.

Ruth, Sarah, and the other residents were behind closed doors in a group counseling session at the moment, but now that he was finished with his painting chores James could still pop his head into the halfway house's main kitchen and say hello to Brian and Mary, who were busy preparing the evening meal. "How's everything going?" he asked, heading for the utility sink to wash the remaining paint from his hands. "Did you get this week's grocery delivery okay?"

Mary looked up from where she was chopping a huge pile of onions for stew. "Hi, James. Yes, everything arrived just fine. I'm so glad you were able to keep your job at Whole Foods. I don't know what we'd do without their food donations. The organic produce is amazing."

"Yeah, it sure is. Believe me, Whole Foods is happy to make those donations. We can't sell produce that's been out on the shelves for longer than two days, even if it's still perfectly good. Health regulations, ya know. It would have just ended up getting thrown out otherwise."

Mary smiled. "Well, we certainly appreciate it."

Brian nodded in agreement. He stood in front of the stove, stirring a pot of kidney beans he was preparing to add to the stew. James still had trouble recognizing him without his full Amish beard and wide-brimmed hat. "You know James, somebody just dropped by looking for you," Brian said with a grin. "He was kind of in a hurry, but if you head down to the reception room you might still catch him."

James knew that "someone" could only be one person. Fred.

When they returned to Lofstad, Fred had pushed hard for James to move in with him at Billingswold. But James had resisted, preferring instead to keep his room back at the Penn university dorm. After what had happened back in Lofstad, he wanted some space and more importantly, some independence. He spent almost all of his free time outside of classes and work volunteering at the halfway house. But that still didn't mean he and Fred didn't see a quite a lot of each other.

Fred was cooling his heels in the main reception hall, just as James knew he would be. They greeted

each other with a firm, warm embrace, followed by a very long, very passionate kiss.

"I'd almost given up on you, kiddo," Fred said. "Does it really need to take four hours to paint a nine-foot-by-nine-foot room?"

"It does when I'm getting it ready for a new resident," James replied. "We're getting a new kid in tonight from Western Pennsylvania. The counselors say he's pretty scared, and probably very emotionally damaged. I just want him to feel at home here, is all."

Fred squeezed James's hand. "Kiddo, as long as you're around, no runaway Amish kid is ever going to be scared again." He motioned to the far corner of the room. "Come here. I want to show you something."

Fred walked over to a small nook in the corner of the reception room that had once been used as a butler's pantry. There was a white cloth tacked to the wall, hiding something.

"What's that?" James asked, pointing. "I don't remember seeing anything hanging here before."

"That's because there wasn't anything hanging here before," Fred said with his usual cheeky grin. "I just got it back from the engraver's this morning. Brian hung it up while you were busy painting." With that, Fred whisked the white cloth off the wall, revealing a simple, brass plaque. "Read the inscription."

James squinted at the small, unobtrusive block lettering. It said:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF JACOB ZACHARIAH SEMERAD,
WHO GAVE HIS LIFE SO OTHERS MIGHT FIND JOY.
1994-2010

"I kept it small and simple, in keeping with the Amish tradition of humility," Fred explained. "What do you think?"

Tears brimmed in James's eyes. "It's beautiful," he said. "It's perfect. I think Jacob would have liked it."

Fred slipped an arm tenderly around James's waist. "I'm glad to hear it, kiddo."

They stared at the plaque for a few more moments in perfect silence. They didn't say anything more, because they didn't need to.

They left the halfway house together, arm in arm and hand in hand.

THE END