

Kathryn
CUSHMAN

Almost Amish

a novel



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Kristyn Krutenat

You are the heart and soul of so many wonderful things,
yet you are never out front, never in the limelight,
always behind the scenes. It is to you, and women
like you, that I dedicate this book.

Grace Griffin

Mama Griffin, you exemplified simple living. Holidays
at your home were never full of gourmet food, fine
china, or gleaming silver. Still, sitting on the floor in
your tiny living room, surrounded by love, is among
the happiest memories of my childhood.

Melanie Cushman

Watching you battle through so much illness with a
smile on your face causes me to grieve for families who
live in misery because of the pressure to keep up and
outdo. Goals like “live through this” and “find relief
from constant pain” have a way of putting these
things in perspective. You are my hero.

Prologue

The cupcakes drooped like wilted daisies. Instead of the nice rounded tops shown in the recipe book, they leaned left. Or right. And a few managed to sag both ways at once.

Julie Charlton carried the tray into the junior high's multi-purpose room, purposely keeping her eyes averted from her frosted nightmare. She had put so much time and effort into these. Why did her baking never turn out right, especially when she was under pressure? Especially now, with the semiformal eighth-grade parent-child dance only hours away?

Scores of balloons hovered at the ceiling, dangling red, black, and white ribbons in festive chaos. Streamers formed graceful arches against the walls; glitter sparkled on the windowsills. Everything looked festive, and intentional, and flawless. Everything except for Julie's cupcakes. She looked around the room to see who might be there, but saw no one. "Hello?"

Nothing but silence.

What luck. Julie could at least drop these off and escape without having to acknowledge the debacle of flour, sugar, and eggs that had taken hours of her morning. She carried her load over to the food table, which was draped in a black tablecloth

with a gold lamé runner, and placed the cupcakes as far away as possible from the crystal pedestal at the end of the table. She knew that Colleen's famous chocolate cake would be highlighted there before the beginning of this evening's soiree. Not one single inch of fondant would be out of place, and it would be displayed in all its splendor for the eighth graders and their parents to admire and devour. Meanwhile, her misshapen little cupcakes would hide at the far end of the table, hoping no one noticed them.

She hurried back to her car, thankful that at least one thing had gone right this morning. Now, she needed to get over to the high school for the meeting of the financial committee and could only hope no one would notice the chocolate frosting stain on her spreadsheet. She'd known it was a bad idea to balance the volleyball team's bank account and bake at the same time, but both things were due this morning. What other choice was there?

She glanced down at her watch. 10:30 A.M. Forty-five minutes until the meeting. Maybe she could run home for just a few minutes. She'd left the kitchen a complete wreck. By now, cupcake batter and frosting were likely dried onto every available counter, cupboard, and backsplash. She needed to get started on the cleanup.

No. There wasn't time.

Yet if she drove straight to the school now, she'd be there half an hour early. A wave of exhaustion flowed over her, making her wish for a pillow and a blanket. How was she going to make it through today?

As she drove past the movie theater, she saw the answer in all of its green and white glory.

Starbucks.

Minutes later, Julie sat at a small window table, enjoying her tall fat-free double-shot latte. By the sixth sip, she could feel the caffeine start to slowly filter energy into her body. She

leaned back and simply savored one of her favorite pastimes: people watching. How long had it been since she'd taken the time to do this?

A couple of women entered, talking back and forth at a rapid pace, complaining about a coworker who apparently messed up a report. Julie recognized them both as mothers from the junior high that Brian attended. Would they be at The Soiree this evening, eating ugly cupcakes and wondering what kind of terrible mother could possibly have the lack of pride to bring these things? No, these women would definitely go for Colleen's sculpture of a cake—or perhaps broccoli and carrots with fat-free ranch.

Both women were bone thin, sleeveless silk blouses showing off their toned arms. Tailored pants and heels, perfect accessories. It must be so nice to wear pretty clothes like that every day. Julie looked down at her jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers and sighed. Still, she was truly thankful for the gift of being able to stay home with her family.

She took another sip and looked at her watch. Time to go. The financial meeting would last an hour; then she needed to stop by Thomas's office to help his secretary plan the company barbecue, make a quick stop at the grocery and the pharmacy, then home to a kitchen that would be covered in something like chocolate cement. Hopefully she could get it scrubbed off before picking up Brian from chess club. After that it would be time to cook dinner and fight with Whitney about homework.

Julie walked past the businesswomen, now standing at the counter getting napkins. As she passed by, she heard one of them say to the other, "Wouldn't it be nice if we got to wear comfy clothes and lounge around Starbucks all day?"

That's when the thought that had been residing in pieces throughout Julie's mind finally came together and crystallized into one cohesive and indelible truth. She made it to her car and simply sat for a moment, trying to get the energy, or desire, to keep moving.

She pulled a tube of lipstick out of her purse, then looked at the tired, middle-aged woman staring back at her in the rearview mirror. It was more than obvious that the haggard reflection felt the same way she did, so there was no reason not to give it voice. “I hate my life.”

There, she’d said it. The words hung heavy in the air, each syllable clogging her lungs with the toxic truth.

Hate.

My life.

Likely, it had been true for longer than she’d even realized. For just one fraction of a second, Julie turned the key and considered driving in the opposite direction—leaving behind all she’d known and starting fresh in some new, exciting location. Somewhere with fewer demands and less underappreciated drudgery.

The thought lasted only until a flash vision of her family pulled her back—Whitney’s brows knit together as she waded through her own heavy load of school and activities . . . Brian’s earnest face as he explained the newest asteroid discovery in deep space and puzzled over bullies at school . . . the lines of exhaustion on Thomas’s face after a hard day at work. They needed her. They needed her support. Who was she to whine about being unhappy? She drove toward the high school, ashamed for even having the thought.

Still, those were the words that echoed through her head, giving her the courage to act, when later that evening her sister-in-law Susan rushed over with an unbelievable request.

“Julie, I’ve got this *amazing* opportunity, but you’ve got to help me. . . .”

Was it love for Susan or her own need to escape that made her answer yes? Even in the aftermath, Julie would never be completely certain.

Chapter 1

“We’re going live in five, four, three, two, one.” As the countdown culminated, the audience did as they were instructed and began to clap wildly, as if this moment was the greatest in their lives. An overhead camera swooped forward, and two cameramen walked through the aisles, pausing at anyone who caught their interest.

“Welcome back, everyone.” Lisa Lee stood in the middle of the set, smiling and nodding her appreciation of the applause. The curls in her long black hair bounced with every move she made, framing her face with the same perkiness that permeated everything about her. “I’ve got some people I’d like for you all to meet, but first, there is exciting news to share.” She gestured toward a large video screen behind her. “Last year we did a three-month segment called *Going Almost Blue Blood*. Do y’all remember that? Did you enjoy it?” The audience went wild with their cheers as the video screens behind Lisa Lee lit up with snippets from last year showing a middle-class family being placed amid some of New York society’s elite destinations, hideaways, and social events.

The host nodded, her perfect smile welcoming and friendly as always. “We enjoyed doing that, so we thought we’d try again,

but this time, we're going to try something just a little different. Everyone on our staff, myself included, is always talking about how busy our lives are, how we don't have time to do the things that are really important to us. Can anyone out there relate?" She held out both arms, hands upturned, gesturing toward her audience. Applause, vigorous head nods, and all-out whooping came from the mostly female audience.

"Well, here's the deal." Lisa took a seat on a high stool just in front of her cooktop. "We were trying to think of a series we could do on simplification, and how it might work. One of the hairstylists on the show is a big fan of Amish fiction—and she was talking one morning about how wonderful that lifestyle sounded to her. And it got me think-*ing* . . ." She almost sang the last word, as she was known to do when excited about something. She looked toward the backstage and motioned with her hands. "Okay, y'all come on out here."

Julie's knees shook as she took each step onto the stage . . . onto national television. She'd been watching everything unfold on a monitor and now followed her sister-in-law out into the lights, taking her exact place on stage, just as she'd been instructed. Her kids came to stand in front of her, as they'd rehearsed, and she put a hand on each of their shoulders, per plan.

It was really happening.

Lisa Lee moved closer and put her hand on Susan's shoulder. "This is Susan Reynolds. I'm sure you all remember her from the occasional cooking features she has done on my show, and this is her daughter, Angie. How old are you, Angie?"

"Seventeen."

Lisa Lee then moved over to Julie. "This is Susan's sister-in-law, Julie, and her daughter, Whitney, and son, Brian. And you two are how old?"

"Sixteen." Whitney's voice projected loud and strong, showing not a bit of fear.

"Thirteen." Brian's voice was barely audible.

Lisa continued. “We’re using some extended family for this scenario, because extended family is very important in the Amish culture.” She smiled again. “So we’re sending this lovely family to spend the summer in Tennessee, near an actual Amish community. They will live without cars, television, or even—can you imagine?*—cell phones*, for the entire time.” The audience began to “ooh” and “aah” over this. “They’re not completely roughing it. They’ll have a few modern conveniences *most* of the time, like air-conditioning and a refrigerator—and they will also have indoor bathrooms.” She held up a hand beside her mouth and pretended to be whispering a secret to her audience. “That one was their main condition before agreeing to do this.”

The studio audience laughed appreciatively. Lisa covered her mouth and giggled, in a display of cuteness that had made audiences around the world love her. “Each week they’ll have a different challenge—to accomplish a task or work through an issue that the Amish face on a daily basis. By the end of this season, we’ll just see if the Amish way of life is really all that simpler than our lives today, or whether it’s just complicated in a different way. What do you think?” She smiled broadly. “Who thinks this might be our best idea yet?”

The audience went wild with applause.

Julie thought she might throw up.



Julie sat numbly in the green room, her mind going over and over the last hour. She thought they’d done well enough, not that any of them had done anything but stand there and smile.

“Wow, look at all this hardware.” Whitney stood next to a shelf full of awards and plaques. “If the Lisa Lee show is really this good, how is it I’ve never even heard of it before?” She picked up a crystal trophy and turned it over in her hands. “This thing is heavy.”

“Whitney, put that down.” Susan, who had been pacing back

and forth, rushed over. “The last thing we need is for you to break something.” Then, as if suddenly realizing she might have sounded too harsh, she offered a not-quite-believable smile. “And I’m guessing most girls your age don’t watch too many lifestyle shows. That’s why you’ve never heard of it.”

“I guess.” Whitney set the trophy back on the shelf and shrugged.

The door to the green room opened and Lisa Lee walked in, followed by one of her assistants—a pretty young blonde. Lisa hurried over to Susan, arms outstretched, and drew her into a hug. “Great job.” She looked around the room. “Great job, everyone. The audience was just eating you up. I think this is going to be our most interesting segment yet, don’t you, Jane?”

The blonde looked up from the clipboard in her hands. “I do.”

“Now, kids”—Lisa looked around—“how would you like a tour of the studio? I’m pretty sure Taylor Swift is making a guest appearance on the talk show filming next door. You want to go watch?”

“Yes!” Angie and Whitney hugged each other and jumped up and down.

“Sounds interesting.” Brian’s words were controlled and even, but Julie suspected that even he was considering joining the girls in their Snoopy dance.

“Great. We’ve got a little bit of behind-the-scenes interviewing to do with your mother and aunt. Jane is going to take you around the studio. It shouldn’t take us terribly long.”

“Don’t hurry on our account.” Whitney skipped her way to the door, before returning to grab her younger brother by the arm. “Hurry up. We’re going to see Taylor Swift.”

The kids all made a collective squealing sound as they disappeared out the door. Jane giggled and followed them out.

“All right.” Lisa’s dimples seemed to glow in her ever-smiling face. “Now that the kids are gone, I’ll take you to your next assignment, your first sit-down interview. Follow me.”

She led them down a long hall, stopping about halfway to open a door. Lisa tilted her head toward the small conference room inside. “Julie, this is your stop.”

“We’re not doing this together?” She looked toward Susan, silently begging her to do something.

“For now, you’ll be separate,” Lisa said quite casually. “Have a seat right here, and the producer will be in shortly. Would you like some coffee, water, anything?”

“No, thank you.”

The door shut with a click, but to Julie it sounded more like the clanging lock of a prison holding cell. She stared at the door, awaiting the arrival of the executioner. How many ways were there to say something stupid on national television? “Get a grip, Julie.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Stop being so melodramatic. It will be fine.” Speaking the words aloud helped, if only a little.

The door opened and a tall man entered the room. His head was shaved smooth, and he wore an obviously expensive golf shirt and khaki pants on his wiry frame. Every step he took exuded a quiet confidence that most people would envy. “Hello. I’m Jim Waters, one of the producers.” He smiled in a relaxed, friendly way, and soon they were making small talk.

Julie was thankful that he’d decided to warm up without cameras or other people in the room. It did help relax her quite a bit. By the time they were ready to get down to business, perhaps she would be able to think straight.

“What do you hope to gain from your time on the farm?” he asked, shifting the conversation a bit. It was a question Julie had been asking herself all throughout the prior days.

“I’m here to help Susan. So I’m just hoping to avoid messing things up for her.” She tried to smile but was too nervous to completely pull it off.

“I know you’re here because of her. But surely, there must be something you are hoping to get from this experience?”

Julie thought for a moment. What did she hope to gain?

What she most hoped was to find a reason to believe that something about her life was worthwhile—or more correctly, a reason that she might want to return home when it was over. *Perhaps there's more truth than necessary in that answer.* “I’m mostly looking forward to slowing down and enjoying my kids. Our lives are so fast-paced that we often do little more than pass each other on the way in or out.”

He nodded. “My wife says the same thing about our family. Especially with kids in sports.”

“Exactly.” Julie could feel the tension melting from her body. She was so thankful to have a producer who at least understood what she was saying.

“What do you most hope your sister-in-law will gain from this experience?”

“I’m hoping it will help launch her career to the next level. It means so much to her, and she really does deserve it.”

“That’s what we’re all hoping.” He smiled and nodded as he leaned forward on his elbows. “But I mean, other than that, what do you hope she learns from the experience?”

Julie thought about that one for a moment, then decided to stick with the safest, and most obvious, answer. “Well . . . I guess I’m hoping that she learns to relax a little.”

“Type A, huh?”

“Definitely.” Julie thought about the last couple of years. “Honestly, I don’t know how she does all that she does. She’s pretty amazing.”

“Why is it I feel like there’s a ‘but’ to that statement?” He grinned in a conspiratorial manner.

“She can be a bit uptight.” Julie supposed there was no reason to deny the obvious. “She pushes her daughter pretty hard, too.”

Jim laughed. “Gotcha. My sister is just like that.” He started a story about her that sounded exactly like Susan when the door opened. Julie looked up, expecting to see a film crew. Instead,

she saw Susan and another woman. Thank goodness! They had decided to let them do this together, after all.

Jim offered his hand across the table. "It was really nice talking with you, Julie."

"You too." She shook his hand.

"Okay, ladies, now that we're all done, we'll see if we can find out where your kids are and get you caught up with them." Jim started toward the door.

"But our interviews. Aren't you going to film them?" Susan asked, taking the question right out of Julie's mouth.

"Oh, they were filmed. There are several cameras in the conference rooms back here. Don't worry, we got it all."

Julie held her breath. She would never have been quite as free with her stories or frank with her answers if she'd had any idea she was being filmed. She looked toward Susan, wondering if she should apologize in advance or just hope that they cut a lot of what she'd said.

Then she saw Susan's face. Her expression of horror left little doubt that apologies might be needed from both directions. Julie didn't think she wanted to know what had been said in the other room. In fact, she was certain of it.

Chapter 2

Susan spooned the balsamic reduction sauce over the pork chops, then created an arc of sauce around the edge of the plate for effect. The color of the julienne vegetables made the perfect complement to the plate, as did the hint of couscous peeking from beneath the chops. A couple sprigs of rosemary across the top added the final touch to the presentation. She took a deep breath, stomach churning, and carried the plates into the dining room.

“Wow, even for you, this looks amazing. You’ve really out-done yourself.” James sat in his usual chair, the soft glow of the candles washing his face in an amber light.

“I hope you enjoy it.” She set the plates on the table, knowing that she most certainly would not.

She pulled the knife slowly across the meat, gathering her thoughts, waiting for the perfect time. But how did one find the perfect moment for a conversation like this?

“Delicious.” James put the fork in his mouth, and suddenly Susan could bear the taste of unspoken words no longer.

“Who is she?”



“Mrs. Reynolds, you nodding off on me there?”

Susan jerked awake, and it took her a moment to realize where she was. Her face burned as she looked up toward the hairdresser. “I’m so sorry.”

The girl waved her hand dismissively. “Not to worry. Lots of people get sleepy when they’re getting their hair done. I don’t take it personally. Come to think of it, I don’t take much personally.”

Two years ago, Susan might have made the same statement. That, of course, was before she’d asked the question whose answer changed everything.



“This is where you get out.” The man behind the wheel of the black Suburban pulled to the side of the dirt road and motioned his head toward the passenger door. It was only the second time Julie had heard his voice since beginning this journey almost two hours ago.

“You can’t be serious.” She looked toward the driver, waiting for the punch line. His black wraparound sunglasses made it difficult to read any kind of expression, but the firm set of his jaw showed no hint of a smile. Julie glanced toward the backseat.

Whitney’s blue eyes were huge, and she shook her head in small, quick snaps. Brian’s mouth was open, but he managed to stab Julie with an “I told you this was a bad idea” expression.

Not for the first time today, Julie wished that Thomas had come with them. He would know how to handle this. But Thomas wasn’t here, and her kids needed her to summon up some courage and stand up right now. “You can’t just leave us here.” Her voice wobbled, betraying any pretense of authority she hoped to convey.

“Sure I can. Haven’t you ever watched reality TV before? This is what happens.”

“We’re in the middle of nowhere, and we have no idea where

to go from here.” She looked out the window for any sign of life—a farmhouse, another car, anything. There was nothing but rolling green hills dotted with a couple dozen cows on the right and a crop of . . . something green and leafy . . . to her left.

The driver pointed slightly behind his left shoulder. “You see that mailbox back there? That’s yours. Your new home is down that dirt drive a ways. Start walking. You’ll find it.”

“Then you need to drive us to the house.” Julie managed to at least keep her tone even this time. “Otherwise, I’ll have to report you to the producers.”

“Mrs. Charlton, the producers are the ones who told me to drop you here.”

“Oh.”

There must have been a more intelligent response, but at the moment, it eluded her.

“How far?” Whitney had her arms crossed across her chest and was leaning back hard into her seat. No self-respecting teenaged girl was going to take off walking down a dirt road without at least a hint of a fight.

“You’ll find out when you get there. Now get moving. We’ve all got a schedule to keep.”

Julie grasped the door handle but couldn’t bring herself to pull it just yet. “I . . . uh . . . what about our things?”

He reached down and pulled the release. “Back’s open. Now, you’ve got sixty seconds to get your stuff out of there before I drive away and take it with me.”

The entire car shook with the force of Whitney’s door flying open. Before Julie had even processed what was happening, Whitney was at the back pulling out her duffel and backpack.

Julie opened her door a bit more reluctantly. “Come on, Brian, get your things. You don’t want to lose your telescope, now do you?”

Once again the car shook. “Hurry up, Whitney, my telescope’s more important than your stupid old shoes.”

“Shows what you know.” Whitney didn’t look at her brother, but she did reach in and pull out the hard telescope case and hand it back to him, soon followed by his bag. “Hey, what about our . . .” Instead of finishing the sentence, Whitney raced around to the driver’s-side window and pounded. “What about our phones? We want our phones back.”

The driver rolled the window partway down. “My job was to confiscate them and deliver them to the appropriate person.”

“If that’s true, then why aren’t you taking our luggage to the *appropriate person*?” Whitney looked toward Julie. “Mom, he’s going to steal our phones.”

His window began an ominous ascent, but just before it reached the top, he called out, “I wish you all the best of luck.” Then the SUV with blacked-out windows pulled away, leaving them all alone, two thousand miles from their home and with no idea of what to expect.

“That guy’s a jerk.” Brian stared after the car with squinted eyes.

“He’s just doing his job, like they told him to.” Julie studied the empty country road and tried to smile brightly as she gripped her suitcase. “Well, I suppose this is where our adventure begins. Why don’t you pile your duffels on my rolling bag, and let’s get moving.”

“I told you this was going to be a disaster.” Brian put his bag on Whitney’s, then wrapped his right arm around the telescope case. “This is heavy. Hope it’s not far.”

So do I. The driveway was mostly dirt, a much deeper red color than Julie had ever seen. Pulling her suitcase onto it from the pavement immediately made it more difficult to pull. There was no house in sight, and the temperature had to be in the high eighties. She’d heard about the humidity of the South in the summer, but it took today’s arrival in late-May Tennessee to make her fully understand it. She suspected they would see much worse before this summer ended. Still, there were worse things than heat.

“Tell me again why we’re doing this?” Whitney adjusted her backpack to the other shoulder and looked toward Julie.

“I told you, I think it is a good idea for all of us to slow down a little. Living simply for a few months will give us a chance to de-stress and think about what it is that’s really important to us.”

“Getting dumped on the side of the road, in this kind of heat and humidity, in a place I’ve never been, doesn’t exactly seem the ideal way to de-stress to me. There’s just nothing logical about it.” Brian mumbled just loud enough that Julie knew he meant for her to hear.

“I already know what’s important to me,” Whitney put in. “It’s the travel volleyball team that I can’t be a part of this summer, because I’m here. Now all the other girls will be way ahead of me for varsity. Not to mention the City College biology class I’d planned on taking.”

“We’ve been over this already, Whitney. You’re sixteen years old and it’s too much pressure. When I was your age, it never even occurred to me that I needed to take college classes in the summer, or that we should play a single sport year round or risk losing our spot.”

“Things were different then,” her daughter said, and Julie tried not to take it as, *Yeah and look at you now*.

“When’s the last time you really enjoyed volleyball, Whitney? The way you talk about it sometimes, it’s become just another chore in your day.”

“Mom, volleyball is what I do—it’s who I am.”

“I’m missing astro camp, and you don’t hear me back here whining about it—even though I think we all know that my hopes for this summer have been decimated.” Brian coughed from behind them. “Mom, could you maybe roll that thing somewhere a little less dusty? I can’t even breathe back here.”

Julie turned to see puffs of dust coming from behind her suitcase wheels. Somehow it reminded her of smoke signals. SOS, indeed.

“Sorry. Why don’t you walk ahead of me?” Julie paused and watched her son struggle past her with his load, his face already beginning to redden from heat and exertion.

“I really don’t see the necessity for coming all the way out here if you just want us to slow down,” Whitney started in again. Her words were beginning to pick up speed. “All you had to do was tell me you didn’t want me to play volleyball this summer. At least I’d still be near my friends. I could even work that summer camp for the Westside kids. It just doesn’t make sense.”

Julie said nothing. She knew better. The kids’ lives had become so high-pressure, so overly scheduled, that it was going to take more than just telling them they needed to slow down. They needed this. A radical lifestyle change. All of them—maybe Julie most of all.

But there was much more at stake here. “This is about more than us slowing down for a while. You know it’s important to Aunt Susan that we do this. We’re a family, and families support each other.”

Whitney nodded, her face suddenly soft. “You’re right, and we will.”

“Yeah, we will.” Brian wheezed. “I just think there must have been a way to help her that was a bit less”—he stopped walking and took a couple of deep breaths—“disruptive to our lives. Where are Aunt Susan and Angie, by the way?”

“Good question.” Julie had no idea why the producers had been so insistent that the two families travel separately. Somehow, she’d just gone with it, like she always did, without asking too many questions. Without asking enough questions, perhaps.

Whitney grabbed Julie’s arm and whispered, “Mom, look, there’s a man up in that tree. The third one on the right.”

Julie looked toward the dark shape in the tree line. It certainly was a man. She could see his jeans and tennis shoes dangling near the trunk about halfway up, his face hidden behind a leafy branch. “Let’s speed up a bit.”

She caught up to Brian and whispered, “We need to hurry.”

“Why?” His face was bright red, so that his freckles barely showed. “It’s too hot to go any faster.”

Whitney grabbed his arm and pulled. “There’s a man up in that tree, dumbo. You want to stand here and wait to find out whether he’s looking for a fresh-off-the-plane California family to rob? Maybe he likes telescopes.” She looked toward the tree again, then turned back, a hint of panic in her eyes. “Mom, I think he’s got a gun.”

Brian jerked around, stumbling over his own feet as he did so. He somehow managed to catch himself before he or his telescope fell. As he straightened up, he began laughing hysterically. “That’s not a gun, it’s a television camera, dork-o.” Brian continued to laugh, but whether it was from relief or showmanship at the idea that he might be getting filmed, Julie didn’t know.

Whitney blew out an irritated breath and stomped away. A few seconds later when they caught up with her, she turned to Julie and said, “So tell me the truth, how bad do I look? I’d rather hear about it now than be caught off guard when I see it on television.”

“You look just beautiful.” Julie reached over to pull Whitney’s hair behind her shoulder. Always a bit wild and wavy, it was taking on a life of its own. Her daughter’s face was damp with perspiration, and orange dust spotted her legs and arms. “And I’m sure they’re just warming up. That won’t be for the show.”

Brian, who was now in front, reached the top of the hill and pointed. “Hey, look, there’s the house.”

Julie caught up to him and almost gasped. Nestled into a lush emerald nook stood the most charming farmhouse she thought she’d ever seen. It was white and gleamed in the sun, waiting for them. Just off the house was what appeared to be a small storage barn, and there was a much larger barn just behind that, surrounded by fences and corrals.

“Doesn’t it just figure that we’d have to get all the way to the *top* of this hill, to see *down* to where we’re going? Don’t you think they could have given us a ride to here at least?” Whitney laughed as she said it, her voice suddenly higher-pitched, the intoxication of cameras and crews and a completely different life obviously affecting her, too.

Julie nodded. “You read my mind.”

The house was made entirely of planked wood painted white, no shutters, with a tin roof on top. It was neat and tidy and appeared freshly painted. Julie had read enough about the Amish way of life to know this was more or less what to expect, but the simplicity of the place carried a charm that fancy accoutrements just couldn’t bring. The red paint was peeling on the little storage shed . . . barn . . . whatever it was, as well as the much larger barn farther back on the property. “It looks like a Norman Rockwell painting.”

“Norman who?” Brian leaned a bit to his right side with the weight of the telescope in his hand.

“He was an artist from a long time ago—before my time even.”

“Was paint even invented back then? Were there dinosaurs, too?” Brian grinned up at her through reddish-orange lashes. His face had gone so red from heat and exertion, his freckles had nearly vanished.

“Brian, you refrain from the old-people humor and I won’t call you ‘kiddo’ on national television.” Julie smiled at her son, happy to see him in such good spirits.

“It smells funny here.” Whitney wrinkled her nose.

Julie took a deep breath. “That, my darling, is clean, fresh air.”

“Perhaps.” Brian sniffed the air. “But I’d say there’s also a bit of freshly turned earth, the sweet smell, I think, is honeysuckle, and there’s just a dash of . . . hmm . . .”

“Manure?” Whitney cocked one eyebrow at her brother.

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“Most likely. Animal waste of some kind is nearby, likely near the barn Mom thinks looks like a painting.”

Honeysuckle or horse manure: Which one was the summer going to be?

Julie looked again at the scene ahead, took a deep breath, and said, “Okay, you two, let’s go do this.”

Chapter 3

“Lift your chin up just a little and look over my left shoulder.”

Susan did as the photographer—whose name she hadn’t been told—said, hoping she didn’t look like a complete amateur. She concentrated on presenting a polished and in-control demeanor for the camera but couldn’t be sure it came across that way.

“Just a minute.” The stylist rushed over to dust Susan’s forehead with a bit of powder. Then she took a comb and painstakingly adjusted what felt like only a few strands of hair. “There now, that’s better.” She hurried behind the photographer, and the camera began to click once again.

The photographer pulled the camera away from his face, tilted his head, and stared. He nodded twice, forehead wrinkled in concentration. “Hmm. Let’s try a few without a smile. Show me your best power pose.” He pulled the camera back up to his face, ready for action.

Susan had no idea what a power pose might look like, but she tried to visualize magazine photos she’d seen of women CEOs over the years. She folded her arms across her chest and turned sideways a little, pretty certain she’d seen this one before.

“Umm, no, I don’t think that works.” Kendra Stern, the seg-

ment producer for the Lisa Lee show, stepped from the shadows. “We do want to portray her as competent, but we want to keep a homey edge to it. Maybe something a bit more relaxed.”

“Right. How about turning that chair a quarter turn, rest your elbow on the back of it, and your chin in your hand.”

Susan did as she was told and waited.

“It still looks a little . . . stilted,” Kendra said.

The photographer squinted, “Maybe if you don’t sit quite so straight. Try to look relaxed, like you’ve just arrived at your cozy home after a hard day’s work.”

Susan tried to ease back a little. Somehow she felt a bit slumped, but she did as she was told as the camera began clicking again.

“Okay, I think we’ve got enough to work with here. Thank you, Carl.” Kendra took a step forward. “You’ll email the proofs this afternoon?”

The photographer loaded his camera into its case. “Yep.” He looked toward Susan then and nodded. “Good luck.”

“Thank you.” Susan watched him leave the room, followed by the stylist, and wondered what to expect next.

“Now, a few more things we need to talk about.” Kendra walked over and popped the latches on her leather briefcase. “I’ve been speaking with the publisher we’re planning to use for your *Simple Hospitality* book. They’ve created a couple of mock-ups for a potential book cover.”

She held up a full-page glossy showing a rustic table set with a checked tablecloth and covered with a bounty of meat, bowls of vegetables, baskets of breads, and at least three latticed pies.

“This one has potential, but there’s nothing that really pops. It looks like any other book already out there.” She shuffled the papers to reveal the next choice.

A twilight sky hovered over a barn that looked much like the barn in this very place. Off to the left, in the foreground stood a white farmhouse, no shutters, a colorful flower bed still visible

beneath the fading sky. Yellow light shone from a window, an oil lamp visible inside. The title was written across the top in white script letters, *Simple Hospitality*.

“That one’s nice,” Susan said, leaning forward to study it more closely. A shiver of excitement ran up her arms at the thought that this really might happen.

“Yes, it is.” Kendra paused for a moment. “Here’s the thing. As you are undoubtedly aware, last year we did *Going Almost Blue Blood* with Abigail Phreaner and her family.”

“Yes, I remember.” Susan had tuned in every Friday to watch the progress of an ordinary family who had been put in New York social circles for the sake of the show.

“Those episodes drew large ratings. But when we partnered in the publishing of *Upper Crust Living for Everyone*, well, the sales were not as stellar as we’d anticipated. In follow-up surveys, it turned out that many of the viewers didn’t really identify with Abigail, per se, and never felt that she changed or became more refined—she just got to live in an interesting situation. In other words, she failed to gain a perceived level of expertise.”

Susan tried to keep breathing. This *had* to work out for her. “So what does that mean for me?”

Kendra shrugged. “It means the publisher has indicated they might reconsider the book if things aren’t absolutely ideal.”

“And what is ‘ideal?’” Whatever it was, Susan would do it. Although she was getting paid a small stipend for being a part of the show, the big payoff was to come afterward. The cookbook or lifestyle book. Recurring segments on the Lisa Lee show. Maybe her own show one day? That was the goal.

Susan might have lost her husband to a twenty-years-younger home-wrecker, but that was the last thing she’d lose. Not her house. Not her dreams. Angie needed stability in her life, and Susan was the only one left who could provide that.

Kendra looked directly into her eyes. “You need to be the best possible *Almost Amish* person this world has ever seen.

You need to make certain that the viewers see you in that light. That they all want to be more like you. We want to see you embodying the simple lifestyle.”

Susan straightened her back. “I won’t let you down.”

“Good.” Kendra put the mock-ups back in her briefcase. “Now let’s step out and get a few shots outside the house. I’ve just been notified the rest of your family has arrived.”

“Oh, really? I didn’t hear the car pull up.”

“That’s because it didn’t. They were dropped off at the head of the drive, about a half mile out.”

Susan looked at Kendra. “You mean they’re having to walk? In this heat? With all their things?”

The left side of Kendra’s mouth twitched oh so slightly. “It wouldn’t make for good reality television if there wasn’t a little bit of discomfort, now would it?”

“But you drove Angie and me right up to the house.”

“We needed you for the photo shoot. And remember, you’ll make simplicity look easy. . . .” She tilted her head to the left and smiled. “Everyone else will show just how hard it is.”