

I

Friday, July 23

7:45 A.M.

SARA YODER drove her black buggy in bright sun up to the high ridgeline at Saltillo and stopped the Standardbred horse on the blacktop at the intersection of county roads 407 and 68, southeast of Millersburg. It had been two and a half years since she had entered her wild period, her Rumschpringe, quitting school on her sixteenth birthday. Just a week ago she had crossed this ridge in a red Firebird, heading north for the weekend out of her little Amish valley along Township 110 to the bars in Wooster. Dressed English and running wild. Freed from the everyday constraints of Old Order Amish life by the Rumschpringe.

Her horse was lathered from the climb out of the valley, so she popped her whip in the air and pulled forward into the shade of an oak, thinking that Bishop Raber just might have been right all along. The preachers, too. Life out there with the English was dangerous. The winds of temptation were too strong for anyone. But hadn't the Old Order allowed it? Hadn't she been set free by tradition, to get the wildness out of her system, to see all of the English world she could handle, knowing that soon, at this reckoning point in her life, she'd be asked to make a decision? To turn from the world and come home to a lifetime of Amish obedience? To know full well what was out there among the English and freely decide to turn from that sinfulness and join the Old Order?

But Sara Yoder also knew too much now of what the English had to offer. She knew firsthand what life could be like out there in the

world. What the real differences between an Amish and an English life were. And it surprised her that she wasn't at all sure that the English were right. Perhaps it really was all vanity and pride, as her parents had assured her.

Truth be told, Sara wasn't sure about even the small things anymore, much less about the consecrated life her parents expected her to lead. Marry at eighteen, join the Old Order congregation, raise a dozen children, and submerge her identity in conformity. Surrender who she was for the sake of humility. To be the same, act the same, live the same as everyone else. To live only for the community of believers. No longer to be an individual. No longer to be just Sara.

In the English world, Sara Yoder was beginning to like the separate person she was becoming. She liked the choice of clothes, the modern conveniences, the pace and feel of freedom. She liked the vision she had of Sara Yoder separate from everyone else, a unique and distinct personality. Free to act and do as she felt. Free to move, breathe, live in the open. Free to be herself.

In the end, though, the scrap of newsprint she held on her lap gave the lie to all that English freedom. It called her to face the truth about the dangers that were out there in the world. It reminded her that John Schlabaugh and Andy Yoder no longer answered their cell phones or returned text messages. Just when John had promised them all the means to free themselves from the vise grips of backward Amish traditions, he had disappeared. Andy Yoder, too. There wasn't going to be any great emancipation for the John Schlabaugh Rumschpringe gang of Saltillo. There weren't going to be any easy answers. No easy escapes.

Sara cast her eyes to the newspaper clipping and read the cryptic lines in the correspondence section of the *Budget*. Four lines of numbers, demanding attention from the handful of readers who could decipher them, inserted among the scores of family letters from Amish all over the world. The *Sugarcreek Budget*, published each Wednesday, and mailed to anyone, anywhere, who might be

interested to know what had happened recently in the lives of the Helmuths in Kansas, or the Peachey's in Ontario. Troyers, Millers, or Yoders. Who had been born, and who had died, in Texas. The quality of the wheat harvest in Mexico that year. Family news from around the world, in an Amish paper published for Amish readers everywhere.

But Sara was concerned only with the four lines of type that were meant, ominously, for her. A greeting number. A location—latitude and longitude. And a salutation number:

3
N 40° 31.174'
W 81° 53.890'

2

Only she and eight others would know what it meant. Anyone in the John Schlabaugh Rumschpringe gang that year. This was their meeting place. This was where they gathered, out of sight of their families, for their running-wild trips to town, once their chores were finished. Once the weekend had come, and they had changed into English clothes. Their parents discreetly looking aside. Pretending not to worry.

Sara folded the paper, set it beside her on the leather seat, and snapped her whip lightly over the withers of her horse. She worked the buggy slowly past the traffic triangle at the top of the ridge and dropped down through the cool shade of the tree farm on the gravel lane of Township 129. At the bottom of the hill, she turned south on County Road 58, crossed Lower Sand Run, and turned eventually onto a narrow, pebbled drive that took her through a stand of pines, around a curve, and up to a small clearing. Near a pond at the edge of a cornfield stood a small red barn. As she pulled to a stop in front of the barn doors, a raccoon with dirty paws scrambled out from under the exterior wall of the barn and scurried off into the corn.

She hitched her horse to a wooden railing that John Schlabaugh had posted in the ground beside the barn, and a rusted, blue Buick

Skyhawk rolled into the clearing. As she tugged the looped reins tight on the railing, Henry Erb climbed out of the little sedan. He was dressed in English clothes—designer jeans, a yellow golf shirt, and white running shoes—but his Dutch-boy haircut gave him away as Amish.

Henry said, “You saw the *Budget*, too?”

Sara nodded and asked, “Have you seen John or Abe?”

“No,” said Erb, and glanced around expectantly. “Anybody else been here?”

He saw that the lock on the barn doors was hanging loose, and he came around the front of his car to open the doors.

Sara joined him and said, “I should have come out here yesterday.”

“It was just coordinates in the newspaper,” Henry said. “What are we supposed to do with that?”

Sara said, “I wouldn’t think anything of it if John and Abe weren’t missing.”

“I tried their cells again this morning,” Henry said. “Still nothing.”

Sara took the left side and Henry the right, and they swung the heavy wooden doors open. There was a damp and musty odor as they entered the gloom of the barn. Henry reached up to a kerosene lantern hanging on the inside wall, lit the wick, and carried the sooty lamp into the barn. At the far edge of the light, an old, red Pontiac Firebird sat with its stern backed up against the far wall.

Sara followed Henry to the car. He held aloft the light to shine it into the front seat. Sara peered into the passenger-side window, touched the vinyl seat, and brushed off a crusty rust-red residue. She showed her fingers to Erb. “John and Abe must have had another fight,” she said. “Right? It doesn’t mean anything more.”

Erb shrugged with a grimace, and walked around to the driver’s side. He opened the door, looked in, and said, “Keys are missing.”

Sara said, “Did you ever know John to park his car here?”

Erb frowned. “No. He keeps it out at his trailer. With mine and Jeremiah’s.” With a clipped, stuttering cadence, Erb added, “John would never leave his car. If he’s parked it here, then something’s wrong.”

“It’s gotta be the drugs,” Sara said ruefully, backing away from the Pontiac. “They’ve gotten themselves in too far.” She looked furtively around the barn, anxiety showing on her face.

“John’s too smart for that,” Erb said, closing the car door.

“I’m not so sure,” Sara countered. She turned from the car and saw something in the near corner. “Bring the light over here,” Sara said, kneeling on the dirt floor of the barn. When Erb brought the light, they could see a ragged hole scratched in the dirt.

“I scared off a raccoon when I drove up,” said Sara. The edge of a plastic bag showed in the hole. Sara scooped dirt out from around the bag and pulled it loose.

Inside the bag were a black leather wallet, two car keys on an antique Pontiac fob, a GPS receiver in a plastic camouflage case, and a cell phone. Erb said, “Those are John’s keys. For the Firebird.”

Sara took out the wallet and thumbed it open. “This is John’s wallet, too.” She pulled out the GPS receiver and asked with growing dread, “Is this John’s GPS unit?”

“Can’t tell,” Erb said. “John’s is like all of ours. I guess it’s his.”

Puzzled, Sara said, “This is not John Schlabaugh’s phone.”

“Right,” Erb said, “but whose?”

Sara frowned, shook her head, and dropped the items back into the plastic bag.

Erb stepped back toward the doors of the barn and said, “Look, Sara. I don’t like it here. John’s got some kind of funny business going on, and I don’t think we ought to be messing in with it.”

Sara asked, “Who put those coordinates in the *Budget*, Henry?”

“I don’t know.” Backing out the door.

“You need to stay and help me figure this out,” Sara insisted.

“I was going up to Wooster. You ought to come along,” Erb said sheepishly. He reached his car, got in quickly, cranked the engine to

life, and spun around in the dirt to point his Buick back down the lane. With his left arm hanging out the window, he said, “Look, Sara. This is John’s business. He calls the shots. So I’m not getting involved.”

Sara shook her head, not bothering to hide her mounting consternation. “There’s something wrong here, Henry. And none of us is innocent anymore. We need to face this.”

“I can’t get mixed up in any more of John’s schemes. The bishop has been to see my father already.”

Sara took her cell phone out of the front pocket of her apron and said, “I know someone who can help.”

“I can’t stay,” Erb said, his voice strained. “I’m going up to Wooster tonight. If you want to go, come down to the schoolhouse. I’m going to get the others to come along.”

Sara gave a dissatisfied shake of her head and waved Erb off. She stood in front of the barn doors, punching in the phone number, and watched Henry Erb speed down the lane toward County 58 and disappear into the overhanging pines.

While she waited for the call to go through, Sara held the plastic bag up to her eyes and studied the contents with growing apprehension. The call went dead. She lowered the phone from her ear and saw a “No Signal” indication on the display. She untied the reins, got back into her buggy, trotted her horse up to the higher ground at Saltillo, and tried the call again. With better reception on the ridge, she got Pastor Cal Troyer at his church in Millersburg. She explained where she was and asked him to come out to meet her at the barn. When he asked what her problem was, she gave an evasive answer.

Pressed further, Sara said, “It’s two of my friends, Cal. They’ve been gone for a week now, and I just found one of their cars parked in this little barn. It shouldn’t be there. And some of his stuff was buried in the corner.”

“I’m with a friend, Sara. OK if I bring him along?” Cal asked.

“Can’t you just come out here yourself, Cal?”

“It’s someone you can trust, Sara.”

Sara hesitated, thinking she shouldn’t have called.

Cal said, “Professor Michael Branden, Sara. You know who he is. Teaches history at Millersburg College.”

“Is he the one who rescued Jeremiah Miller a few years back?”

“Yes. The Millers know him and his wife Caroline well. They are Amishleiben, Sara.”

“Then I guess he can come. But just the two of you, Cal. I don’t know what’s going on out here. I don’t want to get anyone in trouble with the law, but I’m starting to get a little rattled, and I don’t like it.”

“Maybe you’d better tell me what’s going on, Sara.”

“When you get here, Cal. I’ll tell you what I know.”

“OK, but are you still going to come in to the church this afternoon? For our regular talk?”

“I don’t know, Cal. Maybe I shouldn’t talk with you anymore. Maybe something’s gone wrong out here. Right now, I just want you to come out and tell me what you think.”

“Can I tell the professor a little bit about what you’ve told me in the past several weeks?”

“Why?”

“I just think it will help if he knows a little of the background. How you kids are getting along. The Rumschpringe.”

“OK, but I’m not sure we’ve even got a Rumschpringe gang anymore. The group has kind of fallen apart.”

“OK, Sara. Tell me how to get there.”