

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

COLLEEN
COBLE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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*For my Amish friends,
thank you for the lessons
you've taught me about peace,*

and

*for my aunt and uncle,
Don and Edith Phillips,
thank you for the constant
encouragement in my life.*

PART ONE

ONE

“Hannah, why do you fight back? Always you kick against the goad. We’re told to turn the other cheek.”

PATRICIA SCHWARTZ

Hannah Schwartz quickened her pace along the path from the farmhouse until she stood on the hillside peering down at the covered bridge. The Indiana winter wind pierced through the black wool cape she wore. She played nervously with the strings on her bonnet.

Had he come already? Oh, she shouldn’t be here. *Mamm* would be so unhappy with her. But Hannah had made this choice for a good reason.

Though only seven o’clock, the darkness deepened with the storm clouds building in the southwest. Thunder rumbled, and she heard the strains of her cousin Moe’s yodeling as he went to the barn. She couldn’t let him see her. Slipping past the bare branches of an arching goldenrod barring her path to the road, she hurried the last few feet. Flanked by bare maple trees, the opening yawned ahead. She stepped onto the planks of the bridge. A lingering odor of gasoline exhaust made her sneeze three times.

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COLLEEN COBLE

Pausing, she waited until her eyes adjusted to the deeper gloom. She didn't need light. The interior of the covered bridge was as familiar to her as her own bedroom. Reece would be along in a few minutes. She shivered, but not from the February chill that swept down off the hills of Parke County, Indiana.

It was wrong to be here. If her parents knew . . . and Noah.

She paced the wide wooden boards of the covered bridge, pausing occasionally to listen for the sound of Reece's truck. She'd expected him to be here waiting for her like usual. Perhaps he'd had to attend to a convenience-store break-in or some minor law violation. She leaned against one of the massive crossbeams supporting the bridge and looked through a cutout in the siding that formed a window overlooking the water. Still there was no sign of Reece. If he didn't come soon, she would have to go back.

She heard an engine and turned with an eager smile, only to face two men she'd never seen, approaching in a small four-door car. She stepped up onto the footpath of the bridge and waited for them to pass, but the car slowed. The window ran down, and a man who looked to be in his thirties leaned out as the car stopped. He hung his arm, covered with a red and black plaid jacket, out the window.

His blond hair was thinning on top, and his pale blue eyes gleamed in the light from the car's dash. "Hey, pretty lady, need a ride?"

"No, I'm waiting for a friend," she said.

"Well, your friend's not here, but we are." The door opened and he got out. The other man hopped out as well. He was about the same age and wore an orange hat. They approached where she stood.

Hannah shrank back. "My friend will be here any minute."

The man's smile turned predatory. He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. "We can have some fun."

"No!" She struggled to pull her arm from his grasp, but his other hand snaked around her waist. To her horror, she felt him grappling with the

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

snaps on the back of her dress. “Let go of me!” Panicked now, she began to kick and strike at him.

“Whoa, we’ve caught ourselves a little wildcat.” He pinned her hands down and began to drag her to the car. The other man held open the back door.

Where was Reece? She opened her mouth to scream, but the man clapped his hand over it. She smelled tobacco on his fingers and beer on his breath. He tossed her like a rag doll into the car and began to crawl inside with her. She kicked him in the face and scrambled for the other door, only to find the other man there. A shriek tore from her throat. Hannah’s limbs froze. This couldn’t be happening.

The first man’s face twisted into a snarl, and he grabbed her ankle when she tried to kick him again. He managed to climb in next to her. “Get us out of here,” he told the other guy.

The man in the orange cap ran around to the driver’s seat and jumped in. He accelerated toward the end of the bridge. Hannah shrank against the door and fumbled with the lock.

The blond man grabbed her arm. “No, you don’t.”

He tried to kiss her on the neck, but she bit him on the ear. Bile rose in her throat at the taste of his blood. He swore and pulled away, holding his ear. His face darkened, and he raised his hand. His arm and hand cast a shadow in the light of the overhead dome. She cringed just before his slap landed on her cheek. Her vision darkened, and she saw stars.

The car was nearly to the end of the covered bridge. The man in the front seat swore, and the brakes began to squeal. The car fishtailed as he tried to stop. Over the top of the seat, Hannah saw a truck blocking the end of the bridge. Reece stood between the vehicles, gun drawn. The car’s headlamps caught the gleam of his badge.

“Get out of the car!” he shouted. “Hannah, get out of the car.”

Hannah found the strength to grab the lock and flip open the door. The blond man made a halfhearted attempt to grab at her, but she slid out of the

COLLEEN COBLE

car. He slammed the door shut, and she heard him shout to the driver, "Let's get out of here!" The car reversed and backed quickly toward the other side of the bridge.

She lay on the wide wooden boards with the stink of car exhaust filling her lungs. She could see the glimmer of water through the cracks in the boards. What had almost happened? Shudders racked her shoulders, and she rose painfully to her hands and knees. Her palms stung, and her neck muscles throbbed. Running steps sounded on the boards, and Reece called her name.

"I'm here," she said, her voice trembling as hard as her limbs.

Then his strong arms were lifting her. He held her close to his chest, and she felt the way his heart pounded in her ear. His breathing sounded ragged, and she knew he'd been just as frightened as she. "You saved me," she whispered. "Again. You always are there at the right time."

He cupped his palms on each side of her head and kissed her. "I'll always be here for you. No one is going to harm *my* Hannah."

The possessiveness in his voice thrilled her. No one had ever made her feel she was so precious. "The first time we met, you chased off kids who were throwing tomatoes at me," she said, a smile finally finding its way to her lips.

"Stupid kids," he growled. "Just because you Amish don't fight back is no reason . . ." He broke off, his voice choked.

"I got in some licks this time," she said. "I'm ashamed to admit I fought back. But they—"

He put his fingers over her lips. "Don't think about it. You did the right thing."

In spite of what he said, she'd actually *bitten* a man. The shame felt too heavy to bear. All her teachings told her a Christian shouldn't fight back, should meekly accept whatever God sent her way. She'd have to carry this choice without telling her parents.

"Let's go to the jail and file a complaint against those two."

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

“No!” She shuddered at the thought. “I don’t know who they were anyway. You got here in time. That’s all that matters. Where were you?” she asked. “I was about to go home.”

He slipped his arm around her waist. “Got hung up at work. I’m here now.”

“And just in time.” She dared to put her arm around his waist, too, and he grinned. His smile was the first of his many good traits to attract her. A smile that reflected a zest for life. He was *Englisch*, which made him taboo. And maybe that was part of the attraction that spread over her at the sound of his voice. He was older too—nearly thirty. Experienced. She liked that about him.

The emerging moon gleamed on the badge pinned to his shirt. “I wasn’t sure you’d come,” he said.

Hannah’s free hand went to the strings on her bonnet. “I promised I would.” The word *promise* mocked her. Honoring her word tonight had caused her to break even bigger pledges. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“You belong with me.” His hands came down with a possessive grip on her shoulders.

Big hands, softer than *Datt*’s. As a sheriff’s deputy and a detective, Reece didn’t chop wood or handle a saw like the men in her community. He smelled good too. No odor of perspiration, just the spicy fragrance of oriental woods. She’d spent a whole afternoon at the department store last week, trying to identify what he wore, before deciding it was a fragrance called Contradiction.

And that pretty much summed up how he made her feel.

She dared a glance at his face and smiled back. “I can’t stay long. Someone is at home buying *Mamm*’s quilts. They’ll miss me in a few minutes.”

He pressed a kiss onto her forehead. “What are we going to do, honey?” he whispered against her hair.

“Come to meeting with me this Sunday,” she said. “It’s at our house. Visitors are welcome.”

COLLEEN COBLE

He smiled. “Trying to convert me?”

“It would solve a lot of problems,” she admitted. While it was unusual for an *Englischer* to convert to the Amish faith, it had happened. Her own mother had walked such a path. And it would keep Hannah from having to make an impossible choice between her family and the man she was falling in love with.

He tugged her toward the shadows. “Come sit in the truck with me.” He took her hand and led her to his pickup, a black Dodge he’d bought just last week. He opened the door for her, and she slipped inside. It still smelled new, and her cotton dress slid across the leather seats. She ran her palm across the supple leather. So beautiful.

Reece got in on the other side and drove under a walnut tree, where he parked. He clicked on the auxiliary power. Music spilled from the radio, his favorite, Creedence Clearwater Revival. “Bad Moon Rising” blared from the speakers behind her. He slid out from under the steering wheel and pulled her into his arms. His lips came down on hers. She wanted to savor the sensation of his strong arms, let the music blot out her misgivings. Noah had never even embraced her. It wasn’t allowed. This was wrong, too, but in this moment, she didn’t care. All she knew was the touch of Reece’s hands and the scent of the mint on his breath. She relished the mastery of his hands on her.

Reece lifted his head, and his breath whispered across her face. “You know how I feel about you. Marry me, Hannah. We can leave right now. I’ll take care of you. You’ll never have to worry about anything. You’re mine—you know you are.”

The bright joy beating against her ribs exploded into panic. She put her palms on his chest and pushed. “The bishop would put me under the *Meidung*.” Why couldn’t she have met Reece three months ago, before she was baptized? But even then she would have been faced with an impossible choice. She slid away to brace her back against the door, but still she couldn’t bring herself to open it and walk away from him.

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

She was weak, so weak.

The thought of leaving her family made her lungs ache. Being Amish was as much a part of her body as the bone and sinew that kept her upright. Her life was about laughing and talking around the dinner table with loved ones, working side by side with her *mamm*. She'd never expected to find herself in this place, loving one of the *Englisch* when she was engaged to one of her own people.

"You could convert," she whispered.

"I'd have to give up my job, my life. I can't do it, Hannah. I wish I could. But I'll take care of you. There's a world out there you know nothing about. An exciting world of new experiences."

He was right. The Amish faith forbade military service or a job in law enforcement. If she went with him, she would have to give up everything. If he came with her, he'd be in the same position. It was an impossible situation. Oh, but she wanted to be with him! His power and strength made her feel safe when her world seemed filled with uncertainty. He knew so much—all about the world she'd seen only glimpses of.

The day after he'd saved her from some neighborhood bullies, he'd come into the café where she worked and ordered coffee at one of her tables. She'd been drawn to him from the first. She watched the way the other deputies deferred to him. And every minute she was conscious of his eyes watching her.

She shivered. Noah would be so hurt if he saw her in Reece's arms. She should have been stronger.

"Hannah?" Reece reached his hand toward her. "Come back over here, honey. It's okay. I won't push you. I just want to take care of you."

God would punish her if she accepted the invitation in his voice.

From somewhere, she found the courage to grab the door handle and yank it open. She found the motivation to turn and run toward home. Reece called after her, but she didn't slow. The Bible said to flee temptation. The cool wind brushed against her face and shivered down her back. It slowed

COLLEEN COBLE

the blood pounding along her veins, throbbing in her head. Her feet grew lighter as she sped from the bridge toward home. Harsh breaths heaved in and out of her chest.

Scalding shame swept through her veins. What had she become? Could this relationship be good if it caused her to sin so grievously against her parents, against Noah?

Her soles slid over gravel, and she stumbled, nearly went down on one knee. Daring a glance behind, she saw that Reece hadn't followed. She stood and hurried on, stopping on the road to catch her breath. Up ahead, the gas-lights glowed yellow through the window. She hoped her parents thought she was still in the barn.

Composing her features, she stumbled toward the house, though she doubted serenity would do her much good. *Mamm* would take one look at her face and see the guilt etched there. Her mother could almost read her mind. *Mamm* knew what it was like to struggle against the strictures of their faith. Maybe Hannah could talk to her. *Mamm* would understand. She'd tell Hannah how to deal with these emotions.

The thought of leaving her Amish faith left a hollow sensation in Hannah's soul. She'd been taught—and believed—that they'd found the true path to God.

The house was quiet when she opened the back door. Where were her parents? She walked past the wringer washing machine in the utility room and stepped into the kitchen. The empty lemonade packets she'd left by the sink still lay there. Her mother had promised to clean up while Hannah did the barn chores.

"*Mamm?*" Hannah called. Only silence answered her.

Her feet stuck to spilled lemonade on the floor. Her mother never would have left the kitchen in such a state. Had someone taken ill? Alarms began blaring inside her head, and she quickened her pace to rush into the living room, still calling for her mother.

Her eyes fixed on a bumpy quilt hugging the middle of the living room

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

floor and, oddly, a jumble of feet poked out from under it. Her mind fought to sort what her eyes saw. A quilt she'd never seen lay on the floor, black but bright with her mother's trademark hummingbird pattern. *Datt's* size 13 black shoes extended from one side of the quilt, while *Mamm's* size 5 shoes peeked out on the other side.

"Mamm?" she asked. Could this be a joke? Her father loved to tease. They'd hop up any minute, laughing at her gullibility.

No one moved. She bent down and touched her mother's exposed leg. It was cool. Hannah scabbled back on her haunches. A scream built behind her teeth, then blared out with such force that her throat went raw. She couldn't stop screeching. The room began to swirl as she rolled onto her stomach and began to crawl. A red symbol had been painted on the wall. The wheel-and-spokes pattern imprinted itself on the backs of her eyes. A strange word was written just below it. Bile rose in the back of her throat, and she choked it back before stumbling out the door. She had to get to the greenhouse.

BUBBLE LIGHTS ATOP the four squad cars parked outside the farmhouse strobed into the night. All available Parke County deputies had responded to the call to the Amish farmhouse. Deputy Matt Beitler parked his SUV behind his partner's truck and got out. He buttoned his coat against the wind. When the call came in, he had been enjoying his day off with Analise. He'd not been happy to be summoned to work.

He opened the back door and let Ajax, his year-old K9 search dog, out of the back. Taking a firm hold on the German shepherd's leash, he walked toward the house. The odor of manure from the barn wafted over him as he strode over the rough ground. Double homicide on an Amish farm. The Amish were peaceable and model citizens. Reece had sounded almost incoherent when he called, which made Matt break every speed record getting here. His partner wasn't often anything but calm and methodical. O'Connor loathed losing control of anything.

COLLEEN COBLE

Generator-powered floodlights illuminated the yard. The sheriff had already called in the state boys, and technicians were busy looking for clues left by the perp. O'Connor was comforting a young Amish woman. In the dark, it was hard to make out more than her white bonnet.

O'Connor glanced up and saw him. With his arm around the young woman, he led her to the porch and seated her in a rocker. "I'll be right back," he said to her before turning to join Matt.

Matt watched the woman put her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved. Her family or friends must be the murder victims. O'Connor would give him the details.

"Stay," Matt told the dog. He looped the leash around a hitching post and met his partner halfway, near the front door.

"Thanks for getting here so fast." O'Connor took off his hat and swiped at his blond hair.

Thirty, O'Connor was already showing signs of early balding. He wore a distracted expression. The detective was one of the most dedicated in the sheriff's department. He'd helped Matt get the job and had been quick to partner with him, even though he was the senior officer.

"Bad scene?"

"Worse than you can possibly imagine." In the glare of the lights, O'Connor looked deadly white. "Both of the parents." He nodded toward the young woman. "She found them covered with a quilt." He hesitated. "Their limbs are contorted, backs and necks arched."

"Strychnine poisoning?"

"Maybe."

Matt winced. Strychnine was nasty. The victim suffered muscle convulsions that got worse and worse until the poor victim was worn out and the lungs quit working. He wouldn't want to go that way. "You interrogate her?"

O'Connor looked away. "Not yet. I—I was in the area and heard her scream. When I got here, she was outside, in shock. I think she passed out briefly."

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

“We’d better talk to her.” Matt started toward the woman, but his partner grabbed his arm.

“Go easy on her,” O’Connor said. “In fact, let me handle it. She’s all alone now.”

Unusual in an Amish family. They bred like rabbits. “Easy? We need the truth before the trail goes cold. What’s going on with her, boss?” Matt stared from his partner to the woman rocking with her arms clasped around herself. “Can I at least ask her some questions?”

O’Connor dropped his hand from Matt’s arm. “Just be careful.”

Matt approached the woman. “Ms. Schwartz? I’m Deputy Beitler. I’d like to ask you some questions.”

In the brighter wash of light, he guessed her age between twenty and twenty-two. She looked almost colorless between her white bonnet and shapeless gray dress.

O’Connor stepped around him and took Hannah’s hand. “Can you handle this now?” he asked the witness.

Matt shot his partner an incredulous glare. Since when did they tiptoe around witnesses? The media would be swarming the area any minute. But it was O’Connor’s call. “Ms. Schwartz?” he said again.

She looked up. In the glare of lights, her eyes took on a golden glow, eyes like those of a tiger. He could see clear down to her soul, and there was only goodness. Matt shook off the thought. In his experience, the first place to look for a perp was among a victim’s family and friends. Though in this case, he suspected a hate crime. But maybe she hated her parents. It happened.

She rocked back and forth, back and forth.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“I came home from—from a walk and found my parents.” Her voice was hoarse.

He could see she was still in shock. “What about before your walk? Was there anything out of the ordinary, anyone else you saw while you were out?”

COLLEEN COBLE

She rubbed her head. “I—I don’t remember.”

He straightened from hunching over the notepad in his hand. “You don’t remember?” O’Connor kept patting the woman on the shoulder. Matt had never seen his partner behave this way.

“Everything is a blur. I can’t think.” She rubbed fiercely at her temples as though trying to force her brain to cooperate. She looked up at him with a piteous expression. “It was my fault.”

He clicked his pen on again. “What do you mean?”

“Of course it wasn’t your fault, Hannah,” O’Connor said, his voice a little too loud. “You need to rest. You’ll remember more tomorrow.”

Matt poised his pen over the paper. “How was it your fault?”

She raised her gaze to his then. “I mixed up the lemonade. It was a free sample we got in the mailbox. The poison was in that, wasn’t it?”

“What makes you think they were poisoned?”

“The—the way they looked. Poisoned rats look like that.” She shuddered. “We use it in the greenhouse.”

He and O’Connor exchanged glances. O’Connor called over another deputy and asked him to check out the greenhouse.

Matt turned back to Hannah. “You prepared lemonade before you went for your walk?”

She nodded. “With lots of sugar because my *datt* has a sweet tooth. I poured glasses for everyone, including an extra for the guest. Someone was coming to look at *Mamm*’s quilts.”

“Was it a man or a woman who came to buy a quilt?”

She scrunched her forehead and went even paler. “Oh, why can’t I remember?” she moaned. “Let me think.” She sat quietly a moment. “Cyrus. Cyrus Long. At least I think he was here tonight. My memory is all jumbled up. Maybe he was here last night. I can’t remember.”

“Can’t or won’t?” he asked as O’Connor rejoined them.

“Matt,” O’Connor said with a warning in his voice. “I want to talk to you.” He retreated a few steps from the woman.

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

Matt joined him. “What is *with* you, man? I’ve never seen you act like this. You’re mucking up the investigation.”

O’Connor glanced at Hannah, then back to Matt. “She was with me.”

“With you? What does that mean?”

“I mean she slipped away to meet me.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “We were together. That’s all you need to know.”

Matt couldn’t wrap his mind around it. O’Connor was a good eight years older than the Schwartz woman, and as one of the “*Englisch*,” he should have been the last man she’d consider getting involved with. “I see,” he said. “A little cradle robbing?” He knew he was pushing it. O’Connor was his boss, but that was hard to remember when they were friends, practically brothers, before they were partners.

“Shut up. You know nothing about it. I’ve been waiting all my life for someone like Hannah—sweet and good. When I’m with her, I’m better than I am alone. She had nothing to do with this crime,” O’Connor said, his voice firm.

“You know as well as I do that the perp is usually known to the victim. You need to tell Sturgis. You can’t work this investigation.”

“This is *my* case. I know my limits, and I can handle it, Beitler.”

“O’Connor, think about this. You’re already on thin ice with that brutality charge.”

O’Connor ran his hand through his hair. “And you think about how you got this job. And where you’d be if not for me.”

It went against Matt’s strong sense of right and wrong, but he finally shrugged. “Have it your way.” Both men went back to the girl. “I’m going to take a look at the scene,” Matt said.

Hannah trembled. “I don’t have to go, do I?”

“No, you stay here with Detective O’Connor.” At the house, Matt ducked under the yellow tape at the door and entered the living room. Halogen lights mounted around the room illuminated the bodies lying on the wood floor. “What have we got?” he asked Sturgis.

COLLEEN COBLE

“Two adults, I’d guess in their early fifties. Poisoning, maybe strychnine from the contortions of the bodies. The autopsy will tell us.” He nodded toward a heap of cloth. “A quilt was over them. The daughter removed it before we were called.”

“Who called it in?” Matt asked.

“The daughter. She went out to the greenhouse and used the phone there.”

“They have a phone?”

The captain shrugged. “The Amish use phones in their businesses. You ever notice the little phone booths out by the road in their communities? Some of the families will share a phone, but they only use it to make appointments or do business. They don’t want it intruding on their personal lives.”

Matt depended on his cell phone. He barely glanced at the quilt before allowing his gaze to wander the room. A sofa with worn seat cushions sat against the middle of the wall. Sturdy wooden tables, most likely handmade, flanked it with gaslights flickering on top of them. No rugs, no wall ornamentation or pictures.

A red symbol and words on the wall caught his attention. “Blood?” he asked.

“Paint.” Sturgis stuck an unlit cigar in his mouth and chomped on it.

Matt wanted to chomp on something himself, anything to get the vile taste of murder out of his mouth. “It’s a peace symbol. We know what this is all about?”

“Well, the Amish are all about peace. Maybe it’s a hate crime in some twisted way.”

“A hate crime against the Amish?”

“That was my first thought. It seems very well thought-out. The killer brought in everything he would need.”

“Not everything,” Matt said, his gaze lighting on a spilled pool of liquid. “Hannah Schwartz mixed up some lemonade that came in the mail.”

“Might be coincidence.”

WHERE SHADOWS MEET

“Maybe.” But Matt would lay money on finding poison in the drink. “What about the foreign word? We know what it means?”

“Not yet. I think it’s Greek.”

Parke County was a quiet area, and murder was uncommon here. The largest town in this west-central Indiana community was Rockville, where Matt lived, with a population of 2,650. The joke in the area was that they had more covered bridges than residents. Driving through thick forests and hills was a peaceful pastime of Matt’s. He’d been on the force less than a year, and this was his first murder. Seeing something like this was a shock he could not imagine getting used to.

Matt dragged his gaze from the bodies. “Let’s get the Schwartz woman in here and ask her some more questions. I’ll have one of the deputies take Ajax out and see if he can get a scent on the perp.”

T W O

*“Demut and gelassenheit are at the heart of a good life, Hannah.
Accept whatever God gives you without murmur.”*

PATRICIA SCHWARTZ

Sitting on the porch of the plain white farmhouse, Hannah couldn't quit rocking. The cold wind laden with the scent of water from the lake behind the house tugged at the strings of her bonnet and lifted the hem of her long skirt. The rocking calmed the screams still hunkering in her throat. *It's not true. It's not.*

The chant echoed in her heart over and over. This had to be a nightmare. She'd awaken any moment to find herself helping *Mamm* make noodles or shoofly pie. She'd hear *Datt* yodeling on his way in from the greenhouse.

She'd expected God to punish her for her sin. Even when she'd put her black shoes on the road to the bridge, the knowledge settled over her like one of her mother's heavy quilts. The heart commits sin first, and her heart was as black as the night. This punishment, though, was too much. She couldn't bear it.