

A young man with light brown hair and a slight smile, wearing a straw hat, a white button-down shirt, and grey suspenders. He is holding a bouquet of colorful flowers. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage and a white building.

AN AMISH  
*Sanctuary*

SHE'S NOTHING LIKE THE  
GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND.  
HE'S NOTHING LIKE ANY  
MAN SHE KNOWS.

*Jessie*  
GUSSMAN

# An Amish Sanctuary

Jessie Gussman

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**An Amish Sanctuary**

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## *Dedication*

To my children. In my ears, the most beautiful music in all the earth is the sound of my children singing in harmony, praising our God. Those are my most cherished memories.

# 1

The room spun.

*Breathe. Just Breathe.*

Lucy Johnson, aka pop diva, Celeste, to her adoring fans, stumbled into the wall of her small dressing room. Flattening a hand against the cool white paint, she sagged against it. Her heart beat like sporadic gunfire. She was dying.

No.

What had her therapist said? *No one has ever died of a panic attack.* That thought loosened the vice that gripped her chest.

Focus on breathing. Slowly.

Using another relaxation technique her therapist taught, she imagined herself sitting by the ocean, listening to waves, feeling the breeze on her face. Her muscles relaxed slightly until the image in her head filled with paparazzi storming the beach, cameras clicking. Before the picture faded, she saw herself hiding under her beach chair digging in the sand to get away from the ceaseless questions and pictures.

Her heart hopped and skipped like a frog on a hot skillet.

Lurching to a chair covered in sequined stage costumes, Lucy perched on the edge, wrapped both arms around her stomach and rocked back and forth.

Waves of panic rolled through her body. She fought the urge to run. Go anywhere. Now.

*There's nothing to be afraid of.* Self-talk. Another technique. It worked a little because she knew it was true. She'd been to seven doctors and specialists. They'd all pronounced her in excellent physical condition. The anxiety and random panic attacks that came with no obvious trigger were simply the warnings of her body that she'd pushed it too far. They'd said she needed to rest. As if she had time for that.

"Another attack?"

Lucy jumped at the voice; she hadn't heard anyone come into the opulent dressing room. She gave Madison, her public relations director and best friend, a flimsy nod as she pulled air into her lungs. Slowly. Pushed it out through pursed lips even slower. Finally, her arms loosened from gripping her waist as the intense fear faded.

"Ah, honey." Madison placed a soft hand on her shoulder. The panic had dissipated enough that the contact didn't feel claustrophobic. "Have you changed your mind about the resort?"

"No," Lucy whispered. She forced the lingering fear down. "I'm fine." If she said it enough times, she might eventually believe it.

"They're getting worse."

True. Stronger and more frequent. "I can't disappoint my fans."

Plus, she couldn't step out of the spotlight for a second. Not in today's world of microscopic attention spans. Especially not in the middle of a tour.

"You know I care about your career. Keeping you hot is my job." Madison wrapped her arms around

Lucy. "But you're also my friend, and I love you. I want you healthy."

Lucy returned the hug.

"I care about you, too." Lucy stepped back and trailed one hand down a bright purple, sequined outfit hanging in order with the rest of her costume changes for the pending show. "Which is why I don't want to cancel the tour. Any hint of a health scandal could easily cut revenue in half. My career might never recover."

Madison pinched the bridge of her nose as though warding off a headache. "On one hand, I want you to rest. On the other, I want you to be the one everyone is talking about. In a good way."

"Plus, if I do go away, it won't be to some paparazzi encrusted celeb rehab/detox place. I want somewhere no one would think to look for me. Somewhere they'll not automatically think I have issues." Lucy straightened her shoulders. She couldn't be weak, and she would beat the panic attacks on her own terms. She just didn't know what her terms were yet.

Lucy pushed her hand through her short multi-colored hair, filling her lungs with deep, slow breaths. The scent of flowers from the dozen or so bouquets scattered artfully around the room should have been relaxing, but it felt smothering instead. Her body still trembled and she hadn't quite gotten the emotional armor back up, but the feelings had reached a controllable level when she looked out the window. "Brock is here." She kept her tone level, even though her stomach fell.

"Your boyfriend. Great." Madison's bracelets jangled as she swiped an apple wedge from the fruit

tray on the table.

“My hired boyfriend. Who I’ll dump any day.”

Madison’s smile faded as she adjusted a life-size teddy bear among the gifts from Celeste’s fans which would be donated to a local shelter after the show. “No. Not yet. It was only last month that Liam dirty-dumped you for that porn star, Tingle, or whatever her name is.” Madison waved a hand in the air. “They’re everywhere on social media. You have to have a counter attack.”

Lucy eyed a tempting display of chocolate covered strawberries before smoothing a hand down her tight leather pants. She wanted to say that she didn’t need a man to be successful, but in this case, she actually did.

Leveling her gaze at Lucy, Madison said, “Unless, of course, you want Liam to win.” Her tone softened. “You’ve spent enough time with Brock in the last month, and especially with practices this week, surely you’re comfortable with him?”

Lucy swallowed a sigh and nodded. She was comfortable, but she didn’t like him. She couldn’t get over the idea that he was using her as a stepping stone for his own career.

Another man in jeans and a plain, dark green button-up got out of the car beside Brock’s. Shorter than Brock, his blond hair hung in one layer by his ears, looking as if someone cut it with a knife. A diamond stud winked in his right ear.

“I’ve never seen him before.” Lucy nodded out the window.

Madison’s brows furrowed. “Hmm. Me, either.” She whistled low. “Look at those shoulders.” The man spoke to Brock and clamped a hand on Brock’s arm. “And his hands are as big as dinner plates.” Madison



snapped her fingers. "I totally forgot. Brock asked if he could have an old friend who owns a farm Brock is interested in buying meet him for the show. I told him to give his name and info to security." Madison shrugged. "I figured he was a fan."

Lucy nodded. People in her crew brought friends backstage to meet her all the time.

Brock and the stranger laughed and headed in the back entrance of the Midtown Arena, the Buffalo, NY venue where her tour was playing tonight's sold-out show.

"Lucy." Madison put one hand on her hip. Her long, chrome painted nails clicked as she pulled up social media photo. "There's your ex. And Tingle." She flashed the screen, although Lucy had already seen the picture. The whole world had already seen the picture. "They're obscene."

"I know. I know." Lucy closed her eyes and looked away. "I know what I need to do. And I'll do it. It's just..." Madison saw it as necessity. And to a certain extent, Lucy did, too. But the whole transaction, necessary as it was, also made her feel...less.

Madison narrowed her eyes. "Now, remember, the doctor told you to stay calm. Relax." She did an in-and-out breathing motion with her hands, like the cool-down on an exercise video.

Lucy took a deep, slow breath and tried to push her personal drama aside. The burn in her chest eased as she blew the long breath out. She followed Madison out of the makeshift dressing room and through the back corridors.

After a few turns and twists, Madison stopped and knocked on a thick, brown door.

Brock opened it, his slicked back hair shone stark

against his pale face. His teeth flashed in a grin. *Like a shark.* "Hey, how's my girlfriend? Wink, wink." Brock leaned in and slipped one eye closed.

Lucy slapped a friendly smile on her face. "Nice to see you, Brock." Skimming past Brock, her gaze landed on the man she'd seen in the parking lot. Sky blue eyes studied her. She shivered with sudden goosebumps and tugged her cropped top down.

"This is a friend of mine. Judah Martin." Brock's soft hand gestured toward his friend.

Lucy held her hand out to Judah, whose brilliant blue eyes contained mild curiosity and were not filled with the usual hero worship. He didn't gush about her albums or pop star status. Or even seem to have any clue of it as his mammoth hand casually consumed her own.

"That's a different name. Judah." She rolled it off her tongue. Odd. But it fit him.

"Yeah. Great to meet you, too, Ruthie." His voice rumbled with some sort of accent. He gave her hand a perfunctory pump then dropped it, looking over her shoulder as though he expected the real pop star to walk in behind her.

"It's Celeste," she said with mild astonishment. Usually people stumbled over themselves to tell her how much they loved her songs, or how much one of them had changed their life. Judah didn't act as if he even knew that she was world-famous.

His gaze landed back on hers, while his wide shoulders moved in a semi-shrug. "Sorry. Celeste." He stepped back, leaning one shoulder against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. Bored. Except his breaths were deep, as though he'd run up a few steps.

Madison closed the door behind them and pulled

out an electronic tablet.

Lucy looked away. What was Judah's angle? Obviously, he wasn't here to meet-and-greet the pop star.

"We have you on the schedule to sing with Celeste about three-fourths of the way through the program," Madison said to Brock as she worked on her tablet.

"OK." Brock smirked.

"It's not a romantic song. But it's powerful. Look into her eyes and make sure the audience knows that you love her."

Judah's gaze shifted to her. He seemed to know it wasn't normal for a boyfriend to have to be told how to make the crowd believe Brock loved her. If she had time, she could find a man to love her for herself, not for her status and money. Really. She could. But with her schedule, it was impossible.

Madison continued to drone on to Brock, giving him specific suggestions of things he could do on stage.

Her throat closed, and her face felt like plastic.

"Is today still the day for the big announcement?" he asked.

Madison's gaze snapped first to Brock then to Judah.

Judah cleared his throat. "I'm gonna slip out for a few minutes."

"Aah, don't worry about him. He won't say anything." Brock waved a hand dismissively.

Lucy's neck heated. Half embarrassment, half blood that had reached the boiling point.

"Your contract has a gag-order." Madison's words shot out like bullets between her clenched teeth. They'd spent the last month grooming Brock—teasing the press with 'sightings' of Lucy and him out together.

Tonight they had him on the schedule to sing with her, and then for her to make the big announcement, casually, of course, that they were officially a couple. But if Brock was that casual about keeping the fake part of their relationship secret...

Silence lay heavy in the room after Judah walked out.

Brows lowered, Madison chewed on her lip while glaring off into space, probably, like Lucy, weighing the potential PR nightmare of walking away from Brock, with the current PR nightmare of Lucy's ex, Liam. Liam had dumped her, but he made it look as though it was all her fault with half-truths and outright lies. She'd lost fans and sales because of it.

Madison raised her brows.

Lucy didn't care for Brock, but the next guy might be worse.

"Yes," Madison finally said. "Tonight is the big announcement. After you sing."

"Well," Brock crossed his arms over his chest. "I wanted to talk to you about that. This job of being a celebrity is a little harder than I'd thought." He jerked his head at the door. "I wanted to discuss a little business with my friend, but the press gets hold of everything I do." He grabbed a doughnut from the tray on the table. "I'm gonna need more money."

Lucy bit the inside of her cheek and tried to keep her facial expression bland. She didn't pay attention as Madison launched into a lecture to Brock about his current contract. Rather, she tried to reign in her runaway feelings and the nagging, rogue desire to have a real boyfriend. Not hired like Brock. Not a fellow superstar, like Liam, the A-list actor. But someone who saw past the money to the woman

inside.

"I had this really hot chick ask for my number last night, and I had to tell her no." Brock took a large bite of the doughnut in his hand, wiping cream off his face.

Madison very obviously ground her teeth.

Tears pricked Lucy's eyes. Her throat closed, as though her tears had somehow dammed up behind it. Critical mass loomed close. Lucy put a hand on Madison's shoulder and leaned into her ear. "I'm running to the restroom then on to makeup." She left out the part about needing a good cry. Madison didn't need to know everything. Lucy strolled out of the room casually, closing the door before power-walking down the hall.

She tried the first door on the right. *Just gimme a room, any room.* The knob turned in her hand. Relief eased the pain in her chest somewhat, and she pushed the door open. A little bit of privacy was all she needed. *Pull yourself together.*

The sitting room, with a small mauve love seat facing a fireplace on the far wall framed by two large windows, was empty. Lucy shoved the door shut behind her. She leaned her forehead against the door and fumbled for the lock. "I can't cry. I can't cry. I'm going onstage in sixty minutes, and I can't cry." Hot tears spilled out of her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

A throat cleared behind her.

"Aaah!" Lucy jumped and turned. One hand swiped at her cheeks; one clutched her heart, now beating like a bass drum. The familiar ball of anxiety began to unravel. Pain spiked through her chest.

Judah stood in front of the couch, holding his cell phone. "Um, I'll just make my call somewhere else.

Want me to send someone in here for you?"

"No." Lucy spat the word out despite her tight chest; she needed him out. "Go."

He stopped in front of her.

Her body blocked the door. *Move*. But the panic swirled within, pulling her down, sucking her deeper. She tried to step away but only shuffled a bit before wrapping her hands around her stomach. She bent over, biting her lips, refusing to allow the moan trapped in her chest to escape.

"Hey," he said. His hand settled on her shoulder.

The swirling stopped. The warmth of his large hand on her shoulder flowed down, relaxing her clenched muscles. She spoke in the most normal voice she could muster. "I'm fine. I just needed a minute for myself. You can go."

The comforting hand stayed on her shoulder, and the worn work boots that disappeared into blue jean cuffs remained in her circle of vision.

Although calmness flowed through her, tears choked her eyes again. Despite her words, the truth was, she was scared. Scared she couldn't keep up the pretense. Scared she would have a panic attack on stage and everyone would know how weak and pathetic she was. Scared her carefully built house of cards would collapse around her. But most of all, scared that she would be alone forever, inside her pop star bubble, being worshiped for the image she projected and never noticed for the person she was. Scared and trying desperately not to show it to anyone. Not even Madison. She had to get a hold of herself.

The last of the anxiety drained away—the first panic attack that had stopped without becoming full-blown.

Judah leaned forward, his eyes full of pity.

She slapped on a big, happy smile. Force shields reengaged. Thankfully. "I needed a diva moment. Everything's better now."

Doubt crept into his expression, but his hand dropped off her shoulder.

She upped her smile's wattage. *Fake it 'til you make it.* "You can stay. I'm outta here. Makeup will have to do a small miracle on this. But that's why I pay them the big bucks." Pleased that her hands only trembled a little, she opened the door. "You'll have to watch the concert from the wings with Brock. It's the best vantage point in the house. I wouldn't want you to miss it."

Judah didn't voice the skepticism that hadn't faded from his face. "I won't."

"Great. Meet me backstage afterward, and I'll sign a T-shirt for you." She wiggled her fingers in a lighthearted wave before leaving. *Whew.* That was the closest she'd ever come to having a breakdown in front of anyone aside from Madison. Five more concerts, then she absolutely needed to go somewhere and overcome these panic issues.

~\*~

Judah stood in the wings beside Brock as the crowd screamed and chanted. Drums blasted their battle cries. Lucy, or Celeste, which fit her more aptly now, bounced across the stage, her short, rainbow colored hair catching the light. She sang into a microphone, a breathy, pure voice, prettier than he'd

expected.

“Heck of a way to make a living,” Brock said, leaning close to Judah’s ear to be heard over the almost deafening music.

Judah nodded. Standing in front all those people would give him hives. He nodded to the stage. “Nervous?”

“Nah. If I’m gonna get famous, this is part of the deal.” Brock looped an arm around Judah’s shoulders. “When I make your farm into a tourist destination, my name alone will save me millions on advertising.”

“I haven’t decided to sell, yet.”

“Listen, man. I know you think that bull of yours will solve all your problems, but all the breeding in the world won’t pay those massive hospital bills. You’re probably behind on your mortgage, too.”

Judah’s lips tightened, but he didn’t give Brock the satisfaction of a nod, no matter how true it was.

“So, sell that place, pay the bills, and buy another farm in a less prime location. Wyoming. Isn’t that where your family went with most of the rest of your community?”

Judah gave a dismissive shrug. Brock knew his whole history. How he’d been raised Amish but left the order rather than join the church and enlisted in the army—of all things—mostly for the health insurance and to pay his sister’s bills after she had her accident. Although he’d never told Brock about the fiancée who had chosen to stay with the community and marry an Amish man.

“That farm is where I was born. June, too.” Not to mention his Amish friends and neighbors wouldn’t appreciate him not giving them a chance to buy his place. Tradition demanded an auction, even if he



hadn't joined the church, although they would never want to pay the money Brock offered. But he wouldn't give up the fight yet. His bull, Roman, was commanding a pretty hefty price for breeding, plus he had some heifers he could sell, but it wasn't enough.

"Listen, if I've learned anything in life, it's that you can't hold on to the past. Let the place go. Buy another. Be successful." With the background music, Brock practically shouted in his ear.

Drawn like a sunflower to the sun, Judah's gaze rested yet again on the woman singing on the stage. Maybe she made millions singing songs and flaunting her body and personal life for the whole world to see. But she was miserable. Her eyes, unguarded for those moments earlier in the room, had said it all.

Without turning, he asked, "Did they give you the raise you wanted?"

Brock had admitted last week when he made the offer that he didn't have quite enough money to back it up. Not unless Celeste's manager coughed up more than what his contract had stipulated.

"Soon as I'm done out here on stage, they're gonna. They'll realize that they don't have all the power after all."

The music swelled, and the tempo quickened.

Brock continued. "Madison said she wants our song to be powerful. She wants the crowd clamoring for me and Celeste to be together. Well, I'll make sure the crowd wants that, all right. Celeste, too. Then, when she's begging me to kiss her, I'm gonna walk away. Madison'll get the idea—if she wants a lip lock, she needs to cough up more dough."

Judah's chest pinched at the off-handed way Brock planned to humiliate Lucy. "That's more likely to get

you canned than a raise." Judah was pretty sure there was a gag order in Brock's contract, too. He should never have confided to Judah that he was being paid to pretend to be Celeste's boyfriend.

Brock shrugged. "She's a pop star. People fall at her feet. They'll hire someone tomorrow to take my place. Anyway, it's the name recognition I want. Being the boyfriend photo op is too much of a drag."

"You've changed since our Army days." Now, it seemed personal gain meant more to Brock than his integrity.

"You haven't, man." Brock clamped him on the shoulder.

"Surely, there's a better way for you to get what you want."

"Maybe. But this way is the fastest. Either I'm getting a raise, or I'm done. Don't care which." Brock elbowed Judah. "Sell me that farm so you can go live a little."

"Not yet." Not ever, if he could help it. He turned back to the singer, Brock's plan swishing in his head. The friend he'd known ten years ago had been ambitious but not mean.

The woman on the stage belted out words into the microphone, then waved her arms and danced in time to the rollicking beat. Completely different from the one crying in the sitting room earlier. Should he tell Brock that Celeste wasn't as confident as she looked? He dismissed that idea. Brock had become jerk enough to use it to his advantage. The crowd cheered, and the woman onstage beamed. A queen before her subjects.

*Lucida.* The brightest star in a constellation. The word popped into his head, and he rolled it around, liking the way it fit the woman on stage, the way it

seemed to apply for him. As soon as she'd walked into the dressing room, he'd seen it, and couldn't believe the others hadn't been as star-struck as he. He'd never met a woman, English or Old Order, who shone the way she did. Some kind of internal glow that made it almost impossible to look at anyone else when she was in the room. In self-preservation, he'd touched her as little as possible and gotten away as fast as he could. She was a superstar, a lucida, and he a simple ex-Amish farmer. Invisible.

Still onstage singing, Celeste bent down and held her hand out to a cute little girl whose short, curly hair was dyed in several different colors, imitating Celeste's style. The child, who looked to be about five, sang every word in tandem, while Celeste helped the girl climb on stage. After a barely perceptible motion of her hand, a stagehand brought a microphone out. The little girl's eyes popped and flashed with thrilled excitement as she held the mic to her lips and sang the chorus in perfect rhythm with Celeste. The crowd cheered in thunderous approval.

The song ended and the thumping drums stopped, while the crowd noise swelled. Screaming fans rushed the stage and security guards pushed them back.

Judah pulled farther back into the shadows, away from the thousands of screaming and seemingly insane people.

As the applause slowly dissipated, the lights dimmed, and the singer, now thoroughly in her role as Celeste, spoke low into her microphone. She introduced Brock, who strutted out onto the stage as the crowd cheered.

The lights darkened as Celeste sat on the stool next to Brock. The spotlight came on, enveloping the two of

them in its light.

Judah's neck hairs pricked. His gaze darted around, seeing nothing unusual that would cause the odd feeling. The cello played a slow introduction.

Despite himself, tears welled in his own eyes as Brock and Celeste blended in perfect harmony. The simple cello accompaniment and the sweet harmony of the voices rose and shimmered in raw simplicity over the completely silent, packed hall. Several thousand people stood in awe, waving cell phone lights as the last notes faded away.

They canted toward each other. This would be where they kissed, followed by an announcement of their current exclusive relationship status. Except Brock backed away. A fraction of an inch, but enough for Judah to see that he intended to do as he'd said.

The crowd erupted in screams and cheers and chants of "Kiss, kiss."

Celeste's desire to give the crowd what they wanted shone in the pleading in her eyes and the way she leaned toward Brock.

Brock, on the other hand, seemed to be waiting.

The crowd roared, not close enough to see her expression, which had become almost frantic.

With perfect clarity her face flashed into Judah's head, as it had been earlier, with the look of uncertainty and doubt, almost fear. It had only been a few seconds that her heart had shone on her face and the very human emotions under her Celeste cover had been exposed, but they'd been so strikingly real that Judah's heart twisted.

Brock's head angled back, the hard line of his chin outlined against the stage lights.

Celeste's lips trembled, hurt etched in the lines of

her face.

Too far away to be aware of the by-play, the crowd continued to scream and chant.

Brock's body tensed, his foot twitched. Did he honestly think that Celeste would offer him more money now? Brock's expression tightened.

Judah was sure he was seconds away from walking off the stage, leaving Celeste alone and embarrassed. Hurt and abandoned. As much as Judah didn't want to care, he couldn't stop the clenching of his stomach, the prompting of his heart to *do something*. This woman, almost a stranger to him, had touched him on some internal level, and he couldn't stand to see her glow diminished.

The lights of the stage seemed to dim, and the crowd noise faded as Judah focused on Celeste's face. Silently pleading, desperate for Brock to play into the illusion. Which was, after all, what he'd been hired for. Or maybe she was desperate for something else. Something as elusive. His heart thumped and his jaw clenched.

Not sure when or how his feet started moving, Judah forgot about the crowd and all the watching eyes, forgot about his aversion to being in front of thousands of people, forgot about his sister at home and the responsibilities that pulled like black holes in his life. He lunged out on stage, and reached Brock's side as Celeste moved forward.

Brock dodged back.

"Move," Judah said into his friend's ear, giving him a shove.

Celeste's brown eyes flew open, meeting his in the second before his inexperienced lips brushed hers. Later he figured that he should have given at least a