

# *Holding a Tender Heart*

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Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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## **HOLDING A TENDER HEART**

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## One



Debbie Watson slowed her Toyota Camry as she neared the buggy ahead of her. She'd often done this, living as she did in Snyder County's Amish country. And after all this time, she still didn't resent the Plain people and their old-fashioned buggies. In fact, she wondered what it would be like to actually drive one.

Of course, she knew part of the answer. She'd grown up next door to an Amish family—the Beilers—and though she was *Engli-sha*, the Beilers had invited her to ride with them on more than one occasion. On a few Saturday afternoons she'd driven into Mifflinburg with Verna, the eldest of the three Beiler girls, to buy groceries for Verna's mother, Saloma.

Those times had been peaceful as she listened to the steady clip-clop of hooves striking the pavement as they drove along. The soft sounds weren't drowned out even when motorized vehicles passed the buggy—some of them accompanied by loud roars of their engines. Thankfully the locals and occasional tourists were mostly respectful of the area's Amish community and behaved accordingly.

When a car did roar by, Buttercup, one of the Beilers' driving horses, would shake her head at such rude interruptions, as if the noise were too much for her tender ears. She spent most of her life in a quiet barnyard or a pasture with plenty of grass, got extra

feed when she had to work, and was fed delicious hay in the winter months. It was a life to be envied—as was the life of all the Beilers, as far as Debbie was concerned.

Life was hectic in her *Englisha* world—at least most of the time. Hopefully now that she was graduating from college in Lancaster on Saturday, her life might calm down a bit. But she had a job interview in Lewistown tomorrow. If she were hired...well, maybe her life wouldn't be as calm as she was hoping. The job interview was with a Mr. Fulton, a friend of Debbie's dad. Would Mr. Fulton really take her on? Would he think her qualified with only her college education? Wouldn't he ask about her lack of experience? It was hard to tell. But Mr. Fulton had given her the best of wishes for her graduation and a warm smile when she'd dropped off the application.

Did she want a job that her dad arranged for her? Not really. But there were few other options, and she needed a job now that college was over—and they were scarce. Of all the applications she'd filled out, Mr. Fulton was the only one to offer her an interview. Had her mom pushed her dad to speak to Mr. Fulton? Had her dad pulled strings? It was possible since they were good friends. But she didn't dare ask Mr. Fulton or her parents such a thing. And what was so wrong if her dad *had* spoken with Mr. Fulton? Her parents loved her and only wanted to help out. She should be humble enough to appreciate their efforts and take the job if it were offered.

If her mom was behind this, she meant no harm. But even so, it made Debbie feel smothered. Even the decision to go to college had been more her mother's than hers. But now that college was behind her, shouldn't she make some decisions for herself?

Debbie grimaced as two vehicles behind her pulled out to pass her and probably the buggy ahead of her. Why were people in such a hurry? If the truth were known, Debbie would have traded her car for the buggy she was staring at. She would trade her job prospects and even her college degree for the contentment she saw in the Beiler family and the other Amish within their community.

But how could that ever be? Her parents had their expectations of her. A college degree, a good job, money, and eventually marriage to a nice man who was a good social match. A man like Doug Williams. Oh, Doug was nice enough, but he didn't understand her any more than her parents did. The truth was that neither Debbie's parents nor Doug really wanted what she wanted. That too was a problem from her mother's point of view, along with Debbie's "lack of drive and motivation." Debbie didn't fit into the world her mother circulated in. The two were so different from each other. There was no question about that. Her mom had even said Debbie needed an awakening of some sort.

Debbie sighed. She knew she couldn't do much about being different. It wasn't like she hadn't tried. She'd gone to college. But even that was only a small victory for her mother. She'd wanted Debbie to go to Penn State or maybe even one of the Ivy League schools. Her mother had simply sighed and relented when Debbie had been accepted at Franklin & Marshall in Lancaster, one of the oldest colleges in Pennsylvania. Her dad had been on her side, reminding her mother how well esteemed the small college was.

What would either of them say if she told them the truth? That college really didn't matter that much to her. She wanted a simpler life—one like the Beilers led. She had never said those words out loud in her parents' presence, but she supposed she didn't have to. Surely it was evident enough in the way she lived. Conservative and quiet, she hadn't dashed around to wild parties on weekends like most of the high school and college students did. Her dad wrote this off to her religious life, which both parents knew was vibrant.

Out of politeness she did go to the Baptist church with her mother every Sunday when home from school. But even that she credited to the Amish and not to her mother. As for being a Baptist herself...well, her heart wasn't in it. Oh, they were fine people, but they weren't living the life Debbie wanted for herself. What she longed for was a faith to call her own. Something like the Beiler

family's faith. From the time she was a small girl, the Beilers' life-style had made her feel the closeness of God. They did this by the way they lived and their simple trust that God would take care of them.

Debbie leaned back in the seat as the buggy turned off the road and she was able to speed up. Oh, if only she'd been born into an Amish family and had somehow been switched at birth. That would explain her longing for Amish life. But, really, the idea was ridiculous! Debbie Watson born into an Amish family? There were too many things that argued against it. Her baby pictures, her birth certificate, the family resemblance. She was *Englisha* born, but her heart was Amish. That was all there was to it.

No doubt the Beiler influence had something to do with it. Debbie had felt drawn to their farm ever since she could remember. She would head over there for any reason she could find. She'd always loved the smell and sounds of the place in the summertime when the hayfields were cut, the barnyard was clean, and the horses leaned over the fences. In the evening the cows mooed as milking time approached and they meandered up from the pasture. It was life as close to heaven on earth as she'd ever known.

She would often run over when Verna and Ida, the oldest Beiler girls, came out to chore. They would make sure she was comfortably seated on a three-legged milking stool while they bustled about the barn. Wayne and Reuben, the two oldest brothers of the family, had mostly ignored her. To them she was just the curious *Englisha* girl from next door who sometimes hung around... obviously having no chores to do at her own home.

Lois, the third Beiler daughter, had shown no end of fascination with Debbie's *Englisha* life. On Saturdays Lois would play with her in the yard and pepper her with questions about her world. What was it like to wear pretty dresses? Did it hurt to put holes in your ears for earrings? As the two girls grew up, questions had continually arisen, especially when Debbie neared the age of driving a car.

Lois had almost swooned at the news that her friend would attend college. These were all things Debbie had talked about reluctantly, especially after she caught on that Lois only asked such questions when she was sure her *daett*, Bishop Beiler, was out of earshot. But that didn't keep Lois from asking more questions. And their differences didn't end there. Lois stayed inside during chore time so she could help with the supper preparations. She was a born cook and didn't like barn life as much as Debbie didn't like kitchens. They couldn't have been more different if they'd tried.

Down through the years, Debbie's friendship with Verna and Ida had grown deeper. For several years all three Beiler girls had come over for occasional overnight visits, but those had stopped when it became obvious to Bishop Beiler how much Lois loved the *Englisha* life. Thankfully, the bishop hadn't blamed Debbie for Lois's fascination with all things *Englisha*.

Now Verna and Ida were out of their traditional *rumspringa* time and had joined the church. Whether this was from their father's orders or their own choices, Debbie had never been able to ascertain. Lois was at the tail end of her *rumspringa* time. She still hadn't joined the Amish church, even though she'd just turned twenty-one. And she showed no inclination to join either—at least that Debbie had heard of. The only thing holding Lois back from plunging ahead into the *Englisha* world was the deep respect she, along with her two sisters, had for her father's position in the community. How long that would restrain Lois, Debbie could only wonder.

Thankfully Bishop Beiler hadn't known everything that had transpired when Lois visited her house. She'd stayed up most of the nights listening to music, watching television, and trying her hand at using the electric kitchen appliances—all things never found in an Amish home.

Debbie slowed down to pull into her parents' driveway. As she parked the car, she paused for a moment to gaze across the field toward the Beiler farm. In the late-afternoon light the scene was

peaceful, like it was always, the red barn still gleaming from last year's paint job. Emery, the youngest Beiler boy, had seen to that. He was full of youthful energy and well into his *rumspringa*. He likely didn't want his reputation tarnished by a fading homestead.

Wayne and Reuben were long married now and had children of their own, but sometimes on Sunday afternoons they came home for a visit. Marriage prospects for the Beiler daughters seemed less promising. None of the three had dated yet, but Debbie didn't feel comfortable asking why. Lois not dating, she could understand. The youngest Beiler daughter didn't want to settle down with an Amish boy—and likely never would. But Verna and Ida were another matter. Both of them were decent looking and nice, so the problem had to be something else.

Debbie sighed as her gaze shifted from the barn to the well-kept Beiler house. Oh, what she wouldn't give to be there right now! If only she and Lois could trade places—that would make both of them happy. Perhaps she should march over to the Beiler farm and offer to switch places with Lois. That would provoke a hearty laugh from Bishop Beiler—until he thought her words through. His laughter would stop then. Bishop Beiler didn't plan to lose a single one of his children to the world.

It was enough for Debbie that he tolerated her visits all these years, apparently never seeing her as a threat. Did he perhaps understand her heart? Was that why he'd put up with her hanging around so much? She'd practically grown up with his children. She'd even picked up enough of the Pennsylvania Dutch language so she could get the gist of what they were saying part of the time, though she still couldn't speak it. She had to be careful lest Bishop Beiler see her as an interloper, Debbie mused. The girl who'd crept in where she didn't belong. Oh, if only she *could* belong! But that wasn't possible. She was who she was. She would continue to fail to fit in with her own world. She would continue to feel shut out, lonely, and different.



Debbie got out of her car and went into the house. Silence enveloped her—only it wasn't the silence of an Amish home. In the kitchen the refrigerator rattled, and she heard a load of ice drop inside the freezer. The home's heating system whirled as it poured warm air into the room. But the starkest difference was the lack of people. Debbie's mom had a job and wouldn't be back until late. Her dad was working at their garage in town. He spent every weekday and even some weekends there. This was how it always had been and apparently always would be. There was a continuance of sorts, but a continuance of monotony, not the ebb and flow of life that happened over at the Beilers'.

Debbie walked to the back patio doors and looked toward the Beilers' farm. The wash line was empty. If this were a Monday, Ida would have laundry strung up, flapping in the wind until dry enough to take inside. Debbie could see it now in her memory. Mostly long lines of dark-blue and white clothing sprinkled occasionally with lighter colors. The bright spots would be Lois's dresses, no doubt. Lois pushed the *Ordnung* rules until they stretched like rubber bands. But Debbie knew Lois could take things only so far because she was the bishop's daughter. That had been confirmed once during an overnight visit. Lois had collapsed into giggles by the time she was done with the tale, but Debbie had listened in horror, which had only increased Lois's delight.

As Lois's story went, one afternoon after a shopping trip to Mifflinburg with Ida, Lois had snuck a few yards of light-green material into the house. She'd begun making a dress in secret down in the basement, working late at night after her *mamm* and *daett* were in bed. She'd draped the whole contraption, plus herself, in two of their thickest quilts to muffle the sound of the sewing machine. For light, Lois had set a gas lantern on the concrete floor. But her mother had discovered the project before Lois could sneak out of the house with the dress on and head for a youth social. Her *daett* had put his foot down, which had, of course, undone all of Lois's hard work.

Debbie's sympathies were clearly on Bishop Beiler's side, and she'd told Lois so.

That admission had provoked an outburst of astonishment from Lois. How could one not enjoy the *Englisha* life with such opportunities as dressing in beautiful colors at one's fingertips? Debbie's view was clearly beyond Lois's comprehension.

Well, it was beyond Debbie's understanding how one couldn't love the Amish world. Especially if one had been born into it.

With one last glance toward her neighbors' farm, Debbie retreated to the kitchen and tossed her purse on the table. As if the bounce had made the cell phone inside come alive, it began to ring. Debbie dug into her purse and glanced at the incoming number. It was Doug Williams. She almost let the phone continue to ring, but Doug would expect an answer. She'd avoided him all week, but that couldn't go on forever.

"Hello," she said, holding the phone to her ear.

"Debbie?" Doug's voice sounded surprised.

She laughed. "Not expecting me to answer, huh?"

"Well, I never know with you."

"There's no law saying you have to call, Doug."

He sighed. "Look, Debbie, please stop playing games. You know I'd like to go out with you this weekend. Maybe Friday or Saturday night? Or after the graduation ceremony maybe? A nice restaurant back here in Lewistown. Or whatever you want."

"You leave plenty of options, don't you, Doug?"

"That's because I want to see you, Debbie. I really do."

Debbie took a moment to answer. "I don't know if I can, Doug. There will be a lot going on with me...you know...graduating."

His voice hesitated. "Debbie, are you seeing someone else? Is that why you're avoiding me?"

She laughed. "No, of course not! Who would want to see me?" Maybe that was a bit over the top, but right now that was how she felt. No one, including Doug, would want to be with her if they

knew what she was really like. He'd hung around for a year or so now, taking her out on occasional dates. He said he wanted a deeper relationship, but she had stalled.

Debbie pressed the phone harder against her ear. Doug must have said something she hadn't caught because she could hear irritation as he asked, "Debbie, are you still there?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes, just thinking."

"What's so hard about going out with me?" he teased. "I'm a nice guy. Surely you know that by now. You'd enjoy yourself."

"Okay." Debbie sighed. "Where shall it be?" She sounded like she was giving in, and Doug would count chickens where they didn't exist, but that couldn't be helped.

Doug's voice brightened. "How about somewhere where we can talk? Perhaps Andrea's Pizzeria? At six on Saturday night?"

She didn't hesitate this time. "Okay, I'll see you then." When they hung up, Debbie wondered if it was fair to not just tell him flat out they had no future together. But how did one say, "It's not going to work for us" face-to-face...or, worse, over the phone? And yet she did care about Doug. He *was* nice, but...

Her mind went back to last spring. She'd caught sight of a young Amish man as he cultivated his corn crop, and she'd felt...drawn to him. But was it to him or to his Amish life? She'd seen him again during the summer and had experienced the same feelings as she watched him cut his hay. Then in the fall, she'd seen him hauling manure. His spreader had bounced across the rough, plowed ground. By then she knew his name was Alvin Knepp.

He was, as far as she knew, unmarried. She'd heard his father was the poorest Amish farmer around. "The Knepps," Lois had said, "are poor in both farming methods and in money." But Debbie didn't care about those things. Wasn't that exactly what she wanted to get away from? Was that why she often caught herself daydreaming about a certain Amish man?

Alvin exuded a rugged goodness that drew her heart in a way she

didn't understand. And she didn't even know him! She'd had only fleeting glimpses every so often. What would it be like to speak to him? Debbie drew in her breath at the thought. Alvin wore a tattered and torn hat most of the time. Maybe that was all he could afford. Either way, he made a striking figure as he worked. How he appeared on Sundays she didn't know, having never attended an Amish church service. But it couldn't be worse than on workdays. Likely he cleaned up well. She laughed at the thought. What did it matter? He was clearly out of her reach.

How on earth was she supposed to tell Doug all that? He would think her insane, and he would probably be right. Somehow she needed to get past this fascination with a life that could never be hers.