

The
BARGAIN

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PLAIN CITY PEACE



BOOK ONE

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The Bargain: A Novel

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*To my husband, Tom, one of the good ones.
Too often, the courage it takes to lovingly support a
wife and family goes unrecognized. Thank you for serving
the good Lord with grace and skill.*



C H A P T E R 1

“When a great adventure is offered, you don’t refuse it.”

—AMELIA EARHART, QUOTED IN BETSIE’S JOURNAL

BETSIE TROYER REINED in her horse as she reached the outskirts of Plain City. A tear trickled down her cheek as she tried to pretend she was on a normal errand, but grim reminders were everywhere.

As Judith trotted around the corner of Ohio 42, Betsie was barely aware of her parents on the seat beside her. They were silent as the buggy passed the filling station on State Route 161, where the English paid twenty-nine cents a gallon to fuel their fancy cars. Cookie-cutter English houses on postage-stamp lots rubbed elbows with imposing English churches topped with showy bells and steeples. A row of red-brick storefronts marched proudly along West Main Street. The glare of shop lights was absent, but Betsie could almost hear the evil crackle of electricity as it surged through the ugly wires overhead.

A traffic light commanded a stop. Betsie glanced at the Seth Thomas clock ensconced in the white cupola in the center of town: ten past six on a Monday morning. She gritted her teeth and faced front so that her bonnet served as blinders to block out the English world as much as possible. Common sense reminded her it was much too early for the lazy English to shop for their store-bought goods—the English, who already had everything they would ever desire, anyway. *Ach*, they weren’t going to get her parents, too.

“*Dat*, please don’t you and *Mem* leave the Amish,” she burst out. “How can you ignore what you promised on your knees before the church, long before I was born?”

“Betsie, Betsie.” Her father’s grizzled beard dragged against his suspenders as he shook his head. “Now that we know the truth and hold it dear in our hearts, *Mem* and I will follow Jesus wherever He leads. He knows how sorry we are that we didn’t follow Him sooner.” *Dat* sighed. “I pray you and Sadie will follow Him, too. Come with us to Belle Center, *Dechder*.”

“Never.” The buggy rolled onto Railroad Street. The train depot loomed ahead, and in front of it steamed the black beast that would carry her parents away forever. Fifty miles that might as well be five thousand. If she’d had her way, they would all be at home with her youngest sister. Sadie missed saying good-bye because it would look suspicious if they all went to the depot—maybe *Dat* wasn’t so sure of his decision, after all.

She decided to press him. “When I join the church, I will stay here forever.” With Charley Yoder, because he thinks a lot of me, and I think a lot of him, too, she added inwardly. She thanked the good Lord for a single ray of sunshine on an awful day. “Besides, you know I made a bargain with Nelson. I promised to mind the harness shop for him while he’s away, and you’ve always taught me to honor my word—up to now.”

“Betsie,” *Mem* reproved. “You should not speak so to your *Dat*.”

“Leave be, Fannie.” *Dat* rubbed the back of his neck. “Your cousin never should have asked such a sacrifice of you, Betsie,” he said slowly. “I know he didn’t choose to be drafted, but it’s a shame he agreed to serve in the military hospital instead of keeping that new business of his going.”

“*Ach*, it’s all settled. Besides, if I didn’t help my cousin, what would the bishop say? It took him such a long time to grant me permission to live and work in Hilliard while I learn the trade.”

As she spoke, Betsie marveled at how ludicrous her situation was. Why had she, an Amish girl who shunned Englishers, agreed so readily to live among them? She had no explanation apart from her

adventurous streak, which cropped up at the oddest times. Of course, *Mem* would say it stemmed from some of the English stories she checked out from the Plain City Library. More than once, her mother had warned that reading about the doings of Amelia Earhart and Tom Sawyer would get Betsie into trouble.

Trouble there had been. Bishop Jonas Gingerich hadn't liked the harness shop idea at all. It helped—a little—that the English family with whom Betsie would live during her apprenticeship included an upstanding father and mother who would look after her welfare. Mr. Sullivan, the former shop owner, had assured Jonas of Mrs. Sullivan's cooperation. They hadn't met the English lady, but Betsie pictured a mother like the one she'd seen in an English newspaper ad for boxed pancake mix. One who wore a starched, knee-length dress and a dainty apron. In one hand, she held a spatula, and she smiled as she poured batter on a smoking griddle.

Maybe the bishop had seen the same ad, for he had ultimately approved Betsie's request to take over Nelson's business while her cousin was stationed at a Chicago hospital for two years. Incredible as it seemed, she was to start her new job this very morning. Mr. Sullivan had promised to pick her up for the week. It wasn't like she'd be with the English the whole time, after all. She'd travel home on the weekends. *Dat's* sister, Lovina, was Nelson's mother, and this very minute she was traveling from Holmes County to stay with the Troyers while Nelson was away.

Only, *Dat* had stopped short of informing Lovina that he wouldn't actually be there. Betsie cherished this uncharacteristic omission as another crumb of proof that he might change his mind.

"Haven't the English intruded on our way of life enough, *Dat*? Whoa, Judith." Betsie pulled up in front of the gingerbread-trimmed station and faced him. "Do they have to take you and *Mem*, too?"

With his rumbly bear voice hardly above a whisper, *Dat* said, "Look around us, child. See the cars, the modern machinery? It's 1971, yet we live as though it's 1841. Do you really think our Lord cares how we dress or how we plow, so long as we give ourselves completely to Him and His care?" He patted her hand. "Come, Betsie. We mustn't

miss the train; Pastor Shock's brother is expecting us. Bless his heart for taking us in." He disembarked and gave his hand to *Mem* to help her out of the buggy.

Betsie swallowed tears as she set the brake and hopped down to fasten Judith's neck rope to the hitching rail. When she finished, *Dat* cleared his throat and looked from Betsie to the ticket window and back again. "Look out for the Brewster's dog on the way home, *Dechder*. That fool Prince is liable to rush and snap at the buggy wheels and get Judith all riled up."

"*Jah*, I know." Her throat ached. Always she had heard the same advice every time she drove to and from Plain City, but no more. "*Dat*, please! *Mem!*" She clasped her hands. "Don't sneak away like this. Your place is here."

Mem's face crumpled. "Betsie, you know if we told anyone we were leaving the Amish, we would face unbearable pressure to stay. We must make a clean break. If you children would come with us, our happiness would be complete, but we can't make such an important decision for you. As far as our own faith is concerned, go we must." She embraced Betsie in a rare show of affection and turned away to fumble in her pocket for the train fare.

"Run home and get Sadie. Join us, Betsie." *Dat* nodded encouragingly. "You won't find the good Lord lacking."

His kind blue eyes were filled with such compassion that, for a moment, Betsie wavered. But what about her future with Charley Yoder? If she left the Amish with her parents, it was all over with her and Charley.

She shook her head. "I have never found Him lacking, *Dat*. I don't understand why you have."

He looked at the ground. When he raised his head, his eyes glistened as he rubbed them. "A cinder must have got me." He sniffled and then turned heavily toward the ticket window. "Two for Belle Center, please," Betsie heard him say in his best English.

"Round trip?" The stationmaster's busy hands paused.

"Not this time." *Dat* inclined his head with authority but Betsie saw him clutch *Mem's* hand beneath the counter. The stationmaster raised

his bushy eyebrows, pushed up his spectacles, and issued the tickets. Then he sauntered outside to stow their baggage.

Dat held *Mem's* elbow as she climbed the steps. He paused to look at Betsie one last time. "Be careful out in the world, Betsie." He thrust a paper at her. "Here is the address where we will be. Write to us so we know you and Sadie are safe. Trust in the Lord." The conductor took their tickets and showed them to their seats.

Betsie waved and stumbled toward the buggy as the train chugged. One sob escaped her as she undid her mare's neck rope. She held the harness strap as Judith nudged her and nickered. Betsie rubbed her mare's nose, determined not to let the curious stationmaster see her distress.

Her resolve lasted until the train hooted and crossed the road in front of her to retreat into the distance. Then she mounted the buggy step. Mechanically she sat down, the piece of paper still clutched in her sweaty hand. "Our new address, 211 East Buckeye Street, Belle Center, Ohio," she whispered. She shoved the paper deep in her pocket and dissolved in quiet tears, only dimly aware of her surroundings as she drove through town. She passed a few farms and was nearing her own driveway when a childish voice pierced her grief.

"Betsie! See my kitty!"

Wearily she searched the early morning shadows and spotted her neighbor, Katie Miller. Her pixie face wreathed in smiles, the tiny girl lugged a patient orange cat, its distended belly practically dragging the ground.

"If you come over now, I'll let you play with her!" Katie promised.

"Not today, but soon." Betsie managed a wan smile and a one-fingered wave.

Katie beamed. "You're a *gut* friend, Betsie!"

The sweet words thawed the block of ice in Betsie's middle a fraction, but she needed to get home. She managed to pass a couple more farms before a friend of *Dat's* hailed her. With a sinking heart, Betsie tightened the reins. Judith shook her head and arched her neck but submitted to steady pressure. The mare was just as eager as she was to get home.

Joe Miller, Katie's great-uncle, stood next to a white sign he'd tacked to a fence post. "*Guder mariye*, Betsie. Just who I needed to see. Tell me, can a good reader like you make out my sign all right from the road?"

How was it that most Amish signs looked like they'd been lettered by the same hand? Joe's letters were the usual endearing mix of spidery capitals and lowercase. "Firewood, split and camp, ask for Sawmill Joe," she read aloud. "See? I can make it out fine." She hoped he couldn't make out her tears.

"Such a big help you always are, Betsie. Tell your *Dat* I said hello." Joe raised his index finger and touched his hat brim.

Betsie shuddered and drove home, a very different home than the one she'd left this morning.

She cared for Judith in a fog, turned her out, and wandered inside for some sisterly comfort, but Sadie had already left for her job. Betsie knew she should eat a good breakfast, but a cup of tea and some crackers were all she could manage. When she finished the meager fare, she simply sat, something she'd not done in recent memory. Finally she carried her dishes to the sink. She washed them in the cooling water from the teakettle, and as she swiped her clean teacup with the dish towel, a car horn honked. The fragile cup slipped from her hands and shattered on *Mem's* spotless linoleum.

Betsie checked the clock. Was it only yesterday that *Mem* had wound it for the last time? She steeled herself and pushed that thought away. Eight o'clock—Mr. Sullivan was here. She sidestepped the broken glass and pulled the black bonnet over her *Kapp*. She hurried to grab her satchel and dashed out the front door.

A car the color of a buzzing yellow jacket idled in the driveway. A black stripe encircled the car's back end. As Betsie approached, the window lowered. Her steps slowed; this was not Mr. Sullivan, her new boss. Instead, a lady with fluffy auburn hair that dragged on her shoulders sat in the driver's seat. She flipped her hair back and revealed brown eyes. Her face was devoid of the paint that English ladies liked. It came to her that the lady had stopped here because she was lost.

"Hey." The lady looked up and down at Betsie's bonnet, apron, violet dress, black stockings, and sensible shoes. The car door opened and

two bare feet topped by fringed trouser hems emerged. The trouser material flared wide around each ankle but fit skin-tight above the knee, except for rips that revealed hairy kneecaps.

Betsie sucked in her breath. This long-haired person was a man, and a long-haired English man was properly classified as a hippie. She'd glimpsed his kind in Plain City but had given them a wide berth. He towered a half a foot or more above her, increasing the threat.

Her heart slammed. "Don't come near me!"

"Verry funny. Okay, joke's over."

The hippie made a grab for her satchel, but Betsie whipped it behind her and backed away. "You English have taken everything I have, but you're not getting me!"

He froze. "Whoa, easy there. My old man sent me to pick you up, but seems to me you're dealing with something pretty heavy."

"My satchel is *not* heavy. I can carry it." Tears welled up. "Please leave me alone!"

"Oh, wow." He held up both palms in a gesture of submission. "Listen, my dad is Gerald Sullivan. Harness shop. Ring a bell?"

Was that sympathy she glimpsed in his eyes? She willed herself to breathe. He was saying the right words, but how did she know if she could trust him? Maybe he only wanted to placate her long enough to force-feed her psychedelic drugs and then abduct her.

Then again, what did it matter? No *Dat* appeared at her side with solid advice; no *Mem* waited in the house with loving arms. The life she knew was over. She hesitantly surrendered her bag and trailed toward the car.

"Cool." The hippie hoisted the satchel. His cuffs were wide and frayed, his green shirt unbuttoned nearly to his navel. His long hair hid his face as he stowed the satchel in the back. Betsie wrapped her dress around her body like a shield and slid backward into the sloped bucket seat.

The hippie settled himself, twisted a key in a flat wooden panel, and touched a wooden knob on top of a silver stick between the seats. He moved the stick, and the car emitted a powerful snarl.

As the car backed up, Betsie caught a glimpse of her empty house,

a tall white square graced by a wide front porch. Cottonwood shadows danced across the white siding. Her heart ached as she bid a silent good-bye to the green shingles and the shutterless windows.

She crumpled a fold of her dress and rubbed her thumb over the rough fabric. A dull pain throbbed in her right arm, and she realized she was plastered against the window crank. The tires crunched, and then they were on the road.

“You okay?”

Adrenaline raced. Her survival instinct kicked in and set her nerves on a knife edge. She nodded but kept her eyes peeled for Joe Miller or any other neighbor who might come to her rescue if the hippie tried anything.

“Cool,” he repeated. “Kinda touch and go there for a minute.”

She needed an escape plan. Her fingers curved over the door handle. She’d nearly worked up the nerve to bail out and roll to the pavement when there was a click. Loud music flooded the car. Betsie clapped her hands over her ears and squealed.

“Oh, sorry.” The hippie pointed to the black square display with white numbers above five silver keys. “That’s the radio,” he shouted.

“I know it’s the radio,” Betsie snapped, heart racing. She folded her hands in her lap so he wouldn’t see them shake.

“I thought music might help you relax. Forgot I had it cranked to wake me up.” He lowered the volume and punched a key. The orange line skittered to another number. Horns blared.

“Much better, huh? Just drop all that heavy stuff and unwind, like the song says.” He drummed his fingers to the music.

Betsie scrunched down and did her best to ignore his talk. When the music faded, she was relieved, but nearly jumped out of her skin when a man shouted, “All *right!* Keep it tuned to WHOA, baby, where the hits never stop! Great new tune coming up, but first, these messages.” Then another man spoke quite solemnly about a buddy dropping a dime.

“Is this station okay?” the hippie asked. He glanced at her dress. “I mean, for your religion? They pretty much play bubble gum. My little sister likes it.”

She drew her dress still tighter around her knees. “What was he screeching about?”

The hippie grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. “Well, if you have to ask . . . Hey, wait a sec. Screeching? This station is easy listening.”

“Easy? He hurt my ears.”

“Huh. No wonder my old man hired you; you think like him.” He braked for a bend in the road. “Pretty soon you’ll be telling me that all guys should cut their hair above their ears and all chicks should wear dresses.” He glanced at Betsie’s dress and flushed.

Chickens in dresses? She stifled an almost hysterical urge to giggle. This hippie wasn’t so sure of himself now. “You have a funny way of talking, ain’t so? What’s your name, anyway?”

“Michael Sullivan, comic relief at your behest, ma’am.” He stopped for a traffic light.

Betsie stole a look at him, but he caught her in the act and winked.

“Well, what’s the verdict? Perfectly harmless . . . ain’t so?”

Betsie narrowed her eyes. Was this Michael mocking her?

“Skip it.” He held up a couple of fingers, his gaze fixed on the red light. “Peace.”

What? Now she was the one off balance. With annoyance came a surge of her adventurous streak, and she punched one of the radio keys. The orange line jumped to another number.

“Listen up, people. I could lose my job for playing this one,” the man on the radio said. “Tomorrow, May 4, 1971, marks one year since we lost Jeffrey, Allison, William, and Sandra. Rest in peace, Kent State Four.”

Awful twanging filled the car. The twanging lasted a long time. It wasn’t a happy sound—even Betsie could tell the difference from the song Michael played before. Angry thumps reverberated beneath the twangs.

The traffic signal changed from red to green. Betsie braced for acceleration, but Michael didn’t move. He stared at the road with a lost look while the howling voices mourned about soldiers and dead and O-hi-o. She thought he would break the wheel in two, he gripped it so hard. Droplets of sweat popped out on his forehead. Betsie pointed at the green light, but he flinched.

Quickly Betsie rolled the silver wheel until the music clicked off. *Mem* was right. Nothing good ever came out of a radio.