

Forgiven

The Amish School Shooting,
a Mother's Love,
and a Story of Remarkable Grace

TERRI ROBERTS
with Jeanette Windle



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This book recounts events in the life of Terri Roberts according to the author's recollection and from the author's perspective. While all the stories are true, some dialogue and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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May you find peace that passes understanding
through surrender and forgiveness as you absorb
the lessons these pages reveal to you.



Seek
Joy Through Adversity
in the moment, with expectation!

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A special mention to all my Amish friends from the Nickel Mines community who have shown such great interest and concern for our lives in our ongoing, growing friendships. Amish

Acknowledgments

names mentioned in this book are already of public record. These words are not intended to bring glory to the person, but to share how their lives have honored God through interactions I've had with them. All of the glory and honor goes to God the Father for the healing we have all experienced in this process.

Foreword

I still remember the outrage I felt as the news of the Lancaster County Amish schoolhouse shooting swept across media networks the morning of October 2, 2006. Within hours, ABC News and the Associated Press contacted me, wanting quotes. My Plain cousins, friends of two of the Amish families whose daughters were critically wounded, asked if I would request prayer from my readers for the peace-abiding people of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Ultimately, as word reached beyond America's shores, prayers for the injured survivors, as well as for the families of the deceased, were being offered up all over the globe.

What also emerged was sheer astonishment as believers and unbelievers alike struggled to comprehend the Amish bishop's immediate offer of forgiveness to the family of Charlie Roberts, the shooter. "How can mercy be extended for such a crime?" some questioned. "How can you simply forgive, once and for all?" others wondered.

My knee-jerk response came as a simple reminder that each of us is called to forgive those who do us harm. What Christ

taught in the Beatitudes is clear—if we want to be forgiven, we must extend forgiveness to others.

The bishop's pardon stirred up heated discussion about an all-encompassing forgiveness. Many had strong opinions; some even disputed how the Amish people could meekly follow their minister's lead in such an across-the-board act of mercy.

The families of the five little girls who died, as well as those with gravely wounded daughters, began to share that theirs was not merely a one-time offering of forgiveness. Rather, they had to purposefully *choose* to forgive daily and, in some cases, hour-by-hour. The father of one young victim who survived, but needs constant care, admitted that he often questions himself: *Have I truly forgiven?*

Author Terri Roberts' journey to wholeness is a striking testimony to the power of this amazing forgiveness. Shattered emotionally by her son's crime, she realized that she, too, must forgive him. Yet how does a mother move forward after such an unthinkable deed?

I wept at the author's travail over what she might have done that autumn morning, had she known, to thwart the tragedy to come. *Where was God that horrific day? Why didn't He step in and intervene?* My heart was also softened by the stories of the brokenhearted Amish families whose surrender to the sovereign will of our Lord became instrumental in the author's emotional healing.

This riveting account, written by a brave and brokenhearted mother, may not be what you're expecting. In fact, it may surprise you. But it will surely present you with an enduring hope that can only come from the loving hand of our heavenly Father. You will be drawn, as I was, to embrace fully the miracle and blessing of forgiveness.

—Beverly Lewis

Prologue

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.

—Psalm 88:6

Picture an idyllic, sun-kissed valley. Fields stretch to the base of a pine-cloaked ridge, a green and yellow patchwork of tall, tasseled corn, drying alfalfa, ripened wheat and barley. Apple and cherry orchards raise boughs heavy with ripening fruit. A creek, whose clear water offers refreshment on the hottest summer days to valley residents, both humans and animals, contributes trickling harmonies. And there is the laughter of children playing.

Let's not forget the laughter.

No valley is without storms. Rains, soft and hard, occasionally flatten crops, scatter flower petals and unripened fruit. But those same inconvenient rains provide the moisture that makes this sheltered paradise so fertile. Within the valley's memory there has even been a hurricane or two, ripping shingles from

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roofs, toppling fences and trees, sweeping away chickens, and ripping crops from the earth. The farmhouse and barn survived these storms, having been built strong and on solid foundations. The valley, though not untouched, was quickly restored by picking up the broken pieces, replanting the lost crops.

And then one day a new and different storm arises. No mere hurricane this one, but a tsunami. There's been no warning. No single feather of a cloud in a blue autumn sky. Only the trembling of the earth underfoot. Against the merciless, impersonal awfulness of that monstrous curling wave, what use the desperate cries for mercy, for help? What can the valley do except brace for annihilation?

That serene, perfect valley is an image of my own life. Tucked away in my memory is a truly idyllic childhood. I was privileged to grow up amidst lush countryside, rolling hills, quiet woods, and quaint villages in one of our Creator's most perfect garden spots—Lancaster County in central Pennsylvania. I never doubted the love of parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins. Or the existence of a loving and good heavenly Father. I met and married a wonderful man who was—and still is—not only the love of my life but also my best friend. We were blessed with four beautiful, healthy sons.

Of course, life is never without its storms. The normal wind and rains of raising four rambunctious boys. A miscarriage. The inevitable ups and downs of marriage. The challenges of a demanding job. A hurricane blew in with a diagnosis of breast cancer. But I'd survived every challenge. Life was good. My children were grown and settled. I had grandchildren to love. Other mothers would approach me to say what a wonderful job I'd done raising four sons. My very identity was wrapped up in being a wife and mother who wanted God's best for each member of her family. I was living the "happily ever after."

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Then the tsunami struck. On October 2, 2006, my firstborn child, whom I'd cradled in my arms, overseen his first steps, taught to love and serve God, watched grow into a gentle, hard-working man, a loving husband and father—this beloved son walked into an Amish schoolhouse with an arsenal of guns. Before it was over, five precious young girls were dead, five more were seriously injured, and my son had taken his own life.

Suddenly I had a new identity: the mother of the Amish schoolhouse shooter. I cannot describe my devastation, the gut-wrenching pain, the nights of anguish. All those sweet young lives, families, our own family—changed forever because of a single senseless act of evil and rage committed by my own dear son.

I would survive this tsunami. I found myself hanging on by my fingertips as the storm battered my body, inexorably loosening my feeble grip. What kind of a mother was I that my son could do such a terrible thing? Where was the God who'd been there with me in all the other storms of my life? The God in whom I'd taught my children to place their trust? Why had He not stopped this? Was there a single ray of light, of hope in this darkness?

I could not see the light. I could not hold on. But even as I found myself swept away by this rogue tsunami wave, in the darkest depths of my pain, I felt loving arms enfold me. And in surrendering to that sweet embrace, I was reminded that survival is not the only word that starts with the letter *s*. It is in *surrender* that I found balm for my pain. Surrender to the One who had been with me through every storm and who had not abandoned me in this one.

We live in a society that glorifies survival. That teaches us to seek revenge when wronged, to come out on top. I had braced myself for the inevitable hate and vengeance. Instead, I

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encountered love beyond understanding. Forgiveness from the very Amish families whose daughters my son had swept from their arms. And I discovered by their example that submission and surrender, love and forgiveness are not weaknesses, but the strength our world so desperately needs.

Ongoing interaction with the Amish community has profoundly touched and changed my life. Together with them, I've found release from bitterness, anger, and fear in mutual forgiveness and love. It hasn't been an easy journey. But step by step, one day at a time, I've found the strength to move forward. To *love* forward.

In my reflections over time, I am in awe of how the Lord has provided opportunities for me to praise Him when in the natural I should be sorrowful. All these years later, I find myself in a "spacious place" that I can barely explain (Psalm 18:19). Today I write these words sitting in my sun-room, a gift from a compassionate Amish builder, drinking in the calm serenity, listening to the birds singing, enjoying a soft breeze on my face. And I marvel at this realm of peace that has come only through surrender and letting God fill the dark recesses of my heart.

I write this book so that others, too, may experience the peace that passes understanding, and hope for their future. That others living with anger, unforgiveness, and bitterness may discover, as I have, the power and the gift of freedom that forgiveness offers. I invite you to come with me on my journey of faith into an unfathomable abyss—a darkness too deep for the human spirit to encompass. Share my journey into healing, one step at a time.

May this day be the beginning of your own journey.

I

The Happening

I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.

—Psalm 88:8–9

It was good to be home.

The last two weeks had been an exciting adventure of serving God in Toulouse, France. In September 2006, our church had organized a work team to help restore a ministry center that was reaching inner-city youth and refugees in the heart of southern France. While there I'd helped with yard work, painting, and other restoration projects. As a break from our labor, our hosts had taken the team on a tour of Europe's oldest remaining walled city, Carcassonne, where parts of the Kevin Costner movie *Robin Hood* was filmed.

I left France excited and filled with stories to tell. I was also glad to be going home. On the drive from the airport, I was

reminded afresh that of all the places I'd visited, none was more beautiful than Lancaster County. Our own home was just south of the small town of Strasburg, a few miles from Lancaster City. The historic railroad capital of Pennsylvania, Strasburg is a quaint tourist center with railroad and model train museums, an antique railway, and countless small shops and other attractions. Among these is the famed Sight & Sound Theatre, a two-thousand-seat complex built in the middle of a cornfield where Broadway-quality musical productions of biblical stories such as *Joseph*, *Moses*, *Jonah*, and *Miracle of Christmas* draw visitors from around the world.

The countryside around Strasburg is farmed by the Amish, a Pennsylvania Dutch subculture that combines devout Christian faith with a simple lifestyle that has changed little since the sixteenth century. About thirty thousand Amish live in Lancaster County. Once I'd left the main highway, my drive home passed through countryside dotted with neat farmhouses and barns. Black trousers, blue shirts and dresses, and white aprons flapping on clotheslines were a reminder that these families lived without washers and dryers.

The end of September is harvesttime in Lancaster County. Out in the fields, Amish farmers were piling cut cornstalks onto wagons. Yellow squash and orange pumpkins dotted the fields. Dried tobacco leaves and hay were being bundled for market. I shared the road with horse-drawn buggies and Amish youth heading home from school on foot-pedaled scooters.

My husband, Chuck, and I lived only two miles from the Strasburg town center, but the quiet country lane offered the feeling of unspoiled countryside. Our home had been built on a four-acre lot purchased from an Amish farmer, Jake Stoltzfoos. His son Henry was our nearest neighbor, while Henry's brother Chris owned the field adjacent to our property. Other

than these neighbors, I'd had little personal contact with the Amish community. But my husband, a retired police officer, ran a chauffeur service for the Amish needing transportation beyond driving range of their buggies and wagons. He'd recently purchased a van for this purpose. On either side were magnetic signs with Chuck's name and phone number advertising his service to potential customers.

A few other non-Amish houses shared our lane. Beyond the houses rose a ridge thick with pine and deciduous trees. During my time in France, the leaves had begun turning to the rich red, orange, and gold hues of fall. As I arrived home, the air was crisp and tangy, and I remember thinking how beautiful the fall colors were, and whether a sunset over a medieval French city or southern European beach could be any more beautiful than one over the rolling fields and hills of my home.

The evening of October 1 was my first opportunity to share my trip with family. Our second son, Josh, was in Louisiana working on a reconstruction project in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and our third son, Zach, was living in Manhattan. Our youngest son, Jon, and his wife, Megan, already had plans that Sunday evening. But I was delighted that my oldest son, Charlie, along with his wife, Marie, and their three children could join us. Their oldest daughter had just turned seven. Her younger brothers were five years old and eighteen months.

It seemed forever since I'd seen them last before leaving for France, and I hugged all three grandchildren, enjoying some good grandma moments. When we were finished eating and sharing about the trip, Charlie took his older son outside to play softball. Marie and I chatted at the breakfast bar. Their tenth wedding anniversary would be coming up in just a few weeks, and Charlie's thirty-third birthday not long after in early December.

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Another exciting topic of discussion was my next major project for the upcoming winter months. My dream room had begun to take shape in my mind about three years earlier as I pondered where my husband and I were at this stage in our lives. Our children were grown, and the two of us were heading into our retirement years. I wanted to create a sanctuary where we could find peace and quiet, rest and reflection.

What brings revitalization and joy for me is when the sun is visible or directly shining on me. We decided on a sun-room, so I'd begun planning and saving for it. There were countless possibilities. It would be a wonderful place of tranquility and a delightful place to exercise and entertain. Once I'd rested from the France trip and the fall calendar settled into a routine, we would arrange with the contractor to begin.

A short while later, Charlie and his son came back inside, and the house began to empty out. It had been a good evening. I remember thinking as we all said our farewells that Charlie had seemed quieter than usual. He was an introvert by personality and never one to talk a lot in a group situation. Would it have made a difference, I asked myself later, if I'd made a point to ask him how he was doing? Would he have opened up to me? Changed what he was thinking? Changed his plans? Waving good-bye to Charlie, Marie, and the children, I could not have conceived it would be the last time I'd see my son alive.

The next morning I got up early. Sunrise was as beautiful above the fields surrounding our house as the previous night's sunset. Completing my normal routine of devotional reading and prayer, followed by exercise, I headed into work. I had been employed for the past thirteen years at Sight & Sound Theatre and was now manager for concessions and sales items, a position that offered challenges, but a job I loved. The sun shone bright as I drove through Strasburg to the huge theatre complex just

up the road. The temperature was perfect for a gorgeous fall day. I felt no sense of foreboding, no darkness of spirit.

After a busy morning, I was glad to join a good friend and co-worker, Delores, for lunch out on the patio. Delores and I were enjoying relaxed conversation when I heard sirens in the distance. Helicopters sped by overhead. What could possibly be happening in this quiet rural community? As always when I hear emergency sirens, I offered a short prayer for whoever was in need and for the first responders involved, then went back to our conversation. When lunch ended, I returned to my office. As I stepped inside, the telephone was ringing. I picked it up. The caller was my husband. He asked me to come immediately to our son Charlie's home.

He went into no detail. But as I hurried down the stairway from my office, that foreboding I hadn't felt earlier began squeezing at my stomach, and a sense of urgency quickened my steps. It would take something very important for my husband to call me away from work.

The drive to Charlie and Marie's home took only ten minutes. I turned on the radio. A news story was unfolding. There had been a shooting at an Amish schoolhouse in nearby Nickel Mines, Bart Township. Children were among the dead and injured. The reported perpetrator's name was Roy (an incorrect reporting, I would find out a short time later).

Immediately my thoughts and heart began to race. My son Charlie drove a tanker truck for his father-in-law's business, which collected milk for processing every night from area dairy farms, many of them Amish. Charlie often parked his milk truck right near the school. Could he have somehow seen what the shooter was attempting, tried to intervene, and been shot? What if he'd been killed? Was that why my husband had called? Had he been vague so I wouldn't be driving while upset?

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My stomach was churning as tumultuously as my thoughts by the time I pulled into our son's driveway. A state trooper and my husband were standing in the yard as I stepped out of the car. With fear clutching at my heart, I walked right up to the trooper and asked if my son was alive.

"No, ma'am," he responded somberly.

I turned to my husband. With deep pain in his eyes, he choked out, "It was Charlie. He killed those girls."