

THE COURTSHIPS OF LANCASTER COUNTY  1



# Courting Cate



LESLIE GOULD



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2012 by Leslie Gould

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gould, Leslie.

Courting Cate / Leslie Gould.

p. cm. (The courtships of Lancaster County, 1)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1031-0 (pbk.)

1. Amish—Fiction. 2. Lancaster County (Pa.)—Fiction. 3. Single women—Fiction. 4. Farmers—Fiction. 5. Man-woman relationships—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3607.O89 C78 2012

813'.6—dc23

2012028889

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

Author represented by MacGregor Literary, Inc.

12 13 14 15 16 17 18      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Hana,

oldest daughter of mine,  
full of strength and style, hope and humor.

My grace is sufficient for thee: for my  
strength is made perfect in weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:9, KJV



But now I see our lances are but straws,  
Our strength as weak, our weakness past  
compare,  
That seeming to be most which we indeed  
least are.

*Taming of the Shrew*, V.11.173–75,

William Shakespeare



C H A P T E R  
1

When I was seven, *Dat* caught me under the covers reading by candlelight.

I knew it could be dangerous, so I sat straight and tall, using my head as the center pole, being extra careful in my quilt-made tent. My left hand steadied the candle holder as my right clutched the book—*Anne of Green Gables*—checked out that afternoon from the Lancaster County bookmobile parked near Paradise, the closest village to our home.

Perhaps *Dat* came to check on Betsy, my little *Schwester*, asleep in her crib across the room. Or perhaps, in his ongoing state of grief, he wandered the house. He must have, by the light of the moon, seen the odd shape on my bed and stepped closer to investigate.

At the sound of his footsteps, I blew out the flame and remained statue-still, even as he pulled the heavy quilt from my head. Aghast, he held his hand out toward me. I extended the book. He thrust it back. I handed him the candle. He clasped it tightly.

“Don’t you ever, ever do that again,” he said.

The next evening a flashlight sat beside my bed.

That was what I thought about as *Dat*, who was also now

my boss, stood in the doorway of my office in our shop just down the hill from our house. I was twenty-three, not seven. I sat at my desk, not on my bed. But I did have a book in my hand.

“Just taking my break,” I said, slipping it onto my lap and then wrapping both hands around my mug of coffee as the scent of maple sawdust from our cabinet shop tickled my nose.

I sneezed. The clean-up crew hadn’t done a proper job.

“I need those accounts.” Dat’s deep voice reverberated through the tiny room.

“They’re on your desk.” I thought that would get him moving, but he didn’t budge. He filled the doorway with his height and broad shoulders. Others, both Amish and *Englisch*, knew him as Bob Miller, were awed by his business acumen, and considered him handsome, but of course I didn’t have an opinion on any of that. He was just my Dat.

“*Jah?*” I met his eyes. “Is there something else you need?”

He shook his head slowly, but then said, “Are you going to the singing? On Sunday?”

It was only Thursday. “Oh, I don’t know,” I answered and then sneezed again.

“I think you should.” He pushed up the sleeves of his white shirt.

“Dat, I’m too old for—”

“You need to stop reading your life away and start living it.” His face reddened up to his full head of dark hair as he spoke, and his blue eyes grew serious.

It was so like him to think it had to be one or the other. I could do both . . . if I wanted to. But the truth was, I preferred reading over everything else.

He continued, “I don’t know what I’ll do without you,

but I can't wait to find out." He forced a smile and, placing his varnish-stained hands flat on my desk, leaned forward.

"*Ach*, you'll probably just start another business." I opened the manila file on my desk. "Your latest is taking off like a bee in a bonnet." I hoped to distract him from his favorite topic—getting me married.

Instead he leaned closer. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, just something I picked up from the bookmobile."

He put out his hand.

My face warmed, but he was my Dat. I slid my chair back a little, raising the book, and then handed it to him.

He read the title out loud. "*Rural Country Medicine.*" A puzzled look crossed his face. He held the book up. "Why this?"

"I'm interested. That's all." I wasn't going to tell him I hoped to write an article, or maybe even a book someday, on first aid for people who lived in rural areas.

He put the book on the edge of my desk. "Cate . . ." His voice sounded desperate. "My businesses are *gut*, jah? They support our family, employ our people, and allow us to give to God's work. But they mean nothing. . . ." He stopped, took his handkerchief out of his back pocket, and wiped his forehead, even though it was a cool spring day. "What I want most is a houseful of grandchildren."

I nodded. "Betsy will give you that, I'm sure." Betsy, at age seventeen, had already joined the church, saying she had no desire to go on a *Rumschpringe*—a running-around time. "She's eager to settle down."

He shook his head and leaned against my desk.

"Oh, no, she is," I said. Every Amish boy who had met her dreamed of courting her. No Amish boy had ever wanted to—genuinely—court me.

“She may be wanting to have a home of her own,” he said. “But that’s not what I’m referring to. I want *you* to stop living your life through these books. I want *you* to marry and have children. Jah?”

I tried to make a joke of it. “You’re that ready to get rid of me?” But my voice fell flat. I knew he had wanted me to marry for the last four years.

“Your mother and I were parents by the time we were your age.” His voice wavered. “I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy to be keeping your accounts”—for both his cabinet and his consulting businesses—“and seeing that Betsy’s raised.” Which wouldn’t be accomplished until her wedding day.

“And after she marries, I’ll take over running the house.” Which I kept failing at, miserably. I much preferred reading and writing to cooking and cleaning.

“Speaking of . . .” He stood up straight. “Isn’t it your turn to cook supper?” He’d implemented a new edict to re-domesticate me.

“Ach, is it?” I’d totally forgotten.

He nodded.

We usually ate by five, only a half hour away. I had no idea what I would fix. I used to handle the household chores, although never with aplomb, but once Betsy was old enough, she eagerly took over. Over the years I’d forgotten everything I used to know.

“Maybe you should start reading recipe books,” he said.

“Maybe . . .” I stood and picked up *Rural Country Medicine*. I’d finish it when I went to bed.

Dat stepped back to the doorway. “Could you at least go to the singing and”—he coughed a little—“try to be kind.”

I raised my eyebrows.



“Betsy tells me you’re not very—”

“None of those boys are nice to me, if you recall.” I stared up into his face. “None of them want to court me. The sooner you get used to it the better.”

“Ach, Cate. Stop being dramatic. There’s a man out there who’s meant to be your husband. You’ll be a mother yet.”

I’d given up all hope, but it seemed to be beyond my Dat’s comprehension, regardless of how many times I’d tried to explain it. Besides, it wasn’t as if I hadn’t already raised a child. I’d cared for Betsy since her second day of life. Sure, I’d only been six, but I’d been tall enough to be nine and responsible enough to be twelve. I’d had my grandmother’s assistance until Betsy was five, but after that it had been just me.

“I’d better get the potatoes on to boil.” I slipped past him and into the hallway.

Dat’s office, not any bigger than mine, sat to the left. The front of the building held the showroom and the back the shop, where the crew constructed the custom cabinets. They’d all gone home at four, or so I thought.

As I stepped out the side door into the cloudy afternoon, twins Mervin and Martin Mosier tipped their straw hats toward me. Their older brother, Seth, had treated me badly while we were growing up—until two years ago, when I put an end to it. But M&M, as I called the twins, had continued his example.

“Why haven’t you two gone home?” I smirked, knowing full well the reason. I asked it anyway. “Waiting for Betsy, jah?”

“No. We just finished cleaning up.” Mervin had his thumbs hooked in his suspenders. The two were almost identical, with sandy hair and hazel eyes, although Martin carried a little more weight than his brother and had just lately taken to wearing a pair of ridiculous aviator sunglasses.

“Well, you didn’t do a very good job. The dust is spreading all the way to my office.” I motioned for them to follow me and marched back into the building, down the hall, noting the clicks of their steel-toed boots on the concrete behind me.

I flung open the shop door, expecting to see sawdust all over the floor. There wasn’t any. However, in the far corner sat a huge pile. “Why isn’t that in the Dumpster?” I spun around to face them.

“Your Dat said to leave it.” Martin twirled his sunglasses between his thumb and index finger.

I crossed my arms and scowled.

“Honest, Cate,” Mervin said. “He said a landscaper is going to haul it off.”

Dat hadn’t said a word to me. “Well, tidy it up a bit more.” My face warmed.

They didn’t move.

“Now!”

Mervin grabbed the push broom from the corner, while his twin stared at me, saying something.

“Pardon?” I took a step toward Martin.

“Having a bad day?” He met my gaze.

“How about a bad life,” Mervin muttered, his eyes on the floor as he pushed the broom toward the pile, stirring up more dust.

I crossed my arms. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’ll be blunt,” Martin said. “You’re acting like a shrew again.”

My eyes narrowed. “How rude!” I spun around again, stumbling as I did. They both chuckled as I bolted toward the doorway.

And Dat wondered why I didn’t bother going to the singings.

Regaining my composure, I called out, “Go straight home after you’re done.”

The last thing I wanted was to have them hanging around, looking for Betsy to make an appearance and readying themselves for another attack at me.



“I have an announcement to make tonight, at supper,” Dat said at six thirty, as he washed in the utility basin just inside the back door.

I stifled a groan.

After Dat dried his hands and headed for the living room, Betsy said, “I don’t know how you can balance all those accounts, but not be able to get dinner done on time.” Her muscles flexed as she whipped the potatoes, but everything else about her exuded femininity. Her newly sewn lavender dress. Her starched *Kapp* and apron. Her blond hair perfectly wound into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her big doelike brown eyes.

Nearly everything about us was opposite. I had Dat’s dark hair. She was fair like our mother. I was tall. Betsy was petite. I was serious. She was happy.

She was the epitome of an Amish young woman. I clearly wasn’t.

Fifteen minutes later, after Dat led us in a silent prayer and the food had been passed around, we were finally eating.

“Delicious,” Dat said as he swallowed his first bite of potatoes. “These are your best yet, Cate.”

I glanced at Betsy, sure she’d let him know I didn’t make them. She just smiled sweetly.

I couldn’t stand to be deceitful, though. “Actually, Betsy made those,” I said. “She helped me out, a little.”

Dat's face fell. "Well, then," he said and kept eating in silence.

I'd made a casserole from the leftover chicken Betsy had roasted the night before, adding broccoli and cheddar cheese, but I'd overcooked it and it had hardened to the bottom of the pan.

I'd also made baking powder biscuits, but keeping with the theme of the supper, I'd burned those too. I watched Betsy take a bite of hers and then follow it with a long gulp of milk.

We sat at the oak table, made by Dat when he and *Mamm* first married. It was large enough for five times the size of our small family. A few years ago, he'd remodeled the kitchen. Surrounding us were high-quality cabinets made of cherry. The countertops were Formica, though, not the granite or other top-of-the-line material we sold from the shop. Dat said that was far too pretentious for our simple life.

We did have a propane refrigerator and stove, although both were smaller than what the Englisch put in their houses. A woodstove, located in the corner of the kitchen, heated the house's main floor during the long winter months and on cold spring days too.

The coziness of our home usually comforted me, but at that moment I was flustered by my failed supper. I usually avoided doing what I wasn't good at, but it seemed with his cooking edict that Dat was catching on to me. I couldn't help but dread his next announcement.

The clock chimed seven o'clock. On a normal evening, we'd have been finished with the dishes by then.

"Dat," Betsy said extra sweetly, reminding me of just how sour I was feeling. "Are you hiring? Either in the showroom or the shop."

“Who do you have in mind?”

“Levi Rupp,” she said. “I saw him at the store today.” She’d also been seeing him a couple of evenings a week, after Dat had gone to sleep. Before that it had been Martin and before him Mervin. . . .

“Levi Rupp,” Dat said. “Which family does he belong to?”

“A few miles out of Paradise, the other way.”

Dat closed one eye, which meant he was thinking. “Is his youngest brother Ben?”

Betsy nodded. “That’s the family.”

“Hard workers, jah?” Dat dished up another helping of mashed potatoes. “Good attitudes?”

“That’s what I hear.” She smiled.

“I might be hiring in the shop. Tell him to stop by.”

Technically, he wasn’t hiring, at least not in the shop. He needed someone in the showroom—but it had to be the right someone.

Dat, like everyone else, just couldn’t say no to Betsy.

“So is Levi looking to court you too?” I did my best to keep my expression neutral. It was a regular pattern, as predictable as an Amish quilt. Most of the young men who wanted to work for Dat also wanted to court Betsy.

She blushed, making her blond hair and fair skin appear even lighter. “Of course not. He likes to garden. He said he’d give me some tips.”

Dat took another bite of potatoes, as if he hadn’t heard our exchange.

I didn’t believe a word Betsy said, but that wasn’t why I pushed my plate away. How could I expect others to eat what I cooked when I couldn’t even get it down? I supposed, with Betsy most likely marrying soon, I really would have to do something about my culinary skills.

“Cate’s going to the singing with you on Sunday,” Dat said to Betsy.

“No,” I sputtered. “I didn’t agree to that.”

“We’re going to get Cate married.” Dat smiled broadly at her. “It’s going to be a family effort.”

Betsy’s fork clattered to the table.

“Dat.” I handed him the bowl of potatoes again, hoping he’d take thirds. “If marriage is so wonderful . . .” I paused, not wanting to overstep.

“Go on,” he said, dishing up another serving of Betsy’s fluffy clouds.

“Well, why didn’t you remarry?” I swallowed hard after I’d said it.

A pained expression passed over his face. “Well, I had you girls and the business. Then the businesses.” He wasn’t making sense. That was exactly why an Amish man would remarry after his wife died, although because Dat wasn’t a farmer, he wasn’t as desperate for a helpmate as some would be. “I guess I was just too busy.” He shrugged. “And now I’m too old.”

Which wasn’t true either. I hated to think it, but I knew there were single women just a little older than I who would marry him in a second, let alone the widows in their thirties and forties. I’d heard the gossip. “Tell us why, Dat. The real reason.”

“No. That’s it. Really.”

I’d come across a book about remarrying not too long ago. “I read somewhere—”

Betsy groaned. “I hate it when you say that.”

“What?” I turned my attention to her.

She mimicked my voice. “I read somewhere . . .’ It sounds so opinionated.”

“Oh.” So that was how she felt about the interesting facts I gleaned from books—apparently she’d confused sharing knowledge with opining.

In a sympathetic voice, Dat said, “Go on.”

“It’s nothing.” My gaze fell on Mamm’s rocker through the doorway in the living room.

“Tell us.” Dat leaned toward me.

I took a deep breath. “Just that remarriage is a compliment to the spouse who died. That’s all.”

Betsy reached for my plate. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That Dat and Mamm had a good marriage. For Dat to remarry wouldn’t discredit Mamm—it would compliment her.”

Dat didn’t seem to have heard me. “That I didn’t remarry is one of the reasons I want the two of you to turn out well.”

“What?” Betsy sat up a little straighter.

“Well, there was talk that a widower raising two girls, especially two beautiful girls”—Dat sounded a little boastful for a Plain man—“wouldn’t be able to keep them on the straight and narrow. But we’ve all done just fine. Don’t you think?”

Betsy and I both nodded in agreement. I felt the same way as Dat—pleased that, even though she was flighty, I’d done a good job mothering my little Schwester and, for the most part, managing myself. Just before our grandmother died there had been an incident that raised the bishop’s concern, but I’d responded with determination, keeping myself in line and working even harder at caring for Betsy to the best of my ability.

“Back to business,” Dat said, rubbing his rough hands together, signaling it was time to reveal his latest edict.

I exhaled slowly.

“What I want”—Dat looked at Betsy and then at me, focused and intent—“is for both of you to experience marriage and motherhood, God willing. Your Mamm was the best wife any man could have. And the best mother too. That’s what I want for my girls.

“So,” he continued, “I’m implementing a new policy in our family, beginning tonight. Betsy doesn’t go to the singing if Cate doesn’t go.”

“Dat, I’m a grown woman,” I gasped.

“I’m not done.” He squared his shoulders. “Betsy doesn’t court unless Cate courts.”

Betsy moaned.

It was a good thing I wasn’t still trying to eat, or I might have choked.

Dat leaned forward. “And Betsy doesn’t marry unless Cate marries first.”

Betsy burst into tears—something she’d perfected through the years. When she was little she had been known to put her finger in her eye to make herself cry.

I fell back against my chair.

Dat boomed. “Understood?”

Betsy sobbed. I couldn’t move. Neither one of us answered.

“That’s the final word,” Dat said. “I’ll not budge an inch.”

In shock, I watched as he stood and retrieved his Bible from the sideboard. Dat was a kind man, but when he made up his mind, he stuck to it. It made us love him even more because he usually acted in our best interest.

I couldn’t think of a thing I wouldn’t do for him—except get married.

Dat sat back in his chair and opened his Bible, holding it like a shield between him and me. “I finished Revelation this morning.”



It seemed as if it had been a lifetime ago.

“So, tonight, Genesis one,” he proclaimed.

Betsy whimpered. I stared straight ahead. Dat ignored us both. “In the beginning,” he read, “God created . . .”

The only other words I heard were “Be fruitful and multiply.”



“Cate, you have to find a husband.” Betsy attacked the kitchen floor with the broom as she spoke. “Or I’ll never be able to get married.” Her tears had turned to anger, an emotion not usually displayed by my sweet sister.

I added more water to the dishwater, drowning out the sound of Betsy’s voice.

Dat had gone out to the shop to meet the landscaper—jah, M&M were right about that—and then he said he would do the choring by himself. I would have rather been out in the barn too, visiting my horse, Thunder, than trying to ignore Betsy and her lament.

A new round of emotion overtook her an hour later as we readied ourselves for bed.

“Who are we going to find to court you?” She sat on her twin bed as I braided her fine hair by the light of our propane lamp.

I didn’t answer.

“How about Joseph Koller?”

I didn’t mean to yank. It just happened.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“He’s not so bad.”

“He’s how old? Fifty?”

“Oh, I don’t think he’s more than forty-five,” Betsy said.

That made him older than Dat. “And he has eight kids,” I added.

“Half of them are grown.”

I wrapped the tie around Betsy’s braid, biting my tongue as I did. Two of Joseph Koller’s kids were older than I. One of them had children. I had no desire to become a grandmother at twenty-three.

She turned on the bed and fixed her gaze on my face. “You know you’ve gotten really pretty in the last year or so.”

I frowned.

“Your eyes are such a beautiful blue. And your hair is so dark now it’s almost black. And your ears don’t look so big anymore. And your temper’s better than it used to be, although—”

“Stop!” I couldn’t suffer her comments.

“No, it’s true,” she said. “I think you were just a late bloomer.”

I hobbled off her bed, my right leg asleep, and limped across the room to my side, determined to distance myself from her.

“But you should smile more. That’s when you look your—”

A pebble hit our window. Then another one. She quickly turned off the lamp and opened the curtain as a third pebble pinged against the glass.

I followed her, wondering if someone new might have made the late-night trek. She opened the window and stuck out her head. “It’s Levi.” She giggled.

I stared into the darkness, letting my eyes adjust. I could make out the outline of a man standing at the edge of the lawn. He stepped out of the shadows of the chestnut tree. I could see why Betsy thought him good-looking with his square jaw and broad shoulders. His hair was the color of his straw hat, and his smile grew brighter the longer he looked

at her. He had a shyness about him that I found endearing, and he clearly adored her.

She called out, "I'm coming down." She plucked her robe off the end of her bed. "I'm just going to tell him to come by tomorrow, so Dat will hire him. That's all. It's not like we're courting or anything. Honest."

I put the brush on our bureau. "Don't worry about it." I couldn't seem to stop the sarcasm in my voice. "It's not like I'm going to tell Dat or anything. Honest."

She seemed to be unaware of my tone as she stepped across the room and grabbed my hand, squeezing it. "You're the best big sister . . ." Her voice trailed off. "Don't worry," she said. "Surely Dat's money will attract someone."

"Betsy." My entire body bristled. "I don't want 'someone.' Don't you remember? I tried that. It didn't work. He *was* only interested in Dat's money—I won't go through that again."

"But what about me?"

We stared at each other a minute. "Well, that's our dilemma, isn't it?" was all I could manage to say.

Another pebble hit the window.

"We'll find the right person." Betsy let go of my hand. "I'll put the word out. Tonight."

"Don't," I said as she dashed out of the room. I heard her steps on the stairs, and then the back screen door banged. "Please don't," I whispered, knowing it was already too late. I'd made peace with my being a *Maidel* for the rest of my life. Why couldn't Dat?

I turned off the lamp and climbed under my quilt, my book in one hand and my flashlight in the other, ready to finish off *Rural Country Medicine*. I'd already read all the other books I'd checked out. Thankfully I'd visit the bookmobile the next day. The driver, a Mennonite woman named Nan

Beiler, was becoming a friend of mine. Besides working for the Lancaster County Library, she also wrote for *The Budget*, a Plain newspaper, and a few magazines. I was interested in writing, but even more so in editing and eventually publishing. Dat said there wasn't much money in it, though.

All of the women entrepreneurs I knew were single, widowed, or had grown children. It was hard to run a business and raise a family at the same time. Being single would make it much easier. I would make *not* being married work for me. Now I just needed to figure out what kind of business I could make a living at.

And how to get around Dat's newest edict.