

THE SISTERS *of* LANCASTER COUNTY / BOOK THREE

— A —

FAITHFUL GATHERING



LESLIE GOULD



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To all those in health care.
You aid, serve, and heal.
Thank you.



For where two or three are gathered together in my name,
there am I in the midst of them.

Matthew 18:20



Leisel Bachmann

APRIL 2017

A crash yanked me out of my cleaning routine at the care facility. 4:32 A.M. I dropped the sponge on the kitchen counter and hurried down the hall.

Earl Weber's door was open a crack. I pushed into the room. A man wearing pajamas and a robe was sprawled across the floor.

I flicked the light on. "Are you all right, Mr. Weber?" I crouched beside him, taking his wrist. He had a pulse, but his eyes were closed.

As I reached for my phone in the pocket of my smock, he grabbed my wrist. "I'm all right." His eyes flew open. "I felt light-headed, is all. I got myself on the floor before I fell."

"Did you lose consciousness?" I needed to call the nurse if he did.

"No." He rolled to his side.

"I'll help you up," I said. He was my favorite resident in the

entire center, although I tried not to let it show. He was ninety-two, mostly lucid, and always kind.

Once I had him back in bed, I asked him why he'd gotten up in the first place.

"I heard Betty call my name."

Betty was his wife. She'd passed away six years ago.

When I didn't respond, he reached for my hand. "I was sure she was at the door, waiting for me. That I'd just come home from the war, that she had our baby girl in her arms. I could hear both of them. It all seemed so real."

"That happens sometimes." I'd felt my *Dad's* presence a few times after he'd died.

"Thank you," he said, "for being such a good friend to me. You're the best nurse I've ever had."

I didn't remind him—again—that I wasn't a nurse. Instead, I tucked him in, told him I'd check on him soon, and slipped out of the room.

I wasn't a nurse yet, but I would be soon. Graduation was tomorrow. And in less than a month, I'd take my state boards—the licensing exam all nursing graduates had to pass to practice nursing.

Growing up Amish, I'd been warned about being prideful, and I took the warning seriously. But Mr. Weber was right. I was a good nurse. I had the problem-solving skills, emotional stability, and empathy needed to do the job.

As I returned to my cleaning, I thought of Mr. Weber and the stories he'd told me about being a fighter pilot in Europe during the final months of World War II. "I had it easy," he often said. "I couldn't see the fine details of the destruction I caused."

That might have been true, but it was still a dangerous job, and I was grateful he'd survived. He'd be celebrating his ninety-third birthday in a week.

Dat had told me once that my grandfather, who died before I was born, had served as a conscientious objector during World War II. Sadly, Dat passed before he told me more. Honestly, I wasn't that interested at the time, but getting to know Mr. Weber had made me curious. I'd have to ask my *Aenti* Suz for the story.

My phone dinged with an incoming text. It had to be Nick, since no one else texted me at such an early hour. He'd graduated the year before and was a nurse in the emergency department at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center—Mercy, located in Uptown. We'd been dating for nearly three years.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. *Looking forward to dinner.*

I smiled. He was taking me out tonight to celebrate my graduation—after we both got some sleep.

Ditto, I texted back, sending a smiling emoji along with the word.

A half hour later, I checked on Mr. Weber. He was sound asleep. Just as I started to do my charting for the night, a yell came from across the hall. Mrs. O'Sullivan was probably having a nightmare.

I sat with her, speaking in a soothing voice until she drifted back to sleep. By then it was nearly six, and the early risers were beginning to wake. I started a pot of coffee and then began getting the residents ready for the day. I always tried to get as many dressed as possible before the day shift—and my supervisor, Rita—arrived. I'd do my charting before I left.

At 7:15, the staff met for the shift change. Rita had a big mug of coffee in her hand and a bleary look in her eyes. I reported that the evening had been mostly calm, but Mrs. O'Sullivan had a nightmare and Mr. Weber had fallen.

"He didn't lose consciousness," I quickly added.

"You charted what happened?" Rita asked.

“Not yet. I didn’t have time.”

“You said it was a calm night.”

“It was, mostly. It got busy though, and I started my charting later than usual.”

Rita pursed her lips. “That’s not like you, Leisel.”

My face grew warm, but there was no need to react—I hadn’t done anything wrong.

After the shift change, I headed to the nursing station to chart. Just as I finished documenting Mr. Weber’s fall, I heard another aide call out Rita’s name, and then say, “He’s not breathing.”

I stepped into the hall. Mr. Weber’s door was wide open. I rushed into his room.

The man was just as I last saw him, except his mouth was slightly open. I took his wrist in my hand. No pulse. I knew he had a Do Not Resuscitate order in his file, and by the temperature of his skin, it was too late anyway.

As Rita hurried back into the room, I raised my head. “He’s gone.”

She crossed her arms. “Well, I certainly hope this wasn’t caused by his fall.”

“It wasn’t,” I said. “He didn’t lose consciousness or have a bump on his head or anything like that.” More likely, he’d dreamt about hearing his wife’s voice because his time was near. I was sure he was ready to go and was thankful he hadn’t suffered.

Rita made a throaty noise, and then said, “I’ll call the undertaker and his daughter. You’d better get the fall charted.”

“I already did.” I turned toward her. “I’d like to stay and see his daughter.” I wanted to tell her about what he’d said.

Rita shook her head. “There’s no need for that. Go on home.”

“I’d rather stay.”

“No,” she said. “Go home. We can talk more about all of this tomorrow.”

“I graduate tomorrow,” I said. “I’m taking a few days off, remember?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No, I don’t remember. Are you going out of town?”

“No.” I didn’t give her any details, but I was going to spend those few days looking for a new apartment. I’d already given notice on mine.

Not wanting to clash with Rita anymore, I placed my hand on Mr. Weber’s forehead and said a silent thank-you for his life and then a final good-bye. At least for now. He’d had a quiet faith that played out in the way he treated people and the way he spoke about God. Mr. Weber certainly wasn’t the first resident who’d died on my watch, but he was the one I’d miss the most.

By the time I turned to leave the room, Rita was gone. I grabbed my things and headed down the hall. Rita was on the phone in her office, so I gave her a quick wave and headed out the door.

I contemplated calling Nick to tell him about Mr. Weber but decided not to. It could wait until dinner. He’d mourn with me, I knew. Growing to truly care about your patients was both the blessing and the heartbreak of working in health care.

The morning was cold and overcast, and I quickened my pace through the neighborhood. I’d lived in what Nick called “the dive” for the last four years, as long as I’d been in Pittsburgh. It was a furnished studio basement apartment. Could there be anything worse?

Of course, when I signed the lease, I was thrilled. It wasn’t far from the University of Pittsburgh, and there was a grocery store and café within walking distance. Then I’d found the job at the care facility, which was in the neighborhood too.

The apartment was the first step in my *English* life. But now I was ready for the second step: graduation. And then a bigger

apartment with some natural light that I'd be able to afford because I'd soon secure my first nursing job. I figured I'd only sign a six-month lease on a new place though—I didn't want to commit to anything long-term. Just in case.

I hadn't given notice to Rita about quitting my job yet, but surely she knew it was coming. If she could actually remember that I was graduating from nursing school.

My phone dinged again as I started down the stairs to my apartment. *See you tonight!*

I answered Nick with a thumbs-up and a heart. After a moment of thought, I added, *Can you talk?* Why wait until tonight to tell him about Mr. Weber? Within a split second my phone rang. I sat down on the bottom step as I answered it.

"Hey, what's up?"

Once I'd relayed the whole story, he said, "I'm sorry that he's gone, but it sounds like it was his time. What a great way to go."

"That's exactly what I thought."

Nick's voice grew even more tender. "I know you'll miss him though."

"I will." But death was part of life. I'd never been shielded from that as a child, and then as an eighteen-year-old I'd nursed my father as he died from cancer.

Nick reassured me that I'd handled the situation correctly. Already I felt better. After we said good-bye, I dug my keys out of my backpack and unlocked my front door. A musty smell greeted me, one that lingered no matter how much I cleaned and persisted even though the apartment was icy cold. I'd spent my entire childhood in a freezing bedroom—I didn't need to give in to anything as luxurious as heat now. I kicked off my shoes, bumping against my waist-high stack of nursing textbooks as I did.

For the first time in four years I didn't need to study. All I

had to do today was sleep a little, look online for a new apartment, research nursing jobs in the area, and then get ready for my celebratory date with Nick.

I knelt beside my bed as I always did before I slept, another practice I hadn't given up from my childhood. I prayed for my family, about my upcoming boards, for Nick, and then for the two of us. "Please guide us, Lord," I prayed. "And thank you for how you've led us so far."



The restaurant, located on Mount Washington, was the most upscale I'd ever been to—linen tablecloths and napkins, crystal glasses, and fresh flowers. I was both enchanted and alarmed, which pretty much summed up the last four years of my life. The English ways enticed me, but at the same time, I believed them to be extravagant.

Fine dining wasn't part of my Amish upbringing. Neither was the picturesque view outside the window. Below us was Point State Park, where the Ohio, Allegheny, and Monongahela Rivers joined together.

Nick took my hand from across the table. "What are you going to order?" he asked.

"The chicken."

He shook his head. "That's the cheapest thing on the menu. You should order something else."

What was Nick thinking? The chicken entrée was still thirty bucks. We both had student loans to pay back and old vehicles that broke down every other month.

"I like chicken." I gave him a sassy look, which made him smile. His dark wavy hair was newly trimmed, and his brown eyes shone. He wore a suit and tie and looked as handsome as ever. I glanced down at my lap and the dress I'd borrowed

from my friend Paisley for the occasion. I had no idea what the fabric was called, but it was flimsy and flowing, and I felt fancy wearing it.

Nick patted the pocket of his jacket absentmindedly as he said, “I talked with a recruiter yesterday.”

A job recruiter? Hospitals were so desperate to hire nurses that many contracted with companies to find the personnel they needed. My stomach lurched. “Are you leaving the medical center?” I managed to sputter, wondering if I’d misread our plans for the future.

“Eventually.” His hand felt warm. I was afraid mine was icy cold. “It’s the best way to get my student loans paid off.”

I’d heard some hospitals helped pay off student loans, which would be great for him. “Where will you go?”

“It depends on what happens after officer training school—what assignment I get.”

“Assignment?” Slowly, it dawned on me. He’d brought up joining the Air Force in passing, but I thought he’d dropped the idea. Apparently he hadn’t.

“Leisel?” His voice was so low I hardly heard it.

I lifted my head and met his eyes. “I didn’t know you were still thinking about joining the Air Force.”

An unsettled look fell across his face. “I never stopped thinking about it. I don’t want to struggle financially the way my parents did for years. I don’t want student loan debt hanging over us.”

Us.

“We could concentrate on paying off your loans first,” Nick said. “Or you could join up too, and—”

“Join the military?” I choked out, interrupting him.

He nodded, but then our waiter appeared before he could say more.

I ordered the chicken breast. Nick ordered the lump crab and Asian pear appetizer for us to share and the salmon for his dinner.

“How about a glass of our house sauvignon blanc or chardonnay to go with the chicken and salmon?” the waiter asked.

“I’ll just have water,” I quickly answered.

“Me too,” Nick added.

After the waiter left, I hoped the conversation wouldn’t go back to the Air Force. But it did.

“I’ve done my research. Joining the Air Force would pay off our student loans. And there are a lot of training opportunities for our master’s degrees or even doctorates. Nurse practitioner programs. Nurse anesthetist programs.” He smiled. “They’d need a commitment for more training. Probably six years is all.”

My stomach fell. Six years? I hoped we might be married within a year, or at least a couple of years.

But maybe we wouldn’t marry at all now.

The scent of coffee mixed with the scent of grilled meat and fish and freshly laundered linens. It all distracted me for half a second. Until Nick cleared his throat. “You don’t seem very enthused.”

I blinked. “I’m not interested in joining the military.”

Still holding on to my hand, he quickly responded, “That’s cool.”

“I may have left the Amish church, but I still agree with the nonresistance ideology. I can’t support war.”

“But you’d be caring for the medical needs of people—not just soldiers. You’d be taking care of their families too. Not supporting war.”

“Indirectly I would be.” And he would be too. And if I married him, I’d be supporting him, and therefore supporting war.

I'd given up a lot in leaving my Amish family and community, but I wasn't willing to give up everything.

He cocked his head. "I don't understand."

I slipped my hand from his. "I can't support the military," I said. "It goes against my principles."

He exhaled slowly. "Principles of homeland security? Of protecting our citizens?"

I shook my head. "Of killing other people."

His eyebrows arched. "Right. But we wouldn't be killing people."

I tried again. "But we would be caring for and supporting soldiers—"

Nick interrupted me. "In the Air Force they're called airmen."

"—so they could kill if needed . . ." My voice trailed off.

"But you already do support the military," he said. "With your taxes. By simply being a US citizen."

"But we don't have a choice when it comes to paying taxes. We do have a choice as far as joining the military."

Perhaps he was catching on because he nodded. "You're right."

Many people didn't understand Amish nonresistance ideology, how opposed we were to serving in the military. *We*. Even now, I still couldn't stop identifying with the Anabaptist movement—which originated in the early 1500s and led to the Mennonite, Hutterite, Amish, Brethren, and Apostolic churches.

Our ancestors fled Europe for America for freedom of religion. Freedom to follow our faith, based on Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Freedom to turn the other cheek instead of striking back. Freedom to pledge our allegiance to God alone. Because of that, we didn't even have American flags in our schools.

Nick leaned closer. "Would you be okay with me joining, though?"

My head began to spin. What if I wasn't?

Before I could figure out what to say, the waiter approached with our appetizer. And then a speedboat racing down the Ohio River caught our attention. Perhaps Nick realized how uncomfortable the topic was for me because he shifted the conversation to my graduation ceremony the next afternoon. I was thankful my brother-in-law Gordon was willing to miss a day of work to come with my sister Marie and their fifteen-month-old son, Caden. Besides them, Nick would be the only other person there for me.

Nick then told me a story about something that had happened at work the night before. Many people still viewed nursing as a woman's profession because that was the way the media portrayed it. But more and more men were entering the profession, and many who did went into specialty fields, such as emergency, like Nick.

Plus, many had no idea about the rigorous training and expectations. While a doctor can go in and out of a hospital room, nurses provide constant care—dressing wounds, administering medicine, and providing life-saving treatment hour after hour.

“My supervisor said for you to come in and talk with her,” Nick said. “We could stop by tonight.”

“Oh, I don't want you to have to go into work, not on your night off.” I took the last bite of appetizer, realizing I'd hardly tasted it.

“What better way to end the evening?” Nick smiled, but not as broadly as usual. “Each step forward is worth a little bit of a detour.” I couldn't help but think he was talking about more than stopping by the hospital.



An hour and a half later, Nick pulled into the parking garage of the medical center. After he parked, he quickly walked around to my door and opened it.

As we walked toward the hospital, his earlier talk of joining the Air Force continued to nag at me, but I didn't say anything. My sisters often accused me of avoiding conflict, and they were right. I did. Even as he was dying of cancer, Dat cautioned me not to keep so much inside. "*Find someone in life you can talk with,*" he'd said to me. "*And talk things through with the Lord. He wants us to be honest—with Him, with ourselves, and with others.*"

It wasn't that I was dishonest with myself. I knew what I was thinking. I just didn't share it with others unless I absolutely had to. That typically led people to see me as calm and capable—and I was. Both characteristics helped me in caring for others.

As we headed toward the emergency department, we were silent, which was one of the things I appreciated about Nick. We could be together and not feel as if we needed to talk, yet there were other times we talked nonstop.

We'd met when we both took a certified nursing course back in Lancaster County. I was the Amish girl in class, wearing a cape dress, apron, and *Kapp*. He was the confident young man who drove an old Chevy pickup truck and never balked at holding a bedpan or cleaning a pressure sore. I'd noticed him right away.

For two years we were strictly friends. He was the one who taught me how to drive. He was the one who told me about the University of Pittsburgh's registered nurse program. He never encouraged me to leave the Amish, but told me—if I decided to—he'd do whatever he could to help.

It was at the end of his first year of nursing school that he gave me a ride to Pittsburgh, got me settled in my apartment, and helped me find a job at the care facility. Nick was the one who took me to thrift shops to buy jeans and sweaters. He was the one who helped me through chemistry and anatomy. He was the one who took me to the nondenominational church he

attended. *Jah*, it was very different from what I was used to, but I found God and community and fellowship there, just in a different form.

A year after I'd moved to Pittsburgh, on a Sunday afternoon, he reached for my hand. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. Step by step, our relationship grew and progressed. Once he'd graduated and began working in the emergency department, our conversations shifted to the future. To places we'd both like to live and work. To master's and maybe even doctorate degrees. To the idea of marriage. To the possibility of children.

And yes, to that one time before tonight when he'd casually brought up the possibility of his joining the Air Force to quickly pay off his student loans. But then he'd made a joke out of it, comparing it to winning the lottery, and I hadn't taken him seriously.

As we stepped from the garage into the hospital, I let go of his arm. He patted his jacket pocket again as we both faced the hall. What if he had a ring in his pocket? I couldn't imagine being married to a military man.

I quickened my pace toward the emergency department. Although I'd done my emergency rotation at a smaller hospital, I had done several clinicals at the medical center and was familiar with the ED. I craned my neck as we passed each partition. A small boy getting his forehead stitched up. A teenage girl with a leg injury. An elderly man hooked up to an IV.

I followed Nick to the nurses' station. Several people greeted him. I could tell I wasn't the only one who was fond of him. Nick nodded toward a middle-aged woman who stood at a computer, squinting at the screen.

"Hi Sue," he said.

The woman looked up and beamed at Nick. "You sure look spiffy."

He grinned back. “This is Leisel. She’s the one I was telling you about. Leisel, this is Sue, my supervisor.”

She shook my hand and then said, “And you’re looking for a job?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I graduate tomorrow, and then I’m taking my boards in a couple of weeks.”

“Sounds like you’re a go-getter, just like Nick.”

I smiled and said I hoped so.

“We don’t hire many new grads, but it does happen.” She pulled a card from her pocket. “Send me your résumé and then let me know when you pass your boards.”

I took the card and thanked her profusely, wondering when exactly I should send my résumé. Not tonight. But tomorrow? Next week? The week after?

On the way back to the car, I thanked Nick for introducing me to Sue.

“Could we talk more soon?” he asked. “About the Air Force?”

I nodded. “After I take my boards.” I didn’t want to face such a big decision before then. I wanted to marry Nick, but if I didn’t want to become a military wife, would he still want to marry me? I couldn’t bear the thought of losing him. It was the last thing I needed to worry about before taking such a huge test.

As we walked toward the elevator, he put his arm around me and pulled me close. I breathed in his cologne, and then the antiseptic smell of the hospital. Two of my favorite things—Nick and medicine.



The graduation ceremony wasn’t until three the next afternoon. Marie and Gordon planned to drive straight there and sit with Nick.

At one, I dressed in the white nursing uniform I'd purchased for graduation, not sure if I'd ever wear it again. It all depended on where I worked, but most hospital nurses wore scrubs.

I stood in my tiny bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. Even though I usually pulled my hair back into a ponytail, I left it long. Not because I wanted to, but because I guessed most of the other girls would. My blue eyes seemed sad considering the happy occasion, and I realized how much I was missing Dat. He would have come to my graduation, but *Mamm* wouldn't have come with him. No part of me fantasized she'd show up with Marie. And I wouldn't want her to. She'd feel so uncomfortable, so out of place.

But Dat would have loved it.

It had been four years now since he'd passed, but it felt like yesterday.

I turned away from the mirror, grabbed my bag, and headed for my 1999 Ford Focus.

The day was overcast but fairly warm. A few drops of rain fell as I drove to Carnegie Music Hall, where the ceremony was being held, but it stopped by the time I arrived, which was, of course, early. Hopefully Marie and Gordon had arrived too, and we'd have a chance to chat.

I texted Marie and then climbed out of my car. As I passed through the front doors of the building, I marveled at the green marble and pillars in the foyer. I thought of the Carnegies in the late 1800s making their fortune in steel while my Anabaptist ancestors, the Bachmanns, continued to farm the land they'd owned since 1752. The families couldn't have been more different.

"Leisel!"

Paisley and her best friend, Autumn, came running toward me. The two had grown up together in Philadelphia, been best

friends all through school, gone off to nursing school together, and would no doubt find jobs in the same hospital too.

“Your uniform looks so cute!” Autumn called out.

Paisley swung the honors cord around her neck. “Where’s yours?”

After they both hugged me, I pulled my cord out of my purse. Paisley took it out of my hands and tenderly draped it around my neck.

The hardest thing for me in nursing school was figuring out how to interact with the other students. I felt so reserved and awkward and had no idea what to talk about. Studying with a group was what really forged friendships though. I had a gift for cementing facts to memory and being able to teach others.

And thanks to Paisley and Autumn, over the years I’d grown a little more comfortable. They’d made it their mission to acclimate me to the real world. With their help, I’d trained myself to compliment someone’s purse or shoes. And then I’d listen when that person gave me details about brands and shops and costs even though I wasn’t interested.

Over time, Paisley, Autumn, and the other students all learned about my past. Several said they thought I had an accent, although they couldn’t place it. Others asked why I wore jeans instead of dresses. Several asked if I’d return to Lancaster County and practice nursing there.

I always patiently answered that I’d never go back to wearing dresses all the time and, no, I’d never return to Lancaster County to work or live, only to visit. And I tried as hard as I could not to speak with an accent.

Through it all, Paisley and Autumn were the two who seemed to accept me for who I was. And I felt I could ask them about confusing slang, such as *bae*, which stood for “before anyone

else,” which I found out when Autumn asked me, “So is Nick your bae?” She’d laughed at my confused expression and told me no one really used the term *bae* anymore, so not to worry about it. That left me even more baffled. I had to keep up with past slang, as well as current, and then remember not to use it? At least I thought that was what she meant.

And then there was *bye Felicia*, which seemed to mean waving good-bye to someone or something unimportant. And *throwing shade*, which meant to talk poorly about someone. Jah, English slang was like another language altogether.

As I followed Paisley and Autumn toward our staging area, I checked my phone one more time. Nothing from Marie. I did have a text from Nick though. *So proud of you!* he wrote, adding three hearts after it.

When we entered the auditorium, I scanned the crowd and found Nick, but couldn’t find Marie, Gordon, and Caden. I hoped they hadn’t had car trouble on the four-hour trip from Lancaster County.

The ceremony went fairly quickly. To my surprise, I won the Compassionate Student Nurse Award. To my horror, I had to go up front to accept it, but I managed to remain composed, although my face must have been bright red.

When I walked across the stage for my diploma, I could hear Nick shout. Others clapped too, and several of my classmates cheered and called out my name. My face grew warm again as I took my diploma. But inside I was thrilled. I’d just realized my biggest dream.

I returned to my chair and searched the crowd again. Marie and her family definitely weren’t in the audience.

I sat in a middle row of students and had to wait awhile to march out during the recessional. I called Marie as soon as I reached the marble floor of the lobby, surrounded by my

classmates and their families hugging and snapping photos. But she didn't answer.

As I slipped my phone back into my pocket, Nick found me and gave me a hug. As he let go, he said, "I couldn't find Marie and Gordon."

"They're not here." I pulled my phone from my pocket again. "I just called Marie, but she didn't answer. I'll call Gordon." Just when I thought it was going to voicemail, my brother-in-law answered, sounding a little out of breath.

"We're in Lancaster," he said. "Marie is in the hospital. She's having stomach issues. They're running tests."

"When were you going to tell me?" I couldn't hide the hurt in my voice.

"I thought Jessica or your Mamm would have called last night."

"Last night? Marie's been in the hospital since then?"

"Actually since yesterday morning." He paused a moment and then said, "I'm sorry. Things have been a little crazy."

"Do you need me to come home? To help?"

"I'll talk to Marie," Gordon said.

"Where's Caden?" I asked.

"With my mom. She took the day off from school, but tomorrow she's playing piano in a wedding. . . ." His voice trailed off. "Sorry. I'm having a hard time keeping track of everything. I'll figure it out and call you back."

"All right." Once I ended the call, I told Nick what was going on.

"When will you leave?"

"I'll wait until Gordon calls me back."

"Are you sure?" I knew Nick would be halfway down the interstate by now if anyone in his family was in the hospital.

"Do you think I should go?" I did have a few days off after all.

He put his arm around me. “What do you want to do?”

I swallowed hard. I wasn’t sure.

My phone rang again. It was Jessica. “Sorry I didn’t call you last night. I thought Marie would.” She must have just talked to Gordon. “We were hoping it wasn’t a big deal, but now I’m not so sure. Can you come home? We need you.”