

THE SISTERS *of* LANCASTER COUNTY / BOOK ONE

— A —

PLAIN LEAVING



LESLIE GOULD



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Leslie Gould, *A Plain Leaving*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2017 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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017945294

ISBN 978-0-7642-1969-6 (trade paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-3115-5 (cloth)

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

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Mike Haberman Photography, LLC

Author is represented by MacGregor Literary, Inc.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Leslie Gould, *A Plain Leaving*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

In memory of my father
Bruce Egger
1923–2017



The just man walketh in his integrity:
his children are blessed after him.

Proverbs 20:7



Jessica Bachmann

March 2013

Tom Foster leaned toward me and extended the file. “You’re the one to do the initial interview on this. With your background in Lancaster County, I’m counting on you.” The case concerned an Old Order Amish family by the name of Stoltz and a contaminated well, possibly caused by fracking on their property.

It was an issue I had researched quite extensively in the last three years, out of fear of what my brother Arden wanted to do on our own family farm. My fear seemed to be unfounded, but it was still a topic I found fascinating, in a horrifying sort of way.

I steadied myself against my desk. “I’ll do my best.” As I took the file, Tom’s hand brushed mine. My heart began to race, something it hadn’t done in the last three years, not since Silas Kemp had kissed me for the very last time.

I swallowed hard, attempting to ward off the old familiar

hollowness that threatened to ruin my moment with Tom. There was no reason for me to think of Silas now.

“Is that your phone?” Tom nodded toward my desk. Something was buzzing. No one ever called me at work, not on my cell anyway.

“Probably.” I patted the papers strewn across the top, retrieving my phone from under the farmers’ markets file. My desk was usually perfectly organized. Embarrassed, I held it up as if in victory, but the buzzing had stopped.

He smiled. “Are we still on for lunch?”

“Definitely,” I answered. “Eleven forty-five. I’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

I watched as he headed down the hall. Tom was thinner than Silas and not as tall. He looked like a man who worked *in* an office and worked *out* at a gym. On the other hand, Silas looked, or had looked, like a man who bucked hundred-pound bales of hay and wrestled a team of mules, starting when he was fourteen.

Silas hadn’t tried to contact me, not once in the last three years. And why should he have? I made my choice. I knew what I was giving up. My parents. My remaining brother. My two sisters.

I sighed.

And Silas.

I concentrated on Tom, who glanced over his shoulder as he stepped into his own cubicle and smiled again. I waved, sure my face was turning red.

I slunk down into my chair and opened the file. I’d been dying to begin researching the case since Tom first mentioned it. Mentally, I zipped through the basics of fracking, which was actually slang for hydraulic fracturing. It consisted of drilling

into the earth and directing a high-pressure mix of water, sand, and chemicals into rocks and creating fractures, which then released the gas inside. It was controversial for several reasons, including increased geological activity, including earthquakes in some areas. Depleted water tables due to the massive amounts of water needed to complete the process was another problem. Along with the spread of chemicals from the site of the fracking, which possibly caused contamination to ground and well water.

An energy bill, passed eight years before, exempted oil and gas industries from the Safe Drinking Water Act, which further complicated fracking cases.

Yes, I was looking forward to investigating the Stoltz case, but that needed to wait until I finished the list of all the farmers' markets for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture website, which was indicative of the sort of projects I was usually assigned as a clerical assistant. And whom could I blame? I had an eighth-grade education—and now a GED. Although I'd taken a few online classes at the community college, I was the least-educated person in the office.

I placed the Stoltz file to the side of my desk and glanced at the missed call on my phone. My heart lurched. Someone from home had called, from the phone in the office in the barn. Was it *Dat* calling? Had there been some sort of emergency? Hopefully he was just calling to let me know he planned to visit me soon. It had been several months since I'd seen him.

Just as I began to return the call, my phone buzzed again. Same number. Taking a raggedy breath, I pressed "accept" and put it to my ear, aiming to sound professional in case any of my colleagues were listening.

"Hello, this is Jessica," I said in English. "How may I help you?"

“Jess? Is it you?” Leisel, my youngest sister, asked.

I turned toward the wall, my voice low. “*Jah*, it’s me.” She’d never called me before. “Is everything all right?”

“No, it’s not. It’s Dat.”

I fixated on a crack in the plaster. “What’s wrong?”

“He passed this morning.”

“Passed?” I choked on the word. What was Leisel saying? Dat was as strong as a workhorse.

“*Jah*, it all happened so quickly.” Leisel stopped with the English. “I meant to call.”

“What happened, exactly?” I managed to ask.

“He had a cough through the winter that he couldn’t get rid of.”

My legs began to shake as Leisel spoke, bumping my chair against the desk and making it rattle.

“He finally went to the doctor, but it was too late,” she said.

I pressed down on my knees with my free hand, willing the shaking to stop.

“It was cancer. Lung cancer.”

Lung cancer? He’d never smoked. “Did he die in the hospital?”

“No. At home. I took care of him.” Leisel weighed maybe a hundred pounds and was all of nineteen. Dat weighed over two hundred pounds and was well over six feet tall. How could my baby sister have cared for him?

“Come home.” Leisel’s voice cracked.

“Does *Mamm* want me to?”

“Of course.” Leisel’s voice didn’t sound convincing. I doubted my mother would ever forgive me for leaving, and I sincerely doubted if she wanted the stress of having me home.

“Come right now,” Leisel added. “We need you.”

“What about Marie?” She was our middle sister. “Does she want to see me?”

Leisel hesitated for a half second and then said, “Jah, of course.”

“And Arden?” Our brother and I had clashed our entire lives, but our relationship had grown absolutely intolerable before I left.

“Don’t worry about him,” Leisel said. “Just come home.”

I managed to stand, launching my chair backward as I did. “I’m on my way,” I said. “Tell Mamm and Marie . . .” Tell them what? That I was coming home for a few hours? A few days? A week?

I told Leisel good-bye and that I’d see her soon.

I started down the hall to Tom’s cubicle, taking the Stoltz file with me. He was on his phone, but when he saw me he excused himself and put his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone.

“Sorry.” I stopped.

“It’s fine,” he answered, a concerned expression falling over his face. “What happened?”

“It’s my Dat.” I couldn’t stop the tears.

He quickly ended his conversation, stood, and stepped toward me, coming around the side of his desk and wrapping his arm around me. “Is he ill?”

“No, he passed,” I whispered, wanting to take back the words as soon as I said them. Perhaps I’d dreamt Leisel’s call. I buried my head against his shoulder, but then quickly pulled away.

“Jessica.” He always used my full name. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

I gulped in a shallow breath of air. “Lung cancer.”

“When was the last time he was here?”

“Before Christmas,” I answered, as I tucked the file under my arm and swiped beneath my eyes with my index fingers. It was now mid-March. Every three or four months, Dat would hire a driver to bring him to Harrisburg to see me.

“What do you need?” Tom squeezed my shoulder.

“A few days off. I’ll go talk with Deanna.” She was our supervisor. I held up the file. “Do you want to take this over?”

He shook his head. “No, you’re the best person for it.”

I thanked him and hugged the file to my chest. I’d ask Deanna about the file and see what she said. I wouldn’t be back to the office for several days, depending on when the service was held. She might want to take the Stoltz file back and assign it to Tom, regardless of what he just said—I knew how important it was to keep projects on schedule.

Tom took a step backward, releasing me. “Do you want me to go with you?”

I hesitated for a moment, imagining arriving at the farm with Tom by my side. I could see Mamm’s raised eyebrows. Marie’s frown. Arden’s crossed arms. “No,” I said. “But thank you.”

“All right. But I’d like to attend the service.”

“I’ll call,” I said. “Once I know the details.” Tom had met Dat a few times, and there had been a mutual respect between the two, mostly based on a love of the land and farming in general, although for Tom it was mostly theory. A college degree in communications with a minor in ag, and then a job in the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, had given him a lot of head knowledge, although not much practice.

Before Tom drove down to Lancaster County, I’d need to fill him in on the details of an Amish funeral. The service would be conducted in Pennsylvania Dutch and High German, and because Dat was well respected and also a deacon, hundreds of people would be there. Tom might be the only *Englischer*, besides me. Unlike Dat, the rest of my family would not be as understanding.

Tom squeezed my shoulder again, a little awkwardly. We’d

been dating, taking it very slowly, for the last six months. However, we'd managed, mostly, to keep our relationship a secret at work.

"Thank you . . . for everything." I stepped away from him. He smiled kindly. "Call as soon as you can."

"I will."

I slipped down the hall to Deanna's office. She was in her mid-fifties and a friendly and compassionate woman. After I told her what happened, she gave me a hug. "Take the whole week," she said. "Don't give work a second thought."

"Oh, I don't think I'll be gone that long," I said. "I'll most likely be in on Friday, maybe even on Thursday." I assumed the service would be held on Wednesday. I held up the file. "What about the Stoltz case? Tom just gave it to me."

"Keep it," she said. "I told him I wanted you to do it. A little bit of a delay won't matter."

I thanked her. After I placed all of my files in my top drawer, tidied the remaining papers on my desk, and logged out of my computer, I wiggled into my coat, then grabbed my purse, and hurried to my car—a gray 2005 Toyota Camry. To anyone else, it appeared to be a conservative, safe, economical car. To me, the ex-Amish girl, it was an absolute miracle. I thanked God for it every time I sat down behind the wheel. Thankfully I'd driven to work that day—I often walked.

I worked two miles from the Pennsylvania State Capitol and lived only two blocks from it. As I turned off Cameron Street to State Street, the capitol building came into view. Most days I marveled at the beauty of the building with its green dome and expansive wings, but today my troubled soul barely noticed it. I found a parking place, locked my car, and hurried the half block to my brick building.

My apartment was over the coffee shop where I'd worked when I first moved to Harrisburg. I quickly unlocked the door to the outside staircase and hurried up the steps to the third floor. My studio was at the back of the building, overlooking the courtyard. I had a pullout couch, a small table and two chairs, a dresser, and a desk with my laptop on it. The hardwood floors shone, thanks to my polishing them, and the place was decorated with old photographs and prints, all landscapes, that I'd found at secondhand stores.

The space had been my place of safety since I fled Lancaster. I'd first used my computer here. I explored the Internet, discovered Netflix, and watched my first movie. I'd Googled current events, pop culture, and fashion.

I soon learned all sorts of things about myself, starting with that I said *jah* far too often and in what others heard as an accent. In time, I'd been able to rid myself of it. My job at the coffee shop and the regular customer interaction helped cure me of my odd words and speech patterns. I also learned I held my knife and fork differently than the general population, that my hair was frizzy, that I didn't understand most English jokes, and that I had no clue about Taylor Swift, Facebook, or Angry Birds—let alone politicians or world events.

Besides current events, I'd also Googled farming techniques, land development in Lancaster County, fracking, water rights, toxic chemicals, living off the grid, and hundreds of other topics. My thirst for knowledge was insatiable.

Practically everything I'd learned in the last three years came to me by surfing the Web, or from an English co-worker or friend pointing out some new piece of information, usually with an amused look on his or her face. A year after I arrived in Harrisburg, I completed my GED courses and then started

taking an online community college class nearly every semester. The apartment was my place of safety, but my computer was my window to the world. I'd changed beyond measure in the last three years.

I grabbed an overnight bag and filled it with my pajamas and two sets of clothes. I figured I'd wear the skirt and sweater set I had on to the service. Next I hurried into my closet-sized bathroom for my toothbrush and toiletries and placed them in the bag too.

I took a moment and peered out my window and down into the brick courtyard of the coffee shop. Last October, on the last warm Saturday morning, Tom and I had sat at one of the tables, potted plants surrounding us. It was the first time we'd talked about "us." Tom had told me I was the "kind of girl" he'd been hoping for his entire life. I'd warmed inside. He longed for someone sweet and caring, he'd said. Someone who knew how to run a home, but who also loved the outdoors. Funny thing was, out of all the girls I knew who grew up Amish, I was the worst at domestic chores, but I supposed—compared with the average English girl—I did know my way around a kitchen, as well as doing the laundry and sewing. Laughably, my family never would have agreed with Tom. Most of them believed I would make the worst wife ever.

Of course, I couldn't tell Tom that he *wasn't* the type of man I'd been waiting for my entire life. For the first nineteen years of my life, I thought I'd marry an Amish man who could handle a team of mules, plow a field, break a horse, build a barn, and help raise eight or more children. That wouldn't be Tom. But since I left the Amish, he was exactly the sort of man I'd been waiting for. He was kind and dedicated to his church. He was a hard worker, in his own way, and a good leader both at work

and among his friends. He loved his family. And he seemed to love me too.

I focused on the bare courtyard, which appeared to be ready for the upcoming spring days. I longed to sit there with Tom again. It was our spot, just as the old oak tree on the farm had been where Silas and I often retreated. *Silas*.

I grabbed the bag, locked my door behind me, descended the stairs as quickly as I could, and then hurried back to my car, the wind whipping my hair around my face. Was I brave enough for what was ahead of me? Leaving Lancaster County was one thing—returning was an entirely different proposition, especially when my father wouldn't be there to protect me.

Because I'd joined the church, once I left I had been thoroughly and irrevocably shunned. *Streng Meidung* was what was done by our district. The strong shunning. I'd been put under the *Bann* permanently. I'd absolutely expected it. Anyone who grew up Amish knew the verses that supported shunning. I remembered one in particular from Matthew: "*And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.*"

I'd broken my vow of baptism. I'd disobeyed. And I'd refused to confess my sin.

I knew the *Bann* was out of love. Everyone in our community wanted me to return, to keep my vow. I received letters from family and friends, begging me to repent and return to the fold. Not only had I broken my vow to the Lord Jesus, but I'd broken my vow to them as well. The only way to preserve the Amish way of life was to shun those who left—it lent strength to the community, based on Christian principles. In the English world, it would be called "tough love," although I didn't

know of anyone in the general population who loved quite as toughly as the Amish.

I'd never dreamt I'd leave. The day I'd been baptized had been the happiest day of my life. I truly believed the second would be the day I married Silas. But then everything changed.

After I left, I stood firm. I read each letter and then put them in the trash.

Now, as I drove, I prepared myself for what the Bann would mean. I wouldn't be able to sit at the kitchen table with my family. I wouldn't be able to sleep in my old bed in the room I'd shared with my sisters. But at least I would be able to stay in my family home. And I would be able to attend my father's funeral.

A sob shook me. Jah, it was easy to try to ignore that I would live the rest of my life under the Bann when I was living in a completely different world, but going home I'd have to face it and deal with it as best I could and with as much grace as I could possibly muster.

During the hour-long drive south to our family farm, near the community of Leacock, I thought through what my shunning would look like in the next couple of days. I vacillated between denial and gut-wrenching grief. One minute I'd think my father's passing was a cruel joke intended to get me to come home, and the next minute I'd be wailing in despair.

Especially when I had no clear understanding what Arden's plan for the Bachmann land might be now that Dat was gone. Unfortunately I had a pretty good guess.

My heart lurched as I slowed, shifted down into fourth gear, and then turned down the Oak Road toward the historic Bachmann *Bavvahre*.

I shivered. *Farm*. It had been a while since a Pennsylvania Dutch word had slipped through. Three years ago all my thoughts were

in my mother tongue. It was amazing how quickly I'd adjusted to speaking English and thinking in it all the time.

I refocused on the landscape. The cold blustery days of March had always been Dat's favorite time of year. He said he felt an affinity with the unseen life growing under the decay of winter, despite the threat of hail, blizzards, and even tornados. I shared his sentiments. Even now I could make out new shoots of growth in the field between the rail fence and the windbreak of fir trees.

Generations of Bachmanns had farmed our land, beginning in 1752 with Walter Bachmann. Dat had mentioned him a few times, and I could imagine the joy Walter had felt when he acquired this particular piece of farmland.

Of all of Dat's five children, I loved the land with a passion like his, which I imagined matched someone from each generation for the last 259 years. My half brother, Arden, lived with his family on the west side of the property and farmed with Dat, but he didn't love the land or the crops or the animals. His purpose was earning enough to support his family, which was a worthy cause in itself, but it still infuriated me. Of the many things that inspired me to leave the Amish, Arden's views toward the farm was one. Now I feared that with Dat gone, he might sell out to a gas company or a corporate farm, or overwork the land for a larger profit, or sell off a section to a developer.

I'd held on too tightly to my beliefs about the land back then, and finally realized my defeat and gave up altogether. *The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.* The words tumbled through my head—ones I'd surely hear over and over in the next few days. But God hadn't taken the farm from me. I had chosen to leave.

Regardless of the circumstances, my heart swelled involuntarily at the thought of being back on the land. Nothing

screamed *home* to me like our farm. I thought of the vast universe, the blue ball of Earth spinning in space, then North America, the state of Pennsylvania, Lancaster County, and finally our 140 acres. I imagined myself flying over it in a plane and seeing the way the green fields, bordered with strips of plowed earth and trees, would appear like a crazy quilt. I doubted there was anywhere on the planet as beautiful and fertile as Lancaster County.

The field gave way to pasture, spotted by Holstein cows. A group huddled together under the oak tree in the middle. One raised her head and stared at me. My heart lurched at the sight. I'd missed it all—the land, the animals, the crops, the oak tree, the woods on the far side near the highway. Even the mud, which this time of year covered nearly everything.

I shifted into third and rounded the corner. The old sprawling farmhouse with the wraparound front porch came into view. What was now the enclosed back porch of the farmhouse had once been part of the original log cabin. Of course the house had been added to many times over the years. One wing and then another. A second floor. A front porch. A sunroom. It spread out in every direction. It was so big we could have easily squeezed in Arden's family of seven, but it was better they had their own place on the other side of the farm. His kids were fine—it was Arden and his wife, Vi, who had made my life miserable, along with the new bishop. And then my sister Marie too.

Plus my mother, but that hadn't changed in any way. She'd been critical of me for as long as I could remember.

The memory made me cringe, and I slowed even more. I was visiting—not returning. My apartment, smaller than the farmhouse's back porch, was now home to me. It's what I'd chosen.

I focused on the land again. On the left side of the lane, bale

tubes of silage covered the edge of the field. A sheltie I didn't recognize ran along the fence line, barking at my car. On the right side of the lane, cows and horses huddled near the oak tree. A colt bounded away from its mother.

How could Dat be gone? The pasture. The animals. The crops. All of them screamed *Dat* to me. He was the gentle farmer. The caretaker. God's steward.

A sob shook me, and I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

He was only sixty-seven. Much too young to die. I'd been sure he'd live another twenty years at least, providing plenty of time to sort out our differences.

I concentrated on the house again. The porch skirt above the foundation needed to be painted. Most likely the task was on the list of projects for summer. Along with pruning the trees along the side of the house. Beyond them, I could see that the barn roof needed to be repaired. In fact, overall, the property looked much shabbier than I remembered. I reminded myself that Dat had been ill for the last few months, but all of those jobs should have been done last fall. Perhaps he hadn't been feeling well even then, but if so, Arden should have taken charge.

Leisel, wearing a black dress and apron, stepped out onto the front porch. Already a collection of buggies was parked around the barn. I hadn't thought of the houseful of neighbors ready to help with meals and chores.

I parked my car at the edge of the driveway and dabbed at my tears. Leisel came down the steps, pulling a black shawl tight around her shoulders. She walked with what seemed like confidence mixed with fatigue. She'd always looked a little like a pixie—fair skin, blond hair, grayish eyes. And petite. Marie and I appeared to be giants next to her.

We had been the Bachmann sisters, the three of us born in

just three years. Loyal to each other above all, through thick and thin. Marie and Leisel had been my best friends all of my life, until things turned sour about five months before I left Lancaster. Up until then, we'd gone everywhere together. Singings. Outings. Volleyball games. We were protective of each other. Caring of others. And bound together as only sisters can be.

I opened the car door, grabbed my purse, and climbed out, patting my coat pocket to make sure my phone was still there. It was.

I took a step in the gravel, my low-heeled pumps rocking a little with the movement. Leisel tugged the shawl even tighter as she came toward me. At the sight of her red-rimmed eyes, another sob shook me. She was in my arms before I could control myself, and I patted her back reflexively as we both cried. "I'm so sorry," I whispered, my words slipping through as the intensity of my sadness grew.

She tightened her grip on me. Over her shoulder I could see our mother in the doorway, but then she turned and disappeared back into the house. I searched for Dat's sister, *Aenti* Suzanne, but I didn't see her. She would be my ally, I was sure. At least I hoped so.

Thankfully there was no sight of Arden. I'd count my blessings, no matter how small.

"Has anyone called Amos?" I whispered. He was Arden's identical twin, the first prodigal in the family to leave, sixteen years ago when I was just six.

"None of us knows his phone number," Leisel said.

"Dat didn't tell you?" I knew he kept in touch with Amos.

She shook her head. "He planned to. We talked about it. We all thought Dat would live another month, at least a few more weeks. But he went so quickly. Everything changed two days ago."

I could only hope someone had planned to let me know Dat was ill, so I could have come to say good-bye. But I wouldn't think of that now. Amos and I had both brought shame to Dat, although he never put that on us. Others certainly did though, doubly because Dat was a deacon.

"Maybe Amos's information is in Dat's desk." I pulled away from Leisel and started toward the house. "We can look."

Leisel nodded and fell into step beside me, taking hold of my arm. The wind whipped the skirt of her dress and the ties of her *Kapp*, tugging at her hair beneath it. We stepped together, entwined in the grief that connected us.

At first I thought the sound behind me was the wind. But the second time, I couldn't deny someone had spoken my name.

"Jessie."

And I knew who said it. He made my name sound like music. I turned.

Silas came toward me slowly, his straw hat in his hand, his dark hair a little long over his eyebrows. The sleeves of his forest green shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and he wore no coat or vest. His hazel eyes reflected kindness, even after the way I'd left him. "Jessie." He was the only one who called me that. "You're here."

I hesitated for a moment, remembering our past and then the clean scent of his Mamm's soap, mixed with the sweat of hard work on his skin. I remembered how I'd felt when he'd held me, when he'd kissed me under the oak tree.

"Jah, I *am* here," I finally answered as another sob overtook me.