

THE SISTERS *of* LANCASTER COUNTY / BOOK TWO

— A —

SIMPLE SINGING



LESLIE GOULD



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To my husband, Peter,
soldier and healer.



Therefore to him that knoweth to do good,
and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

James 4:17



Marie Bachmann

DECEMBER 2013

I wish I could say I was overcome with happiness as my sister Jessica pledged her life to her beloved. But I wasn't. She looked so lovely in her blue dress that I'd helped her hem the night before. She was never known for her domestic abilities, including when it came to orchestrating her *Hochzich*. She'd spent her childhood helping our *Dat* farm, while I'd been properly trained by our *Mamm* to run a home and all that it entailed.

But regardless of what Jessica lacked, she and Silas were very much in love. Their misty eyes shone as they smiled from ear to ear at each other. However, my eyes were completely dry as I perched on the wedding party bench.

I'd lost so much in the last year. My father had died. My best friend, Gail, had moved to Ohio after Jessica returned to Lancaster County. And my youngest sister, Leisel, had left home for a new life in Pittsburgh, where she attended nursing school.

Someone opened the back door of our shed where the service was being held, and an icy blast of wind tore through the building. It was the first Thursday in December, and the weather was as cold as my heart.

I glanced toward the door, expecting our brother Amos and his daughter, Becca, but it was our *Aenti* Suz slipping into the service. Amos lived in Colorado and had hoped to attend and bring Becca, whom we'd never met. But they hadn't shown up yet. I guessed that their flight had been delayed by the weather.

Bishop Jacobs took Jessica's hand and Silas's hand in both of his and said, "I bless this couple and their marriage in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

He looked out over the congregation and asked, "Will you pledge to pray for and support this couple throughout their life together?"

Of course everyone agreed. Except for me. I stayed silent as I shifted on the hard bench. I glanced first at my Mamm in the front row. She sat straight as a rod, nodding her head in agreement. And then over to the other side where my brother Arden sat with a smile on his bearded face. Nine months ago, neither wanted Jessica to come home again. Now she was the prodigal daughter who'd been welcomed with open arms.

Thankfully, after another scripture reading and prayer, the service was over.

As everyone followed Jessica and Silas out of the shed and toward the house, even though I knew it was expected that I would help my family greet our guests, I set my sights on the barn instead, wrapping my cape tightly around my body to try to ward off the icy chill. *Aenti* Suz stopped me, grabbing my arm as I tried to hurry by her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

I pulled my cape even tighter. “I just need to get some fresh air.”

She laughed. The music in her voice told me she saw right through me, but if there was one thing I knew, it was that Aenti Suz would love me no matter what.

“Just give me a minute.” I pulled away from her. “Then I’ll come straight into the house, I promise.”

Without looking back, I marched toward the barn, the cold wind stinging my eyes. *Winder* had arrived with a vengeance.

For years, Psalm 37:4 had been the verse I’d held on to. *Delight thyself also in the Lord: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.* I had delighted in the Lord since I was a child. I followed the *Ordnung*, down to hem lengths, hat widths, and *Kapp* ties, making sure everyone in our family adhered to our church’s unwritten rules. I honored my mother and my father, even when I didn’t agree with all the traveling and other things he did when he was alive. I respected Bishop Jacobs. I never missed church. I made pies and quilts for auctions to raise money for good causes. I took care of the sick—not like Leisel did, but as best I could.

I helped in other ways too. Just over a month ago, in late October, I’d volunteered to have the district singing at our place because another family couldn’t. True, I loved the *Youngie* singings. They were my favorite of all our community gatherings. And it had been a perfect autumn day with the leaves changing on the trees in the woods and the last of the fall flowers blooming. But the point was, I’d put the needs of the district first.

Jessica had always been so capable and strong, and Leisel so smart and caring, but I’d been the most grounded in our faith. The one who knew just the right scripture for the right situation. The one who could be counted on to pray. The one

who supported the bishop and ministers of our district, no matter what.

But now I wondered if I would ever realize the desires of my heart. All I wanted was to marry a *Bavvah* in our district, one who owned his own farm. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently so, because it seemed there wasn't a single one who was eligible right now, and instead of it being my wedding day, it was Jessica's. My sister who had joined the Amish and then left. Who was shunned and then returned. Why had she been rewarded instead of me?

I was twenty-one. Certainly not an old maid, but without any viable prospects, it could be years before I married.

I pulled in a raggedy, icy breath as I marched along. *Jah*, I knew how ridiculous my thoughts were. That was why I wouldn't share them with anyone. I wouldn't complain. Or whine. Or lower myself to voice my shameful response to my sister's happiness. Not at all. We were called to love one another.

And I did love Jessica. I just needed to rant, if only in my head, for a few minutes.

I pushed open the barn door and fell over the threshold, inhaling the scent of hay and grain. *Jah*, it was cold inside the barn but nothing like the frigid outdoors.

I heard him singing before I saw him. I guessed it was a Mennonite *Leet* or perhaps an *Englisch* song because I didn't recognize it.

I shut the door quietly behind me and stepped farther into the barn. For a moment the beautiful melody warmed me—at least my heart, if not my body.

I'd expected Gordon to still be in the shed or helping in the house, not in the barn.

I wouldn't admit it to anyone—because I was the faithful

sister, the one who never questioned what was done or what our community stood for—but the music of the Englishers and even the Mennonites did appeal to me. A wave of peace washed over me when I sang. It wasn't something I'd felt much of lately.

Gordon's baritone voice grew louder as he sang, "Come into His presence singing Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!" as he hurried around the corner of the stalls. Catching sight of me, he froze and stopped singing.

"Marie," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I just needed a moment, that's all." I sighed, leaning up against the whitewashed wall. I had been looking forward to the next verse. "I didn't expect you to be in here."

"A cow's in labor and having a hard time." His deep brown eyes were full of concern. That was Gordon—concerned for everyone and everything, person or animal, plant or tree. "I was checking on her before going to help in the house. I think she'll be a while though." On our dairy farm, there always seemed to be a cow in labor. It wasn't like in the old days when they all birthed their calves in the spring.

When I didn't respond, Gordon asked, "Could I walk you to the house?"

"Jah." I stepped back to the door and pushed it open, bracing myself for the cold.

"Is everything all right?" Gordon asked as he stepped to my side.

"It's fine," I answered.

"Want to talk?"

"No." That was the last thing I wanted, even though Gordon was always willing to listen.

"What is it?" he asked.

I hesitated. "I'm just feeling out of sorts." I was sure he could

see right through me too, and that he'd know I was feeling sorry for myself. I quickly tried to make it sound as if that wasn't the case. "My sisters are both so strong and determined and directed. I'm feeling uncertain about my own future."

His voice filled with kindness. "You're one of the strongest people I know. Earnest. Disciplined. Confident." He abruptly stopped talking and then blushed, as if he'd said too much. He was such an endearing young man.

"Oh, you're just trying to make me feel better." I quickened my step and he matched it. "But thank you." I meant it. His affirming words comforted me, a little anyway. Maybe my future wasn't as helpless as I feared.

The wind gusted, and Gordon stepped closer to me as if to shield me from the force of it. "No," he said. "I'm not trying to make you feel better. I truly believe that."

Embarrassed, I tried to smile even though my face stung from the cold. But then I ducked my head and forged ahead, concentrating on the path through the snow instead of talking.

When we reached the house, we climbed the steps to the enclosed back porch that was part of the original cabin my ancestors built back in 1752, in the Leacock Township of Lancaster County. I hooked my cape on a peg and Gordon hung his work coat and took off his hat, revealing his wavy dark hair.

As we stepped into the kitchen, the tangy scent of the meatballs in tomato sauce greeted us, but before I could fully appreciate it, Mamm gave me a funny look. "Where have you been?"

I smiled without answering. "What would you like me to do?"

Beyond us, men were setting up the tables for the first sitting of the meal, and Silas and Jessica had gathered around the *Hochtzeit* table with everyone in the wedding party but me.

Mamm nodded toward Bishop Jacobs, standing by Dat's study, which Mamm had converted into a sewing room. It took me a moment to recognize who stood next to the bishop.

"Look who's home," Mamm said. "All the way from Florida."

Elijah Jacobs turned toward me. He had an impish grin on his tanned face.

"Marie," he said, brushing his sundrenched hair from his forehead. "How have you been?"

"Great." I grinned back at him. Elijah had always been a bad boy, and I'd always been a Goody-Two-Shoes. However, even though I'd never admitted it to anyone, I'd always had a crush on him, ever since we were young. I was happy to see him.

Gordon, always the gentleman, stepped forward and extended his hand. "Elijah," he said. "I'm Gordon Martin. I work here on the Bachmann farm."

"Nice to meet you." Elijah shook his hand back with vigor. He appeared so grown up. My heart swelled.

Once Gordon pulled away, he shook Bishop Jacobs's hand while Elijah grinned at me again. I couldn't help but note that his smile seemed even more endearing than it had when we were scholars. My heart contracted as I smiled back, hoping to convey just how happy I was to see him.



The house was crowded for the wedding meal, but we'd decided that running food to the shed in the cold would be more difficult than making do inside. We'd moved all of the furniture except for our long oak table out of the main floor of the house—putting some pieces upstairs, some into the backroom of the shed, and some into a storage room in the barn. Now the men and boys continued to set up tables and benches for

the meal, while the potato cooks finished up and the servers congregated to receive their instructions. Even though the furnishings were gone, our home still felt warm and cozy, as it always did. Our house had served Bachmanns for over two hundred years, something I thought of nearly every day.

Soon the wedding party, including me, was seated at the head table, and then Arden led us all in a silent prayer. The servers began distributing the meatballs, mashed potatoes, green beans, sweet corn, chow chow, pickled beets, and rolls. I barely tasted the food as I watched Jessica and Silas and tried to make out what they were saying over the clatter of forks and knives against the dinner plates. They seemed incredibly happy. I hated to admit it, but they were a much better match than Silas and Gail, who had courted before Jessica's return. Silas had been kind and attentive to my friend, but it was obvious he was meant for my sister. They had an easiness about them that was usually seen in older couples.

I spotted Mamm in the crowd, eating with Aenti Suz. I imagined she especially missed our Dat today. I know I did. And I was sure both Jessica and Silas did too, although from the joyful expressions on their faces it was hard to tell.

Once I finished my food, I headed to the kitchen with my plate, even though some members of the clean-up crew were already wandering around collecting things. Another crew was distributing pieces of pie from table to table.

Once in the kitchen, I decided to help and dished up bowls of mashed potatoes for the second serving. Gordon slipped back outside, to the laboring cow, I assumed.

We had an army of helpers, and others on the clean-up crew were already hard at work tackling the first round of dishes. I'd heard that Englishers hired caterers and servers at their

weddings, but that was something we never needed to do in our community. We all pitched in to help each other—especially when people joined in marriage, when someone died, or when there was an illness or accident in the family. That’s what it meant to live in community.

From the island in the kitchen, I had a view of the front door. So did Jessica, apparently, because when it opened and Amos stepped through with an Englisch girl wearing a skirt and boots, my sister practically flew into his arms in a very non-Amish demonstration of affection. Regardless, I choked up for a moment as he wrapped his arms around her, burying Jessica in his big winter coat. When he let her go, he quickly introduced her to his daughter.

Tears stung my eyes. The girl looked like Jessica and me. Dark eyes. Long brown hair, although mine was lighter. Of course hers wasn’t pulled back in a bun—it fell loose around her shoulders in waves. She smiled sweetly and shook Jessica’s hand but appeared a little overwhelmed by the scene around her. Jessica glanced around the room and finally spotted me.

“Marie.” She motioned to me as Silas reached Amos and shook his hand.

I dropped the metal spoon back into the potatoes and made my way around the tables, wiping my hands on my apron. Mamm and Aenti Suz had seen Amos and Becca too and beat me to greeting them. Something had changed in my Mamm in the last six months. When Amos came for Dat’s funeral, she was as cold as today’s December ice storm. But then something shifted. When Jessica disclosed she’d invited Amos to her wedding, Mamm had simply said she was glad of it.

I, on the other hand, still felt frustrated with my brother, who was Arden’s twin. Amos had left us all those years ago. Did

he really think he could return, again and again, as if nothing had happened?

Mamm wasn't Arden and Amos's biological mother. Theirs had died when they were ten. I sometimes forgot she wasn't Arden's—but never Amos's. The twins were as different as could be.

But now she greeted him in front of our entire district. And then she took Becca's hand and pulled her close. I'd expect such a thing from Aenti Suz, but such warmth from my Mamm was shocking.

As I reached the crowd, Mamm was telling Becca how delighted she was to meet her. "You are always welcome in our home," she said.

After Aenti Suz greeted the girl, it was my turn. "I'm Marie. *Wilcom.*"

She didn't extend her hand to me as she had the others. "Daddy told me about you." From the expression on her face, I guessed what he'd said hadn't been good.

I turned away from her to greet Amos, wondering what his response would be to me, but he had stepped away to shake Arden's hand.

An elbow bumped my arm and I turned, thinking Becca had nudged me or perhaps Jessica, but it was Elijah, a grin on his face. He whispered in my ear, "Families can be complicated, jah?"

I didn't answer. What did Elijah know about family conflict? All of his siblings had joined the church and settled down. And he would too, after spending his running-around years in Florida. At least I hoped he'd come home to stay—and soon.

"Want to sneak out for some air?" he asked, his voice still low.

Now, that was something that actually appealed me. “Sure,” I said. “Let’s go out the back.” No one would notice we’d left, I was sure.



After we’d bundled up on the back porch, Elijah suggested we go to the barn.

I shook my head, not wanting to bump into Gordon again. But I didn’t tell Elijah that. “Let’s go to the shop. We can see if anything still needs to be cleaned up in there.”

I wasn’t sure if Elijah would want to help with that sort of thing, but he responded with a positive, “Good idea.”

We couldn’t speak as we trudged outside. I could barely keep my balance and manage to keep breathing. On the other side of the fence, out in the pasture, the old oak tree’s snow-covered branches swayed in the icy wind. The sight made me shiver all the more.

It wasn’t until we reached the shop and Elijah had flung the door open, and then forced it shut against another gust, that he sputtered, “You can’t imagine how thankful I’ll be to get back to Florida.”

“I bet,” I answered. “When do you leave?”

“After Christmas.”

“So you won’t stay for the Epiphany?”

He shook his head. “January starts our busy season. I need to be back before the crowds arrive.”

I knew of people who spent weeks and sometimes even months in Pinecraft, Florida, each winter, but no one from our family had ever gone. The truth was, I didn’t like to travel far from home, and going to Florida always seemed excessive. I especially balked at the saying, “What happens in Pinecraft,

stays in Pinecraft.” It sounded so fallacious. But I had to admit, the warmer weather was appealing, especially during weather like we’d been having.

The temperature in the shop had definitely fallen since the service, but it was still bearable. The propane heaters had been turned off and all of the benches had been moved out, but there were still some folding chairs that had been put into use that we usually stored in the back room. We moved those, even though furniture from the house was stored there too, and then grabbed two brooms and began to sweep.

As we worked, Elijah asked me about Amos. I told him about my brother leaving sixteen years ago and then returning last March for Dat’s funeral. “This is the first time any of us have met his daughter. We didn’t even know she existed until last spring.”

“None of you knew?”

“Well, Dat did,” I said. “And he told Mamm at some point.” It sounded as odd as it was. I would have never guessed that Dat would be one to keep secrets.

I didn’t want Elijah to ask why Becca had been cold to me, so I changed the subject and asked him about Florida.

“Well,” he said, “it’s as warm as you’ve heard. Of course it’s downright hot in the summer, but very comfortable in the winter. And it’s always a lot of fun. Plain folks come from around here, of course, but also from Ohio and even Indiana, plus there are a lot of great Englisher tourists and residents too. I’ve met lots of fascinating people.”

I was afraid I wouldn’t fit that category.

“I work in a bakery, both in the kitchen and at the front counter. I live in a house with a group of other Youngie.” He grinned. “All guys. We have a revolving door. Some workers

come for a few months—others for a long amount of time. Some of us are there all year round.”

Hoping he’d keep talking about Florida, I said, “Remind me how long you’ve been down there.”

“Off and on for the last three years.”

We’d been eighteen when he left.

“How long do you plan to stay?” I reached the far wall of the shed and shook out my broom.

He shrugged. “I’m not sure,” he answered. “Probably not for long.” He grinned again. “I’m not getting any younger.”

“What does that mean?” I teased.

He laughed. “Well, my parents are pressuring me to come home and settle down.”

“But perhaps you’ll find a girl from Ohio or Indiana and leave Lancaster County altogether.”

“Perhaps.”

I expected him to grin again, but instead, with a serious expression on his face, he said, “I plan to come home by summer—maybe even late spring—and help my Dat farm. My parents have offered me the land, and that’s hard to pass up.”

I didn’t say anything, afraid I might come across as too enthusiastic. Instead, I thought of my rant on the way to the barn just a couple of hours earlier. Was Elijah who the Lord had in mind for me all along? He was going to farm, in our district. And I’d been enamored with him since I was a girl. I breathed a prayer asking for forgiveness for my earlier negativity. Then again, it hadn’t been all rant. Not really. It had been part prayer. Was God answering it already?

Elijah added, “I didn’t like farming much before, but I know I can’t work in a bakery for half the day and play on the beach for the other for the rest of my life.”

I kept sweeping, thinking about the Jacobses' old farmhouse. It was in tip-top shape and wouldn't need any updating. And it was only a few miles from our farm. Perhaps God had heard the desires of my heart. I could be marrying Elijah on our farm by next fall . . . but in late October or early November, when the weather wouldn't be icy cold.

I was enjoying hiding out in the shed with Elijah. He'd run with a wild group after he turned sixteen, while I didn't run at all because I'd already committed to living a life I'd never regret. By the time I was eighteen, I'd joined the church, as I always knew I would, and never looked back. Hanging out with Elijah now felt daring, for me, but oddly comfortable too. Mamm often said that opposites attract, pointing out that she was a homebody while Dat loved adventures. Plus, she was a rule follower like me, while Dat had been more open to other ideas—not in the same way as Elijah though. The point was, being different had worked out just fine for them. At least it seemed so to me.

As Elijah pivoted upon completing another row of sweeping, the shed door swung open and Gordon stepped inside, clapping his gloved hands together. "There you are," he said to me. "Your Mamm sent me to find you." He motioned toward the broom. "I'll finish the sweeping."

"Oh, it can wait," I said. "We were just taking a break from the crowd."

"No," Gordon said. "There's nothing else I need to do."

"Should I stay and help?" Elijah asked.

Gordon shook his head. "Go back to the house. It won't take me long." He smiled kindly at both of us.

But as I handed my broom to Gordon, I detected a bit of sadness in his eyes as his hand brushed against mine.

“*Denki*,” I said. “You’re always so thoughtful.”

He smiled, but then turned toward Elijah.

“So you’ve been living in Florida.”

Elijah nodded. “Jah, in Sarasota.”

“Not Pinecraft?”

Elijah shook his head. “I hang out there a lot, but I’m closer to the beach.”

“I’ve been going to Sarasota in January for the last three years with a group from my church to work in a shelter. We’ll be going again next month.”

“I’ve had a few groups like that come into the bakery where I work. They usually stay at that Mennonite church a little north of the shelter.”

“That’s the one.”

“That’s not really my thing, but I appreciate you pitching in,” Elijah said. “I’ll see you around then.” He grinned. “Here and down there, maybe.”

Gordon held up his hand in a wave, and Elijah opened the door. I pulled my cape tight and stepped back into the wind. We didn’t speak until we reached the back porch.

“Is Gordon one of those do-gooders? One of those over-zealous people who just don’t know when to quit?” Elijah held the door for me.

“I do know that he does a lot of volunteer work,” I answered, thankful to be out of the wind. “He seems to care a lot about others.” When Elijah didn’t answer, I asked, “Why?”

“Oh, we just see a lot of church groups who are looking for an experience. As if claiming to work in a shelter or a soup kitchen is an excuse to go on a trip when they should just book a vacation instead.” He laughed a little as he wiggled out of his coat.

“Oh,” I said, but then felt compelled to add, “I don’t think that’s how it is with Gordon. He seems to genuinely care about others.”

Elijah nodded. “He definitely seems like a decent guy—even if he is Mennonite.”

“Says the guy who hasn’t joined his church yet,” I teased, hanging up my cape.

“Hey.” Elijah hung his coat on the peg next to my cape. “I will soon. I promise.”