

THE COURTSHIPS OF LANCASTER COUNTY 9 4

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# Becoming Bea

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LESLIE GOULD



**BETHANYHOUSE**

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Leslie Gould, *Becoming Bea*  
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For Thao,  
Youngest daughter of mine,  
strong and beautiful,  
faithful and fun.

Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk.

Psalm 143:8 kjv



Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.

William Shakespeare,  
*Much Ado About Nothing*, VII.61



C H A P T E R  
1

I won the third-grade spelling bee with H-A-R-M-O-N-Y. It was a word I loved but was not a feeling I often experienced—except for this moment, sitting on the porch of our farmhouse with my *Mamm*.

It was mid-October. Autumn. Such a beautiful word and my favorite time of the year. The bright blue sky sparkled above us. Sunflowers, the size of platters, lined the field. And woodsmoke from our neighbor’s chimney drifted across the road.

I couldn’t explain the feeling that swept over me. Harmony, *jah*, but with a hint of A-N-T-I-C-I-P-A-T-I-O-N, the word that had won me the fourth-grade spelling bee. As if something good was about to happen. To me. And soon.

Although I did my best to follow Scriptures, I was known more for my melancholy than my optimism. But for the moment, I relished the hopeful feeling.

My R-E-V-E-R-I-E, the word Ben Rupp had beat me with in our fifth-grade bee, ended just as quickly as it came when I caught sight of my sister Molly trudging up the pathway, an empty flower bucket in each hand.

“I’m not feeling well.” She stopped under the oak tree next to the sprawling pile of leaves that I needed to finish raking. Her

skin was pale, all the way to her blond hairline. She was nearly as white as her *Kapp*, which was unusual for her, considering she spent every day working outside. She lowered the buckets to the grass and then leaned against the trunk of the tree.

I clutched my journal in one hand and my Bible, which had belonged to my father, in the other.

Mamm started down the steps. “Bea will go down and help.”

“I will?”

Molly lurched, probably at the surprise of Mamm’s volunteering me to help with the farmers’ market in our lower field.

“Jah, you will,” Mamm called over her shoulder. “Go put your things away.”

I detested the *Youngie* farmers’ market and did my best to avoid it, Saturday after Saturday. But I knew to obey my Mamm, even if I’d just turned twenty-one. She wouldn’t have assigned me the task if it didn’t need to be done.

As Mamm hurried toward Molly, I headed into the house and up the stairs to my room, stashing my Bible, journal, and pencil in my bottom drawer, next to my dictionary and the book of poems I’d checked out from the library. I couldn’t afford to buy books of my own.

I closed the drawer. I was always careful not to leave my personal things out for anyone to paw through. Especially not Molly. She’d snooped once, and I hadn’t been able to trust her since.

When I stepped back onto the porch, Molly was sitting on the wicker settee beside Mamm. “You’ll just need to help load the wagon,” she said. “I decided to close early.”

That wasn’t like her either, but I didn’t comment for fear she’d change her mind.

“The sales have been low for everyone. Not many tourists

out today,” she explained. “We’ve sold out of the pumpkins and asters, but that’s all.”

Even I could have predicted the decrease in traffic. I hurried on down the steps.

“Bea,” my sister called out.

I turned toward her.

“*Denki*,” she said.

Mamm nodded in agreement.

I waved my hand as if it were nothing, which they both knew wasn’t true. I hated crowds. And being around strangers.

“It’s good to see her taking steps to stretch herself,” Mamm said as I continued on. I knew she didn’t intend for me to catch her words—she’d been talking louder than usual lately, perhaps because her hearing had deteriorated during her illness—but it pained me to know my sister and mother talked that way behind my back. Since *Dat* had died it was as if Molly had stepped into the role of parent. Something I was sure *she* relished.

Molly most likely had a touch of the flu that had been going around our district. Even so, we’d been through enough tragedy that I couldn’t help but worry about her. *Dat* had died two years ago and then Mamm had a brain tumor—benign, thankfully—but still she’d gone through an operation and radiation.

I hesitated for a moment on the other side of the oak tree. In the pasture below, the vendors packed their wares: baked goods, fall gourds, lap quilts, woven baskets, fresh herbs, fall flowers, hope chests, and kraut and sausages. An entire cornucopia of offerings. I had often observed the market while I did the wash on Saturday mornings, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells, thankful I didn’t have to interact with the people.

I inhaled and kept marching.

Our yellow lab, named Love, escorted me to the trail and

then stopped and looked up at me with her dark brown eyes. I gave her a pat, even though I wasn't much of a dog person, but I didn't bother to tell her to stay. She knew not to follow me.

Not nearly as surefooted as Molly, I confronted the steep slope, doing my best to keep my balance. I didn't possess the level of comfort my sister had with every inch of our land. Although I couldn't say I excelled at it, I spent much more time doing housework than I did outside chores, leaving the flower farming to Molly.

But still I loved our home, land and all, and couldn't imagine ever living anywhere else, although I wouldn't mind if Molly and her husband, Leon, moved away—close enough to do the work but not in the same house as Mamm and me. I was ready for a break from my sister.

It wasn't that I didn't love her. I did, with all my heart. But with Molly, her way was the only way. We were sisters, true, but as different as night and day, starting with my dark hair and brown eyes. Mamm said when I was born she'd expected I'd be just like Molly. But she said it was obvious from day one I wouldn't be the go-getter my sister was.

All my life I'd lived in Molly's shadow.

I stumbled over a rock as I reached the pasture, my arms flailing as I regained my balance.

I swiped at a trickle of sweat by my temple. It had been overcast and drizzly for several days, but the weather had turned warm again. Maybe we would have a streak of Indian summer before winter came.

The savory smell of bratwurst made my mouth water as I approached the market. A few *Englisch* customers bought up the grilled items and pastries, reaping a good sale price.

I kept my head down, hoping none of the vendors expected a conversation from me. My strategy worked—no one even

called out a hello—although a stranger, an Amish man I didn’t recognize, turned toward me and stared as I passed him. He was tall, broad, and handsome, and wore a thick, short beard. I could feel his eyes still on me as I hurried along.

When I reached our flower booth, my brother-in-law, Leon, nodded a greeting. He and I were both introverts and had much more in common with each other than either of us had with Molly, proving that opposites attract since she was the one he chose. For a short time, a few hours on a camping trip a year ago last June, I wondered what it would be like to court him, but now he was like a brother to me.

I actually did have a brother—Ivan, my half brother, who at nearly fifty had just married Nell Yoder. She’d been delighted to take on the role of big sister to Molly and me, but Ivan remained more like a favorite *Onkel*.

I grabbed the handles of two buckets filled with purple mums and marched to the wagon. I hefted them into the back and scooted them along the boards as far as I could. Our horse, Daisy, nickered, and I stepped forward to pet her, although besides not being much of a dog person, I wasn’t a horse person either.

On my way back to the booth I stumbled over my own two feet at the sight of Ben Rupp, who approached Leon.

“Are you going hunting with us?” Ben called out. “The more the merrier.”

Leon responded, “It’s not hunting season yet.”

“It will be—for muzzle-loaders,” Ben replied. “It comes right after bow hunting. Before regular hunting.”

Leon, his back to me, shook his head and said something, but I couldn’t make out his words.

Ben continued, “I have my *Dawdi*’s old gun. And I talked the twins and Phillip into buying their own.”

Leon said something else I couldn't hear.

Ben's voice was loud, too loud. "You're going to Montana?"  
"Jah. Next week."

No one had said a thing about Leon going to Montana, especially not as soon as next week. I started marching toward them.

A smirk settled on Ben's face as I approached. He took off his straw hat and ran his hand through his hay-colored hair, still streaked by the summer sun. In an indifferent voice, he said, "Bea Zook."

I took a deep breath. "Ben Rupp," I responded, matching his tone. "And it's Beatrice to you."

"Persnickety"—that had been the winning word for our sixth-grade year, spelled by Ben—"as ever," he said.

"How *pretentious* of you," I retorted. I'd won the seventh-grade spelling bee with that word.

Leon stepped between us. "Hey, you two—" But then one of the vendors called out to him with a question.

Ben didn't miss a beat. "Pernicious." It had been on our eighth-grade list. "The definition being, having a harmful effect, in a gradual or subtle way."

As if I wouldn't remember what it meant!

He pulled his hat back on his head. "That's you, Missy D-I-S-D-A-I-N."

That had been his nickname for me growing up, after we'd had the word on our sixth-grade list. The feeling that someone or something is unworthy of one's consideration or respect. That was how he thought I felt about others. He never knew it, but he'd made me cry with that one.

"You're putting yourself in an awfully *precarious* position," I said now as my hands involuntarily formed fists at my side. That had never been on any of our lists.

He had the same impish expression on his face that had annoyed me all through our years as scholars. “I doubt it. You’re just being *perfunctory*,” he said, his greenish brown eyes flashing, and then added, “performing routinely, in a superficial way.”

We’d never had that word either. “I know what it means,” I said as my fingernails dug into my palms, even though I actually didn’t. I’d ask forgiveness for my pride later.

Leon returned. “Hey, you two,” he said. “Knock it off.”

I crossed my arms, hiding my fists beneath them.

“I pity you,” Ben said to Leon, “having to travel across the country with her.” His dimples flashed.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said, but the puzzled look on Leon’s face said otherwise.

My voice cracked. “This is the first I’ve heard . . .”

Leon stuttered. “Mol-ly didn’t tell you?”

“She probably didn’t say anything because it doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“You can’t stay home by yourself,” Leon replied.

“What about Mamm?”

“She’s going,” Leon answered.

“Why would she?” She’d already met Leon’s parents when they came out for the wedding nearly a year ago. There was no reason for her to travel to Montana.

Leon’s face reddened. “You should talk to your Mamm—and sister.”

Ben’s smirk turned into a full-fledged smile. “Another reason I’ll never marry.” He pointed at me and then smiled at Leon. “In-laws.”

I turned away from the two men and began walking as fast as I could toward the path, hurt by both Ben’s rudeness and Leon’s secretiveness. One of the adventuresome barn kittens

darted toward me, and I scooped her up, cradling her like a baby. The kitten struggled to get down, but after a minute gave in and began to purr. I lifted her to my face, stroking my skin with her soft gray fur. I may not have been a dog or horse person, but I'd always loved cats.

Ben's boots pounded behind me. "Bea!"

I let the kitten go and hurried on, trying to forget the handful of times Ben had come to court me in the weeks after Molly and Leon's wedding. I'd been smitten and thought he had been too. I even forgave him for all the years he tormented me through school. Foolishly, I thought we had a future. But then he'd abruptly stopped coming around—without even a hint of explanation.

I struggled up the dusty trail, stubbing my toe on a root. My foot slipped.

"Wait!" he yelled.

I regained my balance and kept moving forward. Reaching the top, I shoved my hands into my apron pockets and persevered, heading toward the front porch as Love fell in step beside me, her wagging tail bouncing off my leg. Mamm and Molly sat side by side on the settee, framed by our old white house.

Molly pointed at me just as Ben reached my side and touched my arm. I turned toward him and saw a pained expression fall across his face when I jerked away.

Leaving Ben behind, I continued on toward the steps. Determined to keep my voice calm but not caring if Ben heard, I asked, "Why didn't you tell me about going to Montana?"

Mamm and Molly exchanged one of their looks, and then Molly said, "When we were just thinking about it, we didn't want to get you all worked up if it wasn't necessary." She glanced at Mamm, who nodded, and then back at me. "Then once we knew for sure, we were waiting until the right time to tell you."

“But you’re leaving next week.”

“True,” Mamm said.

“We’re leaving next week,” Molly added.

“I’m not going,” I answered.

“Bea,” Ben said again.

I whirled around to face him.

“Can we talk?” he pleaded.

“No,” I snapped, and stormed up the steps, past my mother and my sister and into our house, fleeing up the stairs to my room. It was so like Molly to withhold information from me—and so like her to conspire with Mamm to keep it a secret.



Mamm stood in the doorway of my room. “Come get supper. Then we’ll talk.”

“I’m not hungry.” I flopped over on my bed, tucking my journal beneath me.

“Come on down anyway.”

I shook my head. Unlike lots of other Amish families, we rarely traveled. Camping in the Poconos was as far as we’d ever gone—and I was perfectly content with that. “I’m not going to Montana,” I said. “I’ll stay here and see to the farm.”

“That’s all taken care of. Edna is going to do the chores the first week, and then Mervin and Martin will take over when they get back from hunting.”

I’d never felt so humiliated in my life, at least not since Ben dumped me. Edna was my older half sister, and Mervin and Martin were our neighbors. Did the whole county know before I did about the trip to Montana?

“Come on,” Mamm said. “Molly feels horrible.”

I didn’t believe her.

“Bea . . .” Mamm’s voice softened. “I made biscuits.”

I loved Mamm’s baking-powder biscuits.

She added, “And we’re having apple butter.” We’d put up twenty jars of it last week but hadn’t opened one yet.

“Molly wants to apologize,” Mamm said.

I inched my way to the edge of the bed. I *was* hungry. And who was I to thwart an apology? The trip wasn’t Mamm’s idea, I was sure. In fact, it probably hadn’t been her idea not to talk with me about it either. It had to have been Molly’s. Mamm had been deferring to my sister ever since Dat died. “I’ll be down in a minute,” I finally said.

Mamm left, pulling the door closed. I clambered off the bed, straightened my apron and Kapp, and put my journal back in the bottom drawer next to the book of poems, wishing I could escape to the Olde Book Shoppe just outside of Paradise, the village closest to us. It was my favorite place in the entire world. Thankfully the owners of the little store welcomed me to come and browse, even though they knew I couldn’t buy.

But it was a Saturday evening, and they were already closed. They wouldn’t be open tomorrow. Maybe I’d try to go on Monday. Or sometime soon.

I trudged slowly down the stairs to the kitchen, arriving after everyone else was seated. Leon led us in silent prayer as soon as I’d settled on my chair.

Afterward, no one spoke. I stared at my plate while the rest of them dished up the stuffed acorn squash I had prepared earlier that afternoon. Molly passed the platter to me. I took it, staring at the golden flesh filled with ground beef, chopped celery, and baked breadcrumbs. When I placed it in the middle of the table without taking one, no one—not even Molly—commented.

A long moment later, she cleared her throat. “It was my idea to wait to tell you about the trip.”

I kept my head down.

“I knew you wouldn’t want to go,” she said.

“But you didn’t ask.” I raised my head. She remained as pale and drawn as she had been earlier in the afternoon.

“For good reason,” she retorted.

“Girls,” Mamm said, pushing her plate aside.

Leon seemed oblivious to us, gobbling his supper as we spoke.

I muttered, “I thought Molly was going to apologize.”

“Pardon?” my sister croaked.

“Apologize.”

“For what?” Molly asked.

Mamm ducked her head as I said, “For not consulting me . . .” Mamm had said Molly wanted to apologize—but she must have assumed it. Silly me for thinking Molly would.

My sister said, “You’ve never wanted to be consulted before on anything around here.”

I met her eyes. “A trip to Montana is a completely different issue than how many rows of lilies to plant.”

“You’re right. How’s this? I wanted all of us to go together, and I was pretty sure you’d pitch a fit.” Molly stared me down. “Bull’s-eye.” She didn’t flinch. “So I figured the longer we waited to bring it up the better.”

“What did you plan to do? Pack a bag for me and tell me right before it was time to catch the train?”

“Something like that.” She shrugged and spread apple butter on her biscuit.

I reached for the squash, knowing it would do no good to cross Molly now. Mamm must have misunderstood how she felt

about the incident. Molly wasn't sorry at all. In fact, she felt absolutely justified in her behavior.

You would think I'd be used to being treated as an accessory to Molly, as if I were equivalent to her apron or her Kapp, but her attitude still caught me off guard. I'd only stood up to her a few times—I would have to find the strength to do it again. Just not tonight.

I finished filling my plate as Molly put down her fork. "I'm tired," she said.

"Go on to bed," Mamm said. "It's been a long day."

Leon put his fork down on his empty plate, a look of concern on his face.

"I'm fine," Molly said. "I think I'm just feeling overwhelmed with the trip." Her eyes met mine. "And everything else."



Once I finished washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen, I retrieved my books and journal from my room and slipped out the back door.

I shivered as I hurried toward the greenhouse. The welcomed crisp air of the autumn night filled my lungs. The stars shone above me, and Love, roused from beside the barn, yawned and then followed behind. She stopped outside the greenhouse, familiar with my routine. I slipped inside and lit the *Ladann*, placing it on the desk.

I doubted Mamm and Molly would barge into my room at night, but I didn't want to take the chance that they'd see the book I was reading. I put my journal and Bible down and held the book. The brown cover was old and worn, yet soft and comforting.

I'd found a similar volume in the Olde Book Shoppe about a year ago and then started looking for old books of poetry in

the bookmobile. I suspected the librarian now added them to the collection just for me. True, I liked the words and the emotions of the poems. But I also treasured the age of the volumes. I'd always liked old things—furniture, dishes, and quilts—but I especially liked old books.

Mamm had been a teacher before she married, and she saw nothing wrong with reading biographies and an occasional novel, but she'd frown on anything that had to do with romance. I doubted she'd approve of the poetry I read.

I opened my journal. It wasn't that I wanted to be a writer. I had no delusions that I was talented enough. My writing was for myself. And honestly, it was mostly what I copied from other books—Scripture, lines from poems, quotes, words from my dictionary. Words, *Vatts* in our language, were what I loved most.

I folded my hands over my stack of books and bowed my head. I recited the Lord's Prayer and asked for forgiveness for my trespasses again, in a routine way, mostly out of habit, I admit. The word *perfunctorily* came to mind.

What were my trespasses? My only conflicts were with Molly and Ben Rupp. If I didn't have any contact with them, I wouldn't have *any* trespasses. That made me smile. I knew that probably wasn't true, but it certainly felt like it. I added my pride from earlier and then moved on and thanked God for his blessings. Mamm's health. The farm. Plenty to eat. The gray kitten who'd brought me joy just that afternoon in a moment of despair.

God was good. That I knew.

I opened my journal. It was time to address the Montana problem. Most people I knew would be excited to go. A long train ride. The Wild West. Leon's family. But not me. I was a homebody. I didn't like to go anywhere. Staying in Lancaster

County with Edna or a neighboring family would be much better than a long, arduous journey.

I couldn't fathom what would make Mamm let me stay—unless I got a job. Molly had suggested the idea several times in the last few months, as Mamm regained her strength. My sister didn't feel there was enough work to warrant my being home all day.

I started jotting down a list of possible jobs I could find.

*Schoolteacher.* Sure I knew the material, but being in a classroom with thirty students day after day sounded daunting. Plus school had started over a month ago. I was too late for this year, whether I could tolerate the work or not.

Next I wrote down *seamstress*. Mamm and I had made a wedding quilt for Molly, plus I sewed most of our dresses now, but my work was far from spectacular. It was barely passable, in all honesty. My hems were continually ripping and usually had to be repaired by Mamm.

*Shop worker.* I'd have to talk with people, including English people.

*Mother's helper.* That was probably my best bet. I could let my sister-in-law, Nell, know I was looking for some sort of position. She was the best source of advertising I knew.

I doodled a shelf on the page and then wrote *bookstore clerk*. That's what I really wanted to do. Work at the bookstore in Paradise. Shelving books would be my preference, but in a pinch I could talk to an English person if it meant working there. But Albert and Willa Schmidt didn't need any help. It only took two people to run the place.

I closed my journal, determined to contact Nell in the morning, and opened the book to the first page, but found myself reading the first line over and over:

*“It lies not in our power to love or hate . . .”*

The words didn’t mean anything to me, and each time I read them my mind wandered. I’d been procrastinating finding a job because I preferred working at home. But now I couldn’t help but wish I’d found a job sooner. Molly wouldn’t be expecting me to go to Montana if I had.

It was my own fault. It wasn’t that I was lazy—but I certainly did lack my sister’s drive.

I read the first line of the poem once again, but this time Love’s barking interrupted me. I closed the book with a thud.

It was probably Molly coming out to harass me. I gathered up my things, arranging the Bible on the top of the pile, and blew out the lamp. I would read my Scripture passage back in my room. As I opened the door Love’s barking grew louder.

“Who’s there?” I called out. Too frightened to chastise her, I held my breath as footsteps fell alongside the greenhouse. It wasn’t Molly.

A man rounded the corner.

As he pulled off his hat, I realized it was Ben. “Hello,” he said.

I barked as loudly as Love. “You frightened me!”

“Sorry.” His expression turned sheepish. “I wanted to see how you were doing, after this afternoon.”

I took a deep breath, surprised at his consideration.

“Are you going to go to Montana?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“I mean,” he said, “it could be a lot of fun, and . . .”

I must have discouraged him with my facial expression, because he stopped talking. In the silence, I noticed his hair had curled along his forehead and the scent of the crisp night air clung to him.

He smiled then, his eyes shining as he did, and he reached toward me, brushing my arm just as Love barked again.

Heavier footsteps fell on the gravel around the side of the building. Love growled.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

“Bea?” It was one of the twins. “Have you seen Ben?” As he came around the side of the greenhouse, I could see it was Martin, who was a little heavier than Mervin.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said to Ben and then laughed. “Although it was my first guess.”

Ben didn’t respond. I stepped back.

“We need to finish going through the hunting gear,” Martin said. “You’re the one who wanted to get packed a week early.”

“Jah,” Ben said. “It’s better to know what we need now than the night before.” Then he turned toward me. “We’ll walk you back to your house.”

“No,” I said. “I’m fine.”

Ben shook his head.

“Come on,” Martin said, nodding toward Ben. “It means a lot to him.” He grinned.

Ben bristled. I hugged my books.

Martin’s grin faded. “It’s the least we can do after barging over like this.”

There was no reason for me to be rude. I started toward the house. Love followed at my heels, and the boys hurried along behind. Ben caught up, bumping against me. I was caught off guard, and the books tumbled from my arms onto the lawn. Ben scooped them up before I could.

“I’ll take them,” I said, unsettled that my journal was in Ben’s hands.

“No, I’ve got them.” He held the books tight.

Love barked again. As we reached the back door Mamm met us, holding a lamp. “What’s going on?” she said, her eyes focusing on me.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, reaching for my books. Ben handed me my Bible. A peaceful expression covered his face. Then, from the bottom of the stack, my journal. Thankfully, he didn’t open it. He started to hand me the book of poems, but then he pulled it back. I reached for it. He stepped backward.

“Oh, look,” he said, holding it up. “A *Buch* of poetry.”

I grimaced as he flipped it open, stopped, and then read, out loud, “It lies not in our power to love or hate, for will in us is overruled by fate.”

“Bea,” Mamm said, snatching the book quickly, “what sort of foolishness are you reading?”

“Just a book of poems.” I stared down Ben as I spoke. I couldn’t figure him out. Three hours ago he was insulting me, and then a few minutes ago he seemed concerned about my welfare, only to make an absolute fool out of me now.

Things never went smoothly when he was around.

I stepped around Mamm, clutching my Bible and journal.

“Bea!” Ben said as I hurried on, his voice concerned again. “Wait!”

I kept going, determined to get as far away from Ben Rupp as possible.