

A Simple Song

a novel

Melody Carlson



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2013 by Melody Carlson

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

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 Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8007-2225-8

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.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

Katrina knew it was wrong to sing purely for pleasure. Sure, it was permissible to sing a lullaby when rocking a baby to sleep. It was even acceptable to sing simple songs while working in the garden if it helped to get the weeds pulled and if no one was around to hear. Music, she understood from the Amish Ordnung, was mainly meant for worship. But even in worship, one had to be careful because it was sinful to sing too loudly—or too beautifully.

She'd learned that embarrassing lesson more than ten years ago when she'd allowed her voice to soar up joyfully during a hymn at church. Only seven at the time, she believed she was worshipping God with her whole heart. But her spirits plummeted back to earth when she discovered such vibrant singing was both sinful and vain.

“God does not want you to draw attention to yourself like that,” her daed somberly told her afterward. He claimed he had heard her singing above the others even though he was clear over in the men's section on the other side of the barn. “Your voice is not for your own enjoyment, Katrina. And it is vainglory to distract others with it.” His discipline for

her selfish display was being forbidden to sing for an entire month. That was a long month indeed. Because the truth of the matter was, Katrina loved to sing.

Yet Katrina did not feel like singing today. In fact, she barely raised her voice at all during the hymn. And she did not understand why her grandfather had encouraged singing at her grandmother's funeral service. Music was never allowed at funerals, and there would probably be talk of it all over their settlement before the week was out. Even the minister had seemed shocked when Daadi Yoder humbly announced that it was his wife's dying request to sing that particular hymn at her burial. It wasn't even from the *Ausbund* hymnal.

Katrina blinked back tears as she watched the smooth pine box being lowered into the grave. Despite his injured spine, Katrina's father had made the coffin for his mother, starting on it the very same day that she died, just three days ago. Although grieving was meant to be private, Katrina had witnessed her daed crying as he sanded the pine smoother than a coffin need be. However, the tears might have been from the pain in his back too. The poor man had been unable to walk or stand the next two days and had barely been able to get out of bed and dress in his black suit today. She'd witnessed the pain carved into his brow as he'd bowed his head to pray.

With tear-filled eyes Katrina turned away, gazing out over the countryside as she waited for the men to fill in Mammi's grave. Looking past the somber dark line of buggies and horses, her eyes came to rest on the fertile green fields, broken by an occasional fence line or big red barn and plain white house. Dairy cows grazed peacefully over at the Millers' farm. Just an ordinary spring day in Holmes County. Except that Mammi was dead. Katrina still couldn't believe it. Mammi

had always been one of Katrina's favorite people. Katrina would dearly miss her grandmother and her sometimes peculiar ways.

As Katrina listened to the minister finishing his speech by saying how they had all been created from dust and were privileged to return to dust, she realized that he'd hardly said a word about her departed grandmother. It only made Katrina feel worse to think that now she'd never have the chance to know her mammi better. Especially since she'd always suspected there was some untold story attached to Mammi. Although Mammi never spoke of it, Katrina knew that she'd left the English lifestyle long, long ago. Preferring the simple life, she'd been baptized and married Daadi. But the question Katrina had always wanted to ask was, *Why?* Why did she choose one world over another? Now it seemed unlikely that Katrina would ever hear that story.

"Can you believe your grandfather did that?" Cooper asked Katrina. She had chosen to walk back to the farm, hoping it would give her a chance to deal with her emotions, but she was touched when Cooper had offered to go with her. Cooper wasn't officially courting her yet, but some people thought it was just a matter of time. However, Daed would be quick to remind her not to put her buggy in front of her horse. The question of joining the church was supposed to precede any discussion of marriage.

"Did what?" she absently asked.

"Had us sing that hymn." Cooper adjusted the brim of his straw hat, tipping it down to shield his eyes from the noonday sun.

She nodded. "*Ja*, that was odd. But then my grandmother was a bit odd."

“I heard my grandmother saying that you are just like her.” Cooper made a chuckling sound, which he tried to conceal with a cough.

“Just like her?” Katrina turned to peer curiously at him. “I am like an old gray-haired woman, am I?”

He looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s all right. But I would like to know what your grandmother meant by that comment.”

“She meant that when your grandmother was young, she looked and acted like you.”

“Your grandmother knew Mammi back then—back when my grandmother first came to our settlement?”

“Sure.”

Katrina’s curiosity was aroused now. “What else did your grandmother say?”

“Not much.”

“How did she say Mammi looked and acted?” Katrina was not ready to let this go.

“Like you.”

“Cooper.” She shook her head in disappointment, feeling the strings from her white *kapp* swishing against her cheeks. “Is that all you can tell me?”

“That’s all I know of it. If you want more information, perhaps you should speak to my grandmother.”

“Perhaps I shall.” Katrina held her head high as she walked, hoping to send him the message that she was dissatisfied that he hadn’t shared more freely with her.

“See,” Cooper pointed at her. “You’re acting just like your grandmother now. I’ve seen her do that very thing. My mamm would call that ‘acting superior.’”

Katrina felt worried. “Do you think I act superior, Cooper?”

His lips curled in a smile. “I think you *are* superior,” he said quietly.

She glared at him now. “That you would say such a thing!” She stormed off, hurrying on ahead to where her aunt was walking by herself.

“Aunt Alma,” Katrina said as she linked arms with the older woman, “how are you doing on this sad day?”

Aunt Alma looked at Katrina with red-rimmed eyes. She had obviously been crying. “Not too well, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry,” Katrina told her. “I’m sure you will miss your mamm more than I can imagine.”

Aunt Alma nodded. “She was my best friend.”

Katrina knew this was true. Aunt Alma had never married, never left home. And even though Uncle Willis and Aunt Fannie lived in the same house, Aunt Fannie had never been very friendly with Aunt Alma. But then Aunt Fannie was not too friendly with many in their family. Sometimes Katrina wondered why Uncle Willis had married such a woman.

“I was just wishing that I’d known Mammi better,” Katrina admitted. “I never dreamed she would pass away so suddenly.”

Aunt Alma sighed. “Nor did I. She was only seventy-four. Daed is eighty-eight and still as healthy as a horse.”

“Can you tell me more about Mammi?” Katrina said suddenly. “I mean, you knew her so much better than I did. I’d love to learn more about her . . . and how she came to live here. You were a little girl when she came to the settlement, weren’t you?”

“*Ja*. Even though I know Mamm wasn’t my mother by birth, she was the only mamm I ever knew, and she always

treated me as if I were her very own.” She sniffed. “I will be so lonely without her.”

Katrina pulled her arm more snugly around Aunt Alma’s. “Don’t worry,” she told her. “I’ll still come over to visit.”

Aunt Alma looked surprised. “Even though your mammi isn’t here?”

“Certainly!” Katrina smiled at her. “I will come to see you.” Aunt Alma seemed encouraged by this as they turned to walk down the long driveway that led up to the family farm. Many carriages were parking along the drive and over by the big red barn. Already family members were clustered in front of the house. Others were milling about, everyone dressed in black—women huddling together in their white *kapps* and men off to the other side in their yellow straw hats—all waiting to assemble together and share a meal. The dinner was meant to be a celebration of God’s goodness in providing Mammi with eternal life. However, Katrina did not feel like celebrating.

“I would be glad to tell you all I know of Mamm.” Aunt Alma spoke quietly as they came into the yard. “But it will have to be later, Katrina. Fannie expects me to help serve dinner.”

“I know.” Katrina looked over to where men were setting up tables outside. Fortunately the weather was fair today. “I’m working in the kitchen too.”

“Perhaps you can help me to clear out Mamm’s things after dinner. Daed asked me to handle this for him. I’m sure there isn’t much to be done, but we can talk as we work together.”

“Ja,” Katrina eagerly agreed. “I would like to help you.”

Aunt Alma paused by the rosebush near the back door,

turning to look at Katrina. She had fresh tears streaming down her plump, ruddy cheeks. “Your friendship is very dear to me, Katrina. As you know, your daadi is a man of few words. It will be very quiet now.”

Katrina reached out to hug her. “You still have me, Aunt Alma.”

Her aunt nodded, then after adjusting the strings on her *kapp* and drying her face with her hands, she went into the kitchen. Soon they were all busily working to heat up casseroles, fill baskets with rolls, carry out plates and cutlery, and get everything ready for the big dinner. Katrina was thankful to be busy and grateful that her best friend, Bekka, had come over to help as well.

“You girls better eat before there’s nothing left,” one of the older women finally told them. So they filled their own plates with the limited selection of foods, but instead of eating outside with the other women, they cleared a spot on one end of the kitchen table and huddled together, bowed their heads in prayer, and then began to eat.

“I’m sorry about your grandmother,” Bekka told Katrina. “I meant to come by your house and tell you after I heard the news, but we had a big order to package and ship before Saturday.”

“It’s all right,” Katrina assured her. “It’s been very busy here too.”

“I know you were close to your grandmother.” Bekka patted Katrina on the shoulder. “I’m sure you will miss her.”

Katrina simply nodded, breaking a roll and spreading some butter over it. The women were starting to wash dishes now, and the kitchen was getting noisy again. Out the kitchen window, Katrina could see that most of the diners were finishing

up. Children were playing. Adults stood about, conversing. It wouldn't be long until this "celebration" dinner would be over and everyone would go home to their chores. Katrina spied Cooper and his family, who looked like they were getting ready to leave too.

Bekka nudged Katrina with her elbow, tipping her head toward the window. "I heard you and Cooper had a fight today," she whispered.

Katrina wrinkled her nose. "It wasn't a fight."

"I heard you stomped off in anger."

"We simply had a little disagreement," Katrina quietly explained.

"A lovers' quarrel?" Bekka had a teasing glint in her eyes.

"A what?"

Bekka shrugged. "It's something I heard on the computer once . . . an old movie line."

Katrina shook her head. She wondered about how much time her best friend spent on the computer—supposedly working on orders for her family's soap and candle business. Katrina was aware that Bekka watched movies in the little lean-to storage room that doubled as an office. Sometimes Katrina worried that Bekka was a little too worldly. But instead of responding to her friend's silly comment, Katrina stuck her fork into Mamm's special potato salad, taking a big bite as if she were truly ravenous, when in truth, all the food tasted like sawdust today.

"Will you come to the group singing on Sunday night?" Bekka asked as she was getting ready to go home with her family.

Katrina glanced over to where Mamm was just bringing in a new load of dirty dishes. "I don't know, but I don't think

so,” she said quietly. “I doubt that I’m allowed . . . so soon after a death in the family.”

“*Ja*. You’re probably right. But we will miss you.” Bekka hugged her. “See you soon, I hope.”

As Katrina went over to help with the dish washing, relieving Aunt Alma from the task of drying, she tried not to think about how much she would miss the group singing. After all, she reminded herself, how could she want to sing while grieving for Mammi? Besides that, she still felt somewhat conflicted when it came to group singing. As much as she loved the informal socials where young people were allowed to visit and make music together, she always felt guilty at the weekly event. Not only for singing with abandon but for enjoying the music so much.

This was just one more thing about Amish religion that puzzled her—it seemed contradictory. Daed had warned her to be cautious when it came to music, and yet she had been allowed, even encouraged, to go to the group singing. Her first time there, she’d been shocked to discover some of the young people actually brought musical instruments to these gatherings. She’d assumed that the *Ordnung* forbade the use of musical instruments, but some of the young men had pulled out harmonicas and banjos—one fellow even brought an accordion once. She shook her head as she set a small stack of clean white plates in the cupboard. So confusing. Yet as much as she questioned these things, she was afraid to tell her parents. What if they made her stop going?

Katrina had been old enough to attend group singing for only a few months now, but it had quickly become the highlight of her week. Still, she found it hard to believe that group singing was actually allowed in her settlement. It made no

sense on so many levels. Yet she understood that it was related to *rumspringa*—a time when youth were encouraged to discover where they were going spiritually. She also knew that parents secretly hoped their teenagers would form romantic relationships at these gatherings, and that these relationships would lead to courtship, and that courtship would lead to commitment—both in marriage and in the church. It was simply a means to an end.

Mostly Katrina went for the music, although it was at group singing that she had first caught Cooper Miller’s eye. She certainly liked the boy well enough. He was lively and witty and smart—not to mention handsome with his golden curls and sparkling blue eyes. Plus he had a nice, deep singing voice, and to her surprise he seemed to take pleasure in the music as much as she did. However, she concealed her pleasure better than Cooper. Because of her father’s correction, she was cautious about enjoying music in an obvious way. As much as she loved singing with gusto, she still felt uneasy about it afterward. Yes, conflicted described it.

“You’ve done your share of kitchen work,” Aunt Alma told Katrina as she brought Katrina’s younger sister, Sadie, to replace her. “I think Sadie is eager to help now.”

Sadie didn’t look nearly as enthused as Aunt Alma claimed, but Katrina gladly relinquished the tea towel to her. “Don’t break anything,” she warned her, remembering how clumsy Sadie sometimes was at home.

Sadie gave Katrina a smoldering look that would’ve earned her a lecture if Mamm or Daed had seen it. Katrina shook her head, then turned back to Aunt Alma. “Is there anything else I can do to help?” she asked.

“I would appreciate it if you would give me a hand upstairs.”

“Certainly.” Katrina gave Sadie a warning glance, which her sister ignored. Then Katrina followed Aunt Alma through the front room, where Daadi was sitting by the woodstove with some of his men friends, and up the narrow staircase.

The sounds of their footsteps echoed down the upstairs hallway, and for a moment Katrina had the distinct feeling that Mammi was about to appear before them dressed in the same white garments she’d been buried in. Aunt Alma paused at the end of the hall, standing by the door that led into her parents’ bedroom as if she felt something too. Exchanging grim looks, they both just stood there a moment. Then Aunt Alma reached for the doorknob.

Katrina had been in that bedroom only once that she could remember. She’d been about ten, and because Mammi had been sick in bed, Katrina had been invited to come keep her company. But it felt like trespassing to go in there now.

Aunt Alma slowly opened the door, and the squeaking hinge sent a chill down the back of Katrina’s neck as she followed her aunt in. To her relief there was nothing amiss or unusual about this dimly lit room. Like the others in the house, it had well-worn wooden floors and sparse furnishings. Aunt Alma went over to the tall, narrow window next to the bed and pulled the pale muslin curtains open, letting the spring sunlight flood in and making the room more cheerful. Katrina knew that some of Mammi’s more conservative neighbors had questioned her use of curtains, wondering what she had to hide. But the curtains had remained in place for so many years that they looked as if they might fall apart if handled too roughly.

Katrina glanced around, taking in the neatly made bed with one of Aunt Alma’s quilts on top and the straight-backed

wooden chair next to the small, plain dresser. As usual, a few items of clothing hung on pegs near the door. Truly, it seemed Mammi's things could not include much to sort through, although Katrina appreciated being asked to help.

"It's down here." Aunt Alma kneeled down on the faded rag rug that Mammi had crocheted many years ago—another luxury that some of her neighbors would probably question. She bent over, letting out a groan as she stretched to reach something beneath the bed.

"Here, let me help you." Katrina got down beside her, and together they tugged out a small wooden trunk covered with dust. "What is this?"

"It was your mammi's." Aunt Alma sat down on the chair with a tired sigh. "I believe my daed made the box for her shortly after they married. I barely remember it. But this morning he reminded me of it. He said that everything inside of this belonged to her."

Katrina knocked on the lid, seeing that it was nailed tightly shut. "What are we supposed to do with it?"

"Open it."

"How?"

To Katrina's surprise, Aunt Alma produced a hammer that she must have concealed beneath her apron earlier. "With this."

Katrina felt a rush of excitement. "Are we *allowed* to open it?"

Suddenly Aunt Alma glanced at the open bedroom door with a worried look.

"Do you want me to close it?" Katrina asked.

Aunt Alma somberly nodded.

With her curiosity growing, Katrina hurried to the door,

and after peering down the hallway to be sure that Aunt Fannie wasn't lurking nearby, she quietly closed it.

“Daed asked me to deal with this box for him.” Aunt Alma knelt down again, and using the claw end of the hammer, she pried out a nail and then another. Almost afraid to breathe, Katrina watched her aunt with wide eyes until finally she removed the lid and set it aside.