

*What if all we're looking for
is right where we are?*

*Lead
me* **HOME**

a novel

AMY K. SORRELLS

Praise for Amy K. Sorrells

Then Sings My Soul

“Flashing back between the present and [the] past, Sorrells stitches together a beautiful story of family and belief that illustrates the importance of closure and the peace derived from faith. Recommended for readers interested in realistic fiction in the style of Kate Breslin, Kristy Cambron, and Chris Bohjalian.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“*Then Sings My Soul* is the most phenomenal and heartrending story I have ever read. This struck my heart and soul and will remain in my memory forever. The horrific treatment of the Jews during the Holocaust will never be forgotten. Amy K. Sorrells could not have described the events happening with more authenticity . . . than she did. If this story doesn’t ‘get’ you, no others will.”

FRESH FICTION

How Sweet the Sound

“This book will turn your emotions inside out and grip your heart with a clawed fist before pouring acid—and then balm—over the wounds. You have been warned. Now, by all means, go buy this unusually edgy and entirely moving inspirational novel and read it for yourself.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA TODAY*

“Debut inspirational novelist Sorrells opens her story powerfully . . . Sorrells will likely move many readers of faith, and she’s worth watching.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON

“You could read *How Sweet the Sound* because you love a well-told story, but Amy Sorrells delivers so much more. Here the depths of pain mankind can inflict meets the unflinching grace that waits to heal all who’ll come.”

SHELLIE RUSHING TOMLINSON, BELLE OF ALL THINGS
SOUTHERN, AUTHOR OF *HEART WIDE OPEN*

“With poetic prose, lyrical descriptions, and sensory details that bring the reader deep into every scene, Amy K. Sorrells has delivered a lush, modern telling of the age-old story of Tamar. But that’s not all. With a full cast of colorful characters and juxtaposed first-person narratives woven through, this story dives into the Gulf Coast culture of pecan orchards and debutante balls exposing layers of family secrets and sins. In the end comes redemption, grace, forgiveness, and faith, but not without a few scars carried by those who manage to survive the wrath of hardened hearts. Bravo!”

JULIE CANTRELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *INTO THE FREE* AND *WHEN MOUNTAINS MOVE*

“*How Sweet the Sound* is one of those books you want to savor slowly, like sips of sweet tea on a hot Southern day. Aching beautiful prose married with honest, raw redemption makes this book a perfect selection for your next book club.”

MARY DEMUTH, AUTHOR OF *THE MUIR HOUSE*

“Meeting these characters and stepping into their worlds forever changed the contour of my heart. Sorrells’s words

effortlessly rise from the page with a cadence that is remarkably brave and wildly beautiful.”

TONI BIRDSONG, AUTHOR OF *MORE THAN A BUCKET LIST*

“Filled with brokenness and redemption, grit and grace, *How Sweet the Sound* is a heartrending coming-of-age debut about God’s ability to heal the hurting and restore the damaged. Sorrells deftly reminds us that no matter how dark the night, hope is never lost. Not if we have eyes to see.”

KATIE GANSHERT, AUTHOR OF *WILDFLOWERS FROM WINTER AND WISHING ON WILLOWS*

“A stirring tale of loss and redemption. Amy Sorrells will break your heart and piece it back twice its size.”

BILLY COFFEY, AUTHOR OF *WHEN MOCKINGBIRDS SING*

“A daring and enchanted story, Amy K. Sorrells’s *How Sweet the Sound* beckons readers to a land of pecan groves, bay breezes, and graveyard secrets rising up like the dead on judgment day.”

KAREN SPEARS ZACHARIAS, AUTHOR OF *MOTHER OF RAIN*

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A M Y K . S O R R E L L S



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Lead Me Home

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Lead Me Home is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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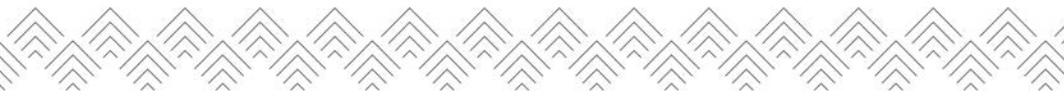
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All at once, the Reverend James Horton understood why Frank Whitmore had killed himself. He pushed the manila file folder back across the desk of his office at Sycamore Community Church. Across from him sat George Kernodle, the sides of his burgeoning belly pressed tight against the arms of the old chair, the flesh of his neck falling over the starched collar of his shirt and striped silk tie.

“I’m sorry, James. I’ve done all I can to keep this from happening.”

The red splotches on Kernodle’s jowly cheeks and the sweat he wiped off his brow and upper lip did not seem to indicate much sympathy, and James’s thoughts wandered

back to Frank Whitmore. James had heard about the circumstances of Whitmore's demise through Charlie Reynolds, the pastor of the Methodist church, who had presided over the funeral and arrangements.

Whitmore's wasn't the first suicide among farmers in the area, the arrival of corporate farms having caused many already-ragged farmers to bend, break, and foreclose, unable to compete with the massive machinery, the demand for genetically modified crops that withstood weeds but sucked the life from the land, and the giant dairies that used heifers for two years and sent them to the slaughterhouse. What broke Whitmore, however, was not the nearby commercial dairy offering public tours and their own label of milk selling for eight dollars per half-gallon (compared to the \$1.60 per gallon he received from the co-op), but rather a particularly nasty storm that knocked out the power on his farm. A widower of nearly a decade, Whitmore had isolated himself so much over the years that no one knew about his predicament. No one came to help him, and he did not ask for help. So when the power company indicated it would take over forty-eight hours to restore the power, Whitmore, faced with losing most of his milkers to the mastitis that would set in before then, shot thirty of his best cows and then himself, sparing them all from the misery.

The whole scenario bothered James for many reasons, not the least of which was that Whitmore had not felt like he'd had anyone to ask for help. The cows he hadn't shot were going to be moved to the Burden dairy farm across

the fields from where James and his daughter, Shelby, lived. Though well aware that sowing seeds of Scripture and tending proverbial sheep did not make him a farmer, James had long watched the work and unpredictable nature of farming through the windows. Tucked between the Burden dairy and Stuart Granger's hog farm, James and his wife had been close to Laurie Burden and her two sons until time and seasons and tragedies came between them, until all that remained was an occasional smile and nod if they happened to see each other in the aisles of the IGA. Laurie's two boys were mostly grown and helped run things at the dairy, but they had enough of their own problems, and he was concerned about how they'd take on the added work of Whitmore's surviving herd. Then again, farmers had a way of figuring out and making do. Like barren fields each spring, just when he thought they had nothing left to give, they gave some more.

"The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away," James thought, reminded of the passage from Job.

"Are you alright?" Kernodle asked, jolting James back to the conversation.

Though he was seated, the room seemed to sway, and James gripped the arms of his chair. "How soon?"

"The auction will be Labor Day. That gives you about a month—"

"Less than a month. That's three weeks."

"Okay, three weeks. You have three weeks to tidy things up, notify your congregants, finish whatever you need to finish."

“How does one auction off a church? I mean, who *buys* a church?”

George struggled to shift his weight, and then he cleared his throat. “Might not be another church who buys it. Might be someone interested in using the land to start over. Build something new.”

“And tear down over a hundred and fifty years of history? George—you have to know the carvings and stained glass alone are worth thousands. At the very least this building is a piece of history.” James felt his throat thicken, and his eyes burned. He was determined not to become visibly emotional in front of Kernodle, but any warmth the two had shared over the years had long ago curdled under the strain of the loan applications and reapplications, the refinancing and now the default of the account.

“I’m sorry. I wish there was something more we could do.” Kernodle hoisted himself up out of the chair, picked up the folder, and stuffed it into his leather attaché. Sweat began to discolor the top edge of his collar.

James knew he should stand and offer the man his hand, but in that moment he could not. Surely Seraiah and Zephaniah hadn’t been exactly warm to King Nebuchadnezzar when he and his pals destroyed the Temple in 2 Kings. Granted, in James’s case, there had been no forced famine, no siege, no one breaking in and scattering his congregants across the countryside. There had been no fires set, no plundering of the church’s few possessions, no physical harm to blame for the church’s demise. But after spending over twenty years in

ministry, he couldn't help thinking up biblical parallels to situations he found himself in, whether he wanted to or not.

Though he felt the familiar urges of the Holy Spirit to love the enemy who sat before him, and to be kind, at the moment it felt a whole lot better to flat-out dislike George Kernodle. Although if he were honest, he'd admit Kernodle didn't deserve all the blame.

The decline of Sycamore Community Church was well under way by the time problems with the bank arose. A few years back, Gertrude Johnson noticed a small crack in the basement wall during the covered dish supper they'd had after the Palm Sunday service. By fall, the crack had grown into a fissure extending down to the floor and across the entire length of the room. Three assessments and estimates later from local foundation repair contractors declared the century-and-a-half-old foundation was not only cracked, but dangerously and precariously shifted. They'd pointed out bowed walls on the inside and extensive evidence on the outside, each symptom adding thousands to the structural repair required.

For generations, the building had been a trustworthy physical sanctuary, the sturdy brick and mortar taken for granted, so much so that James had been acutely aware of exactly where to step as he walked down the aisle each Sunday so as to avoid the creak of an ancient, warping floor-board. But even as he preached and they had their potlucks and weddings and baptisms and funerals, water seeped silent into cracks in window casings. Tree roots pushed and shoved

through the soil and into the footings, weakening them. A shoddy roof replacement a decade before had neglected to upgrade the gutters and downspouts, so one whole side of the foundation had to be removed and replaced. One hundred and fifteen thousand dollars later, the church had a sturdy base and a generous, though ultimately insurmountable, loan from the bank.

What choice did they have? James and the elders knew debt was wrong, but the work had to be done. The elders pitched a fund-raising campaign to anyone they could think of—descendants of charter members, local and regional businesses, organizations supporting small-town churches. Molly, with the help of the vivacious Lizzie Bailey, had organized a community barbecue. A few children had tried to sell lemonade from stands on seldom-traveled country roads. But even with all that, they'd only raised \$4,800. The bank had been willing to give them a low-interest rate and stretch out the payments, but contractors were not partial, not even to near-bankrupt churches.

The problem was not that people did not care about Sycamore Community Church. The problem was the same of any small town. The congregation, strongest in the Eisenhower era, had remained vibrant during the decades that followed. After James took over in the early 1990s, it had grown steadily for the first years he'd been there. But then, sometime around 2010 if he had to guess, attendance had been stagnant, eventually dwindling severely. The attendance the previous Sunday had been fourteen. It had started out

as thirteen, which despite the fact he was not superstitious always made James cringe. Thankfully, Wilma Petticrew had shuffled in late, so the number rose to fourteen. There wasn't anyone to blame for this either, anyone except himself for not being more charismatic, not having the foresight to envision the postmodern pilgrimage of parishioners from the pews. Farms foreclosed. Families moved away. And the rest—if they hadn't given up on church altogether—were drawn like bugs to a streetlamp to the lights and sounds of the megachurch down the interstate. Congregants aged and died off until tithes—even from those willing to give their 10 percent—were nearly nonexistent, and the interest from a handful of aging endowments barely paid for the light bill, let alone allowed enough of a salary for James and Shelby to eat.

Even with the foundation fixed, the parking lot was full of horrendous chuckholes, and the velvet offering bags were threadbare to the point that just last week one busted open when a well-intentioned grade-schooler plunked in a plastic bag full of pennies he'd collected, and which had gone rolling every which way across the warping oak floors. And now, on the afternoon of September 4, he would be forced to pull the door of the church closed for good.

God's will and sovereignty aside, the loss of the church was one more death in James's life, creating the same sort of despair Whitmore must have felt when he shot each of the cows he'd raised between the eyes and then held the gun to his own head.

All that work.

All that blind trust.

All that faith in the weather bringing rain after drought and warmth after frost, of trying to be still and know somehow the Lord, Jehovah-Jireh, would come through at the last minute.

James wondered how the suicide rate of farmers compared to that of pastors.

He tried to force a congenial smile, but before he could extend his hand, Kernodle turned and ambled stiffly out of his office.

Moments later, Bonnie Thompson rushed in. “Are you alright, Reverend? Mr. Kernodle, he looked positively beside himself.”

“Have a seat, Bonnie.” James motioned toward the chair Kernodle had vacated.

Bonnie, the wife of Hank Thompson, owner of the local hardware store, never spoke ill of anyone. Besides the seasons, she’d been one of the few predictable things in James’s life—and Shelby’s, for that matter. Ever since Molly died, Bonnie had been there picking up slack when he was too depressed to make heads or tails of expense and budget reports, taking care of the weekly bulletin, taking care of most everything, really, so he’d have time to focus on what he did best, which was his sermons. She’d taken care of the accounting, too.

“There’s nothing more the bank can do for us.”

Bonnie sighed, then pulled her mint-green cardigan across

her chest as if bracing herself against a gust of wind. She had a plain face, softened further by a generous application of loose powder. She wore her hair rolled and set in a style that reminded him of his grandmother. Folks could easily pass by her in a store or on a sidewalk having no idea she was the sort of person the Lord used to help hold men together when their worlds collapsed.

“We’ve no more bonds, no more savings, and we owe too much already for another extension. And you know I can’t possibly give another sermon on tithing. The few folks who are left don’t have anything else to give.”

A tear etched a trail down Bonnie’s powdered face. “I know,” she said as she pulled a handkerchief from her skirt pocket. “I can’t believe it’s come to this.”

“Me either.” James stood and walked to the window. The familiar *thump-thump* of a car woofer approached, and eventually Silas Canady’s tricked-out late-model pickup truck appeared. The ginormous off-road tires turned slowly, and just in case someone might miss it coming down the street, bright-red-and-orange flame graphics gleamed on the shiny black paint of the hood and sides. As the truck rolled by, Silas tossed a cigarette butt onto the church’s lawn.

In the park across the street, three mothers stood and talked while pushing their toddlers on the swings. Older children swung themselves across the monkey bars, slid down the slides, and he could hear them squeal as they spun themselves dizzy on the rusty merry-go-round. The park had been a popular place on Sunday afternoons when the church was in

its prime, when the pews were filled in the morning and the picnics afterward lasted deep into the afternoon.

James put his head in his hands and let the tears that had threatened as Kernodle had sat in front of him flow freely. It wasn't the first time Bonnie had seen him weep. But it wasn't as if it was a usual occurrence, either. He was grateful she was not uncomfortable around a weeping man, that she would sit there and keep him company without trying to fill the awkward moment with pointless assurances.

This was a time to weep if there ever was one.

And he was grateful she allowed him that.

A Note from the Author

Each of my books begins with an idea, and most often, from something broken in the world that moves my heart. In the case of *Lead Me Home*, my heart was (and still is, in many ways) broken for small churches, small towns, and the overlooked among us—like Eustace. A second major inspiration for *Lead Me Home* was my cousin's dairy farm. Just like the Burdens, my cousin and his family have a sustainable dairy farm with about sixty cows they've been milking twice a day, every day, without fail, for decades. The county next to them once had more than a dozen farms just like theirs that have gone out of business because of suburban sprawl and giant, industrial dairy farms with which they could not compete. This drastic decline of small, sustainable farms continues today.

It's not easy being small these days. It's not easy being the church these days, either. Many small towns, independent farms, and churches are dying, just like in the fictional town of Sycamore, Indiana. Many folks like James and Noble

wonder how they could possibly be in the right place. Many feel insignificant—even invisible—because of how they compare to the bigger churches, farms, and dreams all around them. This feeling isn't limited to small towns, either. In the suburbs and the cities and indeed everywhere, folks struggle to feel like they matter when every sound bite, every social media outlet, everything that saturates our senses says that bigger, louder, stronger, smarter, more beautiful, more independent, and more trendy is better.

The gospel of Jesus Christ stands in contrast to all of that. Jesus came for the weak and the small. For the widow and the orphan. For the deaf and the mute. For the blind and the lame. He came for the poor and insignificant. He whispered into the ears of sinners and made them new. He shook the crowds and moved the masses and fed the thousands with truth and gentleness and peace. He did not demand allegiance but allowed questions. He did not deny thieves but embraced them when they repented. He loved the unlovable, spoke to the unspeakable, moved the immovable, and justified the unjust. And Jesus, in his holiness, was—and is—the furthest thing from trendy in this broken world.

If I could sum up this story with two verses from the Bible, they would be Revelation 2:4 (AMP), “But I have *this* [charge] against you, that you have left your first love [you have lost the depth of love that you first had for Me],” and Psalm 16:6 (NIV), “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.” I hope that after reading this book, you will look at the town,

home, and family where God has put you with new eyes, that you will see that the sunsets are beautiful right where you are, and that you will realize that no matter how big or small your church, the one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord. And I hope you will realize that when God seems to say no to a specific dream, he may be saying yes to the ones that matter most. As James says, “Few of us end up where we hope to be, but somehow we all end up where we ought to be.” The boundary lines we come up against in our lives are there for a reason, because God loves us and knows the deepest desires of our hearts.

And about the little blue butterfly, the endangered Karner blue, three of which appear in the story: I came across the details of the Karner while researching Eustace’s butterfly-collecting hobby and learned that, according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, “Over the past century, the number of Karner blue butterflies has declined by at least 99 percent across their historic range.” The report goes on to say, “The single most important factor causing the decline of the Karner blue butterfly across its range has been the loss of habitat. . . . The Karner blue butterfly’s habitat is very specific, and the butterfly is unable to adapt to these changes in its environment. Habitat loss, isolation of populations, combined with the extremely small size of many of the remaining population, puts these populations at high risk of ‘winking out.’” I believe we would be wise to look at the way nature reacts to changes in the world, not only because we have a responsibility to our environment, but because perhaps the

demise of certain species mimics the demise of certain aspects of our culture, and indeed, the spread of the gospel itself, were it not for the ultimate sovereignty of our God.

And finally, above all, there is grace.

Grace for James and Shelby.

Grace for Noble and Laurie.

Grace for Eustace.

Grace for Gertrude and Jack, Silas and Cade.

And there is grace abundant for each of us who chooses to believe.