

Love  
Still  
Stands

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*To Tim, Erin, and Nicholas  
Love always*

*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*

ROMANS 12:12 (NIV)

*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power  
is made perfect in weakness.*

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9 (NIV)

## *The New Hope Families*

<b>Luke &amp; Leah</b> <i>Shirack</i> William Joseph Esther & Martha (twins) Jebediah Bethel Graber (Leah's sister)	<b>Thomas &amp; Emma</b> <i>Brennaman</i> Eli Rebecca Caleb Lilah Mary & Lillie Shirack (Emma's sisters)	<b>Benjamin &amp; Irene</b> <i>Krepp</i> Hiram Daniel Adah Melinda Abram Joanna Jonathan
<b>Silas &amp; Katie</b> <i>Christner</i> Jesse Simon Martin Phoebe Elam Hannah Lydia Sarah Elijah Christner (Silas's brother) Ida Weaver (Katie's sister)	<b>Tobias &amp; Edna</b> <i>Daugherty</i> Jacob Michael Ephraim Nathaniel Margaret Isabel  <b>Aaron &amp; Mary</b> <i>Troyer</i> Matthew Molly Reuben Abraham & Alexander (twins) Ella Laura	<b>Peter &amp; Cynthia</b> <i>Daugherty</i> Rufus Enos Deborah Rachel John Mark Phillip Ruth Naomi

## Preface

An author's imagination grows in fertile ground. The New Hope, Missouri, of *Love Still Stands* is a fictitious town that sprang from my imagination. The idea that a town would reject a group of Amish families blossomed from a simple "what if?" What if they weren't met with open arms? Let's be perfectly clear, however. I don't know of any real town in Missouri where this has happened. I do know there have been cases of "Amish bashing" in other places, which led me to the premise of this story. This storyline gave me the opportunity to explore what bigotry does to its victims, but also what love, kindness, forgiveness, and Christ-like turning of the other cheek do for bigots. While I was writing this story, my husband and I rented a car and drove 1,500 miles on the highways and back roads of Missouri. Everywhere we were met with the lovely hospitality of the great Show-Me State. My thanks to the kind folks in Jamesport who shared their observations and experiences with us. The same in Bolivar, Stockton Lake State Park, and Branson. My husband is really sorry he scared the Park Ranger with his Fox 29 TV cap. We truly enjoyed our stay.

Also a word of thanks to Cathy Richmond, who kindly shared tips about physical therapy with me. Any mistakes in this arena are mine and mine alone. That also holds true for the descriptions of the Amish way of life. Please remember that every Amish district has its own set of rules, the New Hope Amish included.

I hope you enjoy this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. As always, my thanks to Harvest House Publishers, Kathleen Kerr, Mary Sue Seymour, and the multitude who have helped me on this writing journey. Tim, thank you for being my driver, traveling companion, best friend, and the guy willing to do the talking when the introvert in me chickens out.

Let all the glory be to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## Chapter 1

Bethel Graber longed for the fresh air of a buggy ride. She craned her aching neck from side to side, trying to ignore the pain that radiated from her leg after hours of watching the white lines on the asphalt whip toward her and then vanish underneath the van. Pain accompanied her daily now. Crammed between her nieces' car seats, she had no room to evade it. Instead, she breathed through it, inhaling stale air scented with diapers and little-boy sweat. The girls' chubby cheeks and sleepy smiles made her want to pat their rosy faces, but she didn't dare for fear they'd wake and the squalling would begin again.

The drive across southern Kansas to a tiny town in Missouri called New Hope should've taken under five hours, but the children weren't used to traveling in a car. Poor William suffered from car sickness and Joseph needed to stop for the restroom at every gas station along the way. Fortunately, their driver seemed to have a limitless supply of patience. Bethel, on the other hand, had plumbed the depths of hers.

"Are we getting close?" She leaned forward to make herself heard over the rumble of the van's engine. She didn't want to wake Jebediah either. The youngest of Leah and Luke's brood had cried a good part of the first two hours of the drive. Blessed silence, indeed. "Shouldn't we be getting close?"

"You're as bad as the *kinner*." Leah rubbed her eyes. Her older sister had managed to keep her apron spotless and her chestnut hair

smooth around her crisp prayer *kapp*, but dark smudges under her eyes made her look bruised and weary. “We’ll be there when we get there.”

“Your sister’s right.” Luke adjusted his arms around Joseph and William, who slept burrowed against their *daed*’s chest, one seated on either side of him. “But having made this trip a few times now, I can tell you we’re about to go around a bend in the road, turn right, and make our way down a long, bumpy dirt road. At the end, you’ll see our new home.”

*Our new home. Our new start.*

Leah’s nose wrinkled, and her lips turned down in a thin line. She faced the window as if interested in the landscape, more and more different from the flat plains they’d left behind. Bethel did the same, anxious for a glimpse of this new home. Towering oak, hickory, and sturdy spruce trees vied for space along the road, which seemed to rise and fall as the terrain became more hilly. The trees were dressed in autumn colors, their orange and red leaves brilliant against a radiant blue sky overhead. The spaces between the trees had their own decorations, mostly in yellows, purples, and pinks—brown-eyed susans, sunflowers, sweet clover, morning glories, and tall thistle that hadn’t given up their colorful blooms to autumn weather just yet. In comparison, her memories of Bliss Creek already seemed drab.

“It’s pretty, Daed. It’s pretty, isn’t it?” Yawning widely, Joseph wiggled from Luke’s grasp and sat up. “I can’t wait to see the house. Are the horses there? And the chickens and the pigs?”

“Hush, son, you’ll wake your *bruders* and *schweschders*.” Luke tipped Joseph’s straw hat forward on his head. “The livestock will be there, as I told you before—three times—and your clothes and the furniture. It’ll all be waiting for us to unpack and start working.”

His gentle tone and good-natured smile endeared her brother-in-law to Bethel as it had many times in the past. Luke was a good man, a good husband, and a good father. Leah didn’t seem to register her husband’s words or her son’s question. She returned to her knitting, the needles clacking, the blue and gray yarn sliding smoothly between



them. God had showered the woman with blessings. Yet she seemed only to notice the half-empty glass.

Bethel tried to stymie her thoughts. They served no purpose. God made her a teacher; her sister, a mother. She tried, as always, to ignore the niggling thought that attempted to worm its way into her mind. *If only it were reversed.*

*Stop it.* She should be thankful for the short time she'd been honored to be in the classroom. Still, it hurt to think about her new circumstances. Now, with her injuries, she had neither children of her own nor scholars to teach and mold and shape.

God's plan?

*What is it, Gott? What is Your plan?* Bethel slapped a hand to her mouth, even though she hadn't spoken aloud. *Sorry, Gott, I'm sorry. I don't have to know Your plan for me. I have faith in You. You have a plan.*

Sitting up straighter, she smoothed her apron, determined to be content with her lot. Better she should focus on helping Leah, easing her burden, with five children and only the boys old enough to be of any help. They could weed or gather eggs and pick vegetables in the garden, but the laundry, sewing, cooking, and cleaning? Leah had her hands full. Somehow, Bethel would help.

"When we get there, I can get the kitchen clean so we can start unpacking pots and pans." Bethel offered an olive branch in the unspoken fray. "That way you can make up the pallets of blankets. Tomorrow when the furniture is unloaded, we can start putting together the beds."

"It only looks pretty now, Joseph. The leaves will drop soon, and the snow will start." Her tone soft, almost resigned, Leah spoke as if she hadn't heard Bethel's offer. Her gaze didn't waver from her knitting. "We won't have time to plant a garden, much less harvest anything before it's too cold. We should've waited until spring to move."

"The bishop decided." Luke's patient tone mirrored the one he'd used with his seven-year-old son. "We're a little late, but we can still plant winter wheat and rye."

"You said yourself the later we plant, the poorer the yield—"

“There. There’s the turn.” Luke cut his *fraa*’s sentence short. He leaned in front of her and pointed. “Turn right, Michael.”

“I know. This isn’t my first time, remember?” Michael Baldwin, Luke’s favorite driver and a friend who would be missed when he returned to Bliss Creek, navigated onto the dirt road with ruts so deep the van bounced and rocked. “Whoa, easy does it.”

They slowed to a crawl. To a speed more appropriate for a buggy. Bethel smiled at the thought. She wished again she *were* in a buggy. Then she could take the time to enjoy this new scenery, to smell the smells of her new home and hear the birds that surely perched in these trees. She needed this new beginning. She needed to leave behind the images of the furious storm that sent school desks flying through the air. She needed to forget the sounds of the screaming children on the day her career as a teacher had ended and her life on damaged legs had begun.

“For now, Joseph is right. It *is* pretty. And I like snow. We had plenty of that in Kansas too.” She managed to keep defiance from her voice. “It’s a good new start.”

Her brother-in-law grinned at her. It made him appear much younger than his thirty years. Under the brim of his straw hat tufts of his walnut-colored hair stuck out, making him look like Joseph, a boy enjoying an adventure. Bethel grinned back. She saw her hope and excitement mirrored in his face.

“You’re right. A new start.” He leaned toward Leah as if he would touch her, but he didn’t. She didn’t look up from her knitting, but her frown deepened. “Look out there, Leah. That’s the land we’ll farm in the spring. We’ll have a bountiful crop and all will be well.”

Still, Leah didn’t look up. The van rounded another bend in the road. Bethel strained to see the house and the barn and the land that would be their new home, their new start.

“What’s that?” Luke scooted forward on his seat. “What is that on the front of the house?”

Bethel saw the semi that held all their belongings first. She saw the animal trailers that held the horses and the buggies. Then she saw the house and the reason for Luke’s dismay.

At first she couldn't understand. This house? For this place they'd driven almost four hundred miles? Someone had shattered the glass in every window, first and second floor. Neon orange spray paint marred the once white facade, the wide strokes winding their way between the shattered windowpanes in wide, arching loops like a snake in search of its prey. The loops ended in words written in huge letters. The edges of the windows had been blackened by fire that appeared to have burst out from the inside. Trash littered the porch and the front door dangled from its hinges.

None of them spoke, the silence filled only with their ragged breathing.

Luke withdrew his arm from around William. The little boy rolled away, then sat up, his eyes wide at the abrupt awakening. "Daed?"

"We're here." Luke's tone had lost its gentleness. His jaw worked as he undid his seatbelt as if to get out. "Stay in the van—all of you."

Michael looked up at the rearview mirror. "Hang tight. We're almost there."

"I have to—"

"We're almost there, Luke."

"What's it say?" Bethel managed to breathe the words even though she had no air in her lungs. Their precious new start had gone up in flames, it seemed. "Those orange words. I can't tell what it says."

"It says *Go home*." Leah's voice barely rose above a whisper. "This is our new start?"

## Chapter 2

Elijah Christner shifted from one foot to another. He breathed in and out. *Steady.* The moment had come. The dusty white van would arrive in minutes, chugging toward him over the pitted dirt road. Why he felt so responsible for the condition of his friend Luke's new home, he couldn't say. He'd only arrived himself. The damage to the façade had been shocking, but the inside contained far worse damage. Whether it could be salvaged or should be razed remained a question in his mind. The Shiracks, like the Christners, had come a long way for this new start. They might have to dig deeper for it, work harder, start from scratch. He pushed the thought away. A little spray paint and an indoor bonfire couldn't stop the likes of this load of Plain folks from doing what they set out to do.

"You want me to break the news?" Silas chewed on a blade of grass, his beard, more silver than blond now, bobbing. "I don't mind."

"I'll do it. Luke's my friend." Elijah forced himself to smile at his older brother. "You know Luke. He'll take it in stride, like he does everything else. It's Leah..."

Silas shook his head. "It's not our place to judge."

"I'm not judging—"

"Here they are."

In a cloud of dust and a spurt of gravel, the van rolled to a stop. Luke climbed out first. He leaned into the vehicle and exchanged

muted words with Leah. After a moment, he turned, his face a mask of contained emotion, and strode toward Elijah and Silas. Leah got down on her own and then released the little ones, who were strapped into car seats. The older boys jumped out and raced about like foals set free from their stalls while the twins tottered on short legs, unsteady from the hours in the van.

“What happened here?” Luke stomped toward the house. “How did this happen?”

“We don’t know.” Silas spoke before Elijah had a chance. His big brother did that often. One of the challenges of being the youngest of ten siblings. Everyone spoke for him. “It was like this when Elijah arrived to check on the livestock. He came to find me right away.”

Luke turned to Elijah. “Is it as bad inside?”

Elijah nodded. No sense sugarcoating it.

Kicking aside empty soda cans and beer bottles, Luke and Silas trudged up the steps. From the back they looked like twins with their blue cotton shirts, suspenders, broad backs, and black pants. Her tone stern, Leah admonished the boys to watch the girls and followed.

Elijah started to go with her, but movement in the van caught his gaze. He’d forgotten Bethel had made the journey with her sister. He pulled the sliding door wider. Bethel sat on the backseat, struggling to pull metal crutches from the cargo area behind the seat. He leaned in. “Let me help you.”

“I can get them.” Her smile, with its accompanying dimples, softened the brusqueness of her words. She’d always been quick with a smile. “But *danki*.”

“Not from that angle, you can’t.”

Ignoring her protestations, he jogged around to the back and jerked open the double doors. Boxes of clothes, a cooler, and a large picnic basket crowded the small space. The crutches were wedged to one side. Bethel twisted, her arm over the back of the seat, her face contorted with pain. She continued to tug, but to no avail.

“I’ve got it.” Elijah tugged from his end. Bethel let go. A crutch flew up and smacked him in the nose. “Ouch! *Ach*.”

"I'm so sorry!" Bethel's fair skin turned beet red. "I didn't mean to hit you. I'm sorry."

"It's not a fatal wound. It's just a little bump." Rubbing his nose with one hand, Elijah retrieved the crutches with the other and trotted back to the side door. "Let me help you out."

"That's nice of you, but I can manage." An undercurrent of stubborn insistence ran through the polite words. "I don't need help."

"It's too big a step."

Without thinking he put his hands on her waist and swung her gently from the van. Their faces were level for a brief second. He saw something in her expression he couldn't read at first, and then it squeezed his heart. A deep sadness resided in Bethel Graber's face.

He hesitated. Her blue eyes widened. Suddenly aware of her clean scent and her slender waist under his fingers, he set her on her feet on a shaggy carpet of grass that needed to be mowed.

He'd never been this close to her before. It surprised him to find she stood nearly as tall as he did. Not many women did. Her blonde hair shone at the edges of her kapp. The red dissipated from her face, leaving her fair skin even whiter than before. Lips pressed together, she ducked her head, grabbed the crutches he'd leaned against the van, and thrust them under her arms.

After a second or two, she met his gaze. "Danki." She swung the crutches forward in an awkward gait, her right leg dragging. "Don't do that again. Ever."

"I was only trying to help." Baffled by the emotion he'd seen in her face, Elijah struggled for words. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not an invalid."

It wasn't his touch that offended her—he couldn't take time to contemplate why that realization pleased him—it was the idea that he thought she needed his help. Everyone needed help sometimes. It wasn't a sign of weakness, only humanity. "That doesn't mean you don't need—"

The sound of sirens in the distance interrupted his response. Just as well. She obviously meant what she said. No helping. Elijah would find it hard to comply with that order. Having spent the last few years

caring for his parents made helping second nature for him. Bethel's pretty face wouldn't make it any easier. Her disability didn't touch the loveliness of her eyes or her smile—even though she seemed so much sadder than when he'd seen her at prayer services and the singings. Just as he was.

"Is that an ambulance?" She pulled herself from the shadow of the van and peered at the car racing toward them. The uneven ground caused her to stumble. Elijah lifted his hand to help her, but then let it drop. No helping. "Is someone hurt?"

"No. The semi driver called the sheriff's office on his cell phone." Elijah put his hand to his forehead instead, cupping his fingers against the sun as he tried to see the car racing toward them. "There's more damage inside the house. The driver said it needed to be reported."

"What kind of damage?"

"It looks like someone tried to set fire to the place."

Her audible intake of breath made him wish he'd softened the words a little.

The car slammed to a stop. A grizzled-faced man in a brown uniform and shiny patent leather boots exited the driver's side. He left the car running, the sirens blaring, and the door open. Hand on the gun hanging from his hip, he strode toward them. "Who are you people and what are you doing on the Johnson property?"