

*Love's Journey
Home*

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*To Tim, Erin, and Nicholas
Love always*

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.

PSALM 37:7

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

ROMANS 5:3-5

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Chapter 1

Helen Crouch squeezed by a couple busy scolding a small boy who appeared to have a green lollipop stuck in his golden curls. Smiling, she angled her way through the growing crowd along the parade route. She could remember when Edmond had been that age. He'd been so sweet and anxious to please as he rummaged for eggs in the chicken coop or helped her pluck weeds in the garden. Ten years and a *rumspringa* later she could see little of that child in her only son. Inhaling the mingled aromas of popcorn and cotton candy, she held her hand to her damp forehead to block out a July sun that peeked through glowering clouds overhead. Maybe Edmond had slipped into the crowd to find Emma and Thomas for her.

Not likely, given a recent spate of disappearing acts by a sixteen-year-old apparently bent on squeezing every last drop from his running around.

“*Mudder*, look, funnel cakes.” The note of entreaty in Naomi’s voice told Helen her oldest daughter wanted to ask, but knew better. Their egg and jelly money wouldn’t stretch to treats—not this month. “They smell so good.”

“Not as good as chocolate-marshmallow cookies.” Helen patted her daughter’s shoulder. The cookies were Naomi’s favorite, which was why Helen had thought to pack them in the basket along with the sausage,

cheese, and biscuits. “Let’s find Emma and Thomas. They’ll have saved a space for us.”

“Helen, over here!” As if she’d heard Helen’s words, Emma Brenneman’s high voice carried over the many citizens of Bliss Creek who’d gathered, despite the threat of an impending thunderstorm, to see the Fourth of July parade of area high school marching bands, cowboys on decked-out horses, John Deere farm implements, and fancy cars from the dealership on I-35. “It’s getting crowded already. We managed to save a shady spot!”

“We’re coming.”

After glancing back to make sure her two younger daughters were keeping up with Naomi, Helen dodged a knot of *Englisch* teenagers who crowded Bliss Creek Park’s edge. They were busy examining a bag of firecrackers, looks of delight on their acne-dotted faces. She stubbed her toe in the crack of the sidewalk and stumbled. One of them grinned, his braces glinting in the sun. She forced a return smile. “So sorry. Can we get around you?”

The sea parted and they trotted through.

Why did she apologize? Habit? In another habit she’d never been able to break, Helen looked beyond Emma to make sure Thomas accompanied his wife. Her friend’s husband stood in the shade of a stout elm, his back turned. He talked to another man, equally tall and lean. Helen picked up her pace and narrowly missed colliding with a double stroller and its occupants—rosy-cheeked twins dressed in matching red, white, and blue sundresses and bonnets. “Sorry. So sorry.”

Her daughters tried to hide their giggles behind their hands, as they tended to do when she made a blunder. “Mudder!”

“Hush, girls.” She turned to Emma, glad Thomas hadn’t seen her latest misstep. As if it mattered. He seemed engrossed in a conversation that held words like *harvest* and *wheat* and *rain* and something about a well having gone dry. Indeed, Thomas had his hands full, it seemed. Helen focused on Emma. “Have you seen Edmond?”

“He’s not with you?” Emma ran one hand over a crisp apron that did little to hide her swollen belly while she grabbed little Caleb with the other to keep him from escaping into the street. “Don’t worry. Knowing Edmond, he won’t want to miss the fried chicken, home-made potato chips, and pecan-chocolate-chip cookies we brought to share with y’all. How’s your mudder doing? It’s too bad she couldn’t have come along.”

“She’s doing better, but crowds don’t suit her. What about Annie? Didn’t she come?” Helen glanced at the quilts strewn in the grassy strip between the sidewalk and the street. No Annie. “When I dropped off my jams and jellies at the bakery yesterday, she promised me she would come—that she would try to come.”

“*Ach*, if only it were so.” The customary happiness in Emma’s face since her marriage to Thomas and Caleb’s arrival fled for a second. “She isn’t ready. She decided at the last minute she didn’t want to come. Couldn’t come, I reckon. She can’t seem to bring herself to celebrate anything yet.”

“She’ll get out when she’s ready.” Helen knew this from experience. The deep wound of loss took time to heal and could be ripped open by the simplest thing. A smell or a taste that reminded one of a person forever gone. “With time, she’ll find her way.”

“It’s been a year. It’s time for her to begin again.” Emma’s tone was kind, but firm. “She’s young and she should marry again. Noah needs a father. She needs a husband.”

“A year isn’t so long.”

Helen said the words at the same time as the man who stood next to Thomas, one hand propped on the tree’s trunk. He’d turned at Emma’s statement and his gaze met Helen’s. In his expression, she saw a fellow sojourner, someone who’d experienced the rocky, meandering road that follows the death of a loved one. Who had he lost?

“Not so long at all,” the man added, his dark eyes filled with a sadness that quickly fled, replaced with a polite blankness. “All things considered.”

Helen intended to agree, but instead she remained mute. The man had been cut from the same cloth as Thomas, sewn with the same careful stitch. He could've been a twin, except older, at least forty. Threads of silver and gray shot through his dark beard and the unruly hair that escaped from under his straw hat. His eyes were large and the color of tea allowed to brew all afternoon in Kansas's summer heat. His leathery bronze skin spoke of years spent working outdoors. Crow's feet around his eyes told the story of squinting against the broiling afternoon sun. Or laughing.

"Helen? Helen." Emma's insistent tone jerked Helen from her inventory of this stranger who seemed so familiar. "This is Gabriel Gless, Thomas's cousin."

Feeling as awkward as a child on the first day of school, Helen scrambled for a simple salutation. She opened her mouth and nothing came out.

Naomi nudged Helen with a sharp elbow. "Mudder?"

"Nice to meet you." She managed a nod. "Welcome to Bliss Creek."

Straightening, he moved toward her, a glint of laughter in his eyes. What was so funny?

"These are my daughters." She introduced the girls. "Are you and your *fraa* visiting long?"

"My *fraa* passed." No emotion visited those words but Helen saw the same expression in his eyes as before. He might be able to stifle the feelings in his speech, but not in his heart. "Been almost three years now."

"Gabriel's not visiting." Thomas spoke up as if to rescue his cousin. He too knew about this rocky road, even if his had diverged toward happier times. "He and his *kinner* moved here from Indiana. Making a new start of it."

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Meet the Gless clan." He swept his long arm toward the wiggling mass of youngsters engaged in all sorts of tomfoolery on the quilts. "Isaac, Daniel, Mary Elizabeth, Samuel, Abigail, Seth, Isabelle, and little Rachel."

They all chimed in with hellos that ranged from bellows to softly uttered words and ducked heads. Mary Elizabeth, whose blonde hair and blue eyes must've belonged to her mudder, shifted from one bare foot to another. "Some of us will be looking for work, if you know of any."

"Work... *jah, jah*, I'm sure you'll manage that around here. Annie, Emma's sister, have you met her?" Helen glanced at Emma, who shook her head as if to say not yet. "She's needing a hard worker who knows how to bake to help her out at Plank's Pastry and Pie Shop."

"Not now." Gabriel gave the girl a sharp look. "We'll have time for that later. For now, let's enjoy the parade."

Mary Elizabeth ducked her head, but she seemed pleased with Helen's tidbit of information. Helen studied the rest of the children. Rachel appeared to be about three, Isaac probably twenty-one or twenty-two. Quite an age spread. At least the older ones could care for the younger. As if to underscore the thought, little Isabelle, who might be about four, escaped from Mary Elizabeth's grasp and trundled toward Helen, arms up as if to offer a hug. Her sweet smile enveloped Helen, and she accepted the damp offering of a hug and a kiss.

"It's so nice to meet you, Isabelle." The hug warmed Helen's heart. Her own daughters were quick with affection, but this little girl didn't know her in the slightest, making her unconditional offering all the sweeter. "You are very welcome to Bliss Creek too."

"Wants cookie." Isabelle had a lisp. She patted Helen's cheek with a sticky hand that indicated she'd already had at least one dessert. "Hungry. Want cookie. Have cookie?"

Not only did Gabriel have his hands full with eight children, but this child would require extra care. Her almond-shaped eyes, round cheeks, and stubby fingers and arms were all signs that Isabelle was one of those special children who would forever be a child. Helen raised her gaze to Gabriel. She saw nothing in his bronzed face but a father's deep love for his child.

Isabelle wiggled from Helen's grasp.

“Pony!” Her hands flailed and she skipped in the direction of a wagon that had pulled into a parking lot on the other side of the street. “Pet pony.”

“Not now,” Gabriel called. “Don’t go in the street, little one.”

Isabelle looked up at Helen and smiled. “Pony.”

“Jah, pony.” Helen waved at Luke, Emma’s oldest brother, and his wife, Leah, who were directing their flock as they hopped from the wagon Luke had outfitted with rows of wooden seats for his big family. “You made it. The route’s almost full.”

An unsmiling Leah returned her wave with a barely noticeable flick of a hand. “We’re late as always,” the other woman called as she hoisted baby Jebediah onto one hip and roused her twin girls from the second-row seat. “I forgot the basket and we had to go back...”

The high, tight whinny of a horse interrupted Leah’s words. Helen glanced east toward the beginning of the parade route. A buggy, swaying from side to side, raced down the middle of the street, the horse pounding in a frantic gallop.

“What is...who is...” Helen’s questions were caught up in the murmurs of the crowd that immediately began to swell. Plain families didn’t participate in the parade. They only came to watch in anticipation of the fireworks display to follow. “Whose buggy is that?”

The horse looked familiar. *Daed’s* Morgan? She still thought of him as *Daed’s* Morgan even though her daed had passed in April. She couldn’t get a good look at the driver of the buggy. His hat covered his face. Then he stood and snapped the reins. One hand went to his hat and lifted it high. He whooped and yelled, “Yee haw! Ride ’em, cowboy!”

The voice. The face. The face so like George’s. Her cheeks suddenly hot, hands shaking, Helen started forward into the road. “Edmond? Edmond! What are you—”

A hand grabbed her arm and jerked her back so hard she tumbled into the quilt and landed atop Abigail. A knee gouged her back. With a startled cry, the girl scooted to the left, causing the other children to scatter. Tangled in her long skirt, Helen scrambled onto her

knees, fighting to see over Daniel, Isaac, Samuel, and the other boys who jumped to their feet.

Gabriel dashed into the street and swept Isabelle into his arms just as the horse and swaying buggy whipped past them, wheels rattling on the asphalt. His momentum carried him to the far curb. He stumbled, dropped to his knees, but kept the little girl securely wrapped in one long arm.

The buggy, still swaying wildly, disappeared down the street. Several folks in the crowd, their faces at first puzzled, and then amused, began to clap. From the looks of them, they were tourists. The teenagers hooted and hollered their appreciation. Others, older folks, shook their heads and muttered, disapproving looks on their faces.

Gabriel popped up, whirled, and marched back toward them, Isabelle still dangling from his arm like a stuffed doll.

“Who was that?” Despite his obvious anger, he kept his voice down to a low growl. He panted, furious red blotches on cheeks that had gone white. He seemed oblivious to his daughter’s giggles. “He nearly ran over Isabelle. He could’ve killed her.”

“I—”

“Police. Stop. Stop that buggy now!” Police chief Dylan Parker raced past them on foot, dodging people who had spilled into the street to watch the buggy continue its flight toward Bliss Creek’s city limits. The police officer’s hat blew from his head, but he didn’t halt. “Edmond Crouch, stop now!”

Sirens wailed. Flashing blue and red lights came into view. One of Bliss Creek’s three police cars gained on Chief Parker, swerved around him, slowed, and then halted long enough for Parker to jerk open a door and climb in before picking up speed again.

The noise of the crowd grew. Laughter mingled with questions and curious bystanders turned their gaze on the Plain families who had congregated in one spot along the parade route.

“You’ve met my daughters.” Fighting the urge to cover her face, Helen rubbed the spot on her arm where Gabriel had jerked her aside and gazed up at him. “That was my son, Edmond.”



Chapter 2

Isabelle squirmed in Gabriel's arms and wailed. The sound penetrated an anger born of fear. Laura had left him in charge of their children. He alone had the job of watching over them and raising them properly in their faith. In his wife's absence, he would do whatever necessary to care for them, keep them safe, and send them on their ways to start their own families of faith. Some days, like today, the promise proved to be a tall order. He deposited Isabelle on the sidewalk. She trotted back to Helen and again held up her arms.

"*Nee*, Isabelle, go to Abigail." He nodded to his older daughter. "Take her."

"But Daed, she's all sticky and dirty—"

"Then get her cleaned up and make sure she stays out of the street." The girls spent a great deal of time caring for Isabelle and little Rachel. They didn't complain, but Gabriel knew their burdens were heavy in a household without a mudder to oversee the cooking, laundry, sewing, canning, baking, and gardening. "The parade will begin any minute. Then we'll eat and later we'll watch the fireworks."

"We'll take care of her, Daed. Don't worry."

Abigail smiled up at him. With her curls, fair skin, and blue eyes, she was the spitting image of Laura at sixteen. Gabriel had known his wife from the time she was four. Secretly promised to marry her

at twelve. Done so at eighteen. He swallowed the lump in his aching throat. Abigail hoisted Isabelle to her hip and snatched a rag doll from the crumpled quilt. Isabelle laughed and clapped her hands. Laura would be pleased with their children. This was Abigail's rumspringa and she spent it caring for the little ones, not running wild in the street in a runaway buggy.

New anger blew through him. He turned and bore down on Helen. "Does your son always race along parade routes acting like a cowboy?"

"Nee. Never. It's his rumspringa..." The woman's voice trailed away. "He's been...different."

Having been through three rumspringas already with his own kinner, and now Abigail in hers, Gabriel found not much surprised him. But this wild ride through the streets in broad daylight, this was a new one. What would possess the boy to do something so openly? Back home the teenagers wore Englisch clothes, smoked, carried cell phones, and even drove cars. They sneaked around, thinking no one saw. Parents turned their heads and pretended not to know. But this flaunting of it was different. Disrespectful. His hope that this move to Kansas would make it easier for him to protect his children from worldly influences drained away.

This boy, this Edmond, had been out of control. What kind of mudder raised a child to act like that? Helen looked so forlorn, he might have felt sorry for her were it not for the hairsbreadth he'd been away from being trampled by the horse. He'd felt the breeze of the buggy as it passed. For himself, he had no worries. But for his children. They had only one parent now.

"Edmond's a good boy." Thomas spoke as if reading Gabriel's thoughts on his face. His cousin stood next to Helen, towering nearly a foot over her, his arms crossed over his chest. "He's a hard worker. Works for me on the farm."

Thomas would never say something he didn't mean. He rarely spoke at all, but when he did, he meant it.

Still, the horse's whinnies sounded in Gabriel's ears. The feel of

Isabelle's body squirming against him as he hurled himself past the buggy caused the panic to rise again. Fighting for composure, he leaned over to examine the knees of his pants. Better they didn't see his face. One pant leg had been torn by his rapid descent to the asphalt.

"That was strange behavior for a good boy." He managed to sound calm. No judgment. "He seemed...crazed or drugged."

"He's embraced his rumspringa, as many of our youngsters do." Helen put her hands on her ample hips. Gone was the awkward woman who'd introduced herself earlier, replaced by a mother hen whose feathers were ruffled, her chick found wanting. "As I'm sure your older boys have done. That is the point of it. He should be forgiven for that."

"My boys didn't put a little girl in danger." Warmth flooded Gabriel's face and showered his neck. She ought not to speak back to a man such as himself. Yet he couldn't help but admire that she stood up for her son. "Forgiven, yes. But his actions—endangering others and flaunting it in public—must be corrected. Surely you'll talk to your bishop."

"Now your bishop as well." Thomas spoke again. Why did he defend this woman and her undisciplined son? "I'll talk to Edmond."

"So will I, being I'm his mudder and all." Helen dusted her hands together as if to wash them of the subject. "I'll go now. I reckon Chief Parker has caught up with him and given him a talking to. Emma, could the girls stay with you until I come back?"

"Of course."

"Rumspringa doesn't give him the right to put others in danger." Gabriel couldn't help himself. He kept talking even though she'd turned away, giving him her back. She was short and sturdy, very different from Laura with her long legs and thin build. The direction of his thoughts confounded him. "Does this community's Ordnung allow him to do that?"

"Nee." Thomas answered yet again. "He'll be dealt—"

"Mrs. Crouch!" A sweaty, heavy man in a uniform so tight the buttons looked as if they might burst wormed his way through the parade

goers. His skin was burnt red from the sun and he wore shiny sunglasses that hid his eyes and reflected everything around him. “Mrs. Crouch, I need to talk to you.”

Helen turned back. Her dimpled cheeks turned from red to an ashen gray. “What is it? Is he hurt, Officer Bingham?”

“No, ma’am.” The officer removed his hat. He nodded at Gabriel and Thomas, then glanced at a notebook he clutched in his hand as if seeking guidance. “Chief Parker says to tell you, begging your pardon, ma’am, that your son is drunk. He’s being arrested. For drinking and driving.”

Drunk. Drinking and driving. An Englisch act. Plain folks didn’t imbibe. Not those who followed the Ordnung. Gabriel had hoped for a strong, faithful community where he could raise the children and guide them with the help of that community. Instead this. The packing, the leaving of everything and everyone familiar. The endless drive across the Midwest. All of it had been for nothing.

“That can’t be.” Helen brushed past Gabriel and stood toe-to-toe with the officer. “Edmond wouldn’t do that.”

“We caught him, ma’am.” The officer made a *hmmph* sound that was halfway between a cough and snort. “He was out there with a bunch of kids from the high school, out behind the Pizza Parlor where the trash bins are. When we pulled up, Edmond had the bottle in one hand and a red plastic cup in the other. Red plastic cup, ma’am. You know what that means.”

Helen’s face turned from white to red again. “You arrested him for having a red cup?”

“They use them at keggers and the like. You see a red cup, you’re seeing alcohol, ma’am.”

A kegger. The officer spoke a language Gabriel recognized from having worked in the Englisch world, but it was obvious Helen didn’t comprehend. She glanced sideways at Gabriel, her round cheeks flaming. “Did you see him drink from the cup?”

“He threw it down. The bottle too. Then they scattered in all

directions. Your son took off running to the buggy. We yelled for him to stop. He didn't."

"Likely you scared him," Thomas said. "We don't deal much with law enforcement, as you know."

"Helen." Emma touched her friend's arm. "You must go to him."

A look passed between Emma and Thomas. Thomas doffed his hat at Gabriel and without another word, motioned for Helen to follow him.

Gabriel shook his head. "I thought Dahlburg's community had fallen into sinful ways, but I don't know of any of the young men in that community being charged with something like this."

Emma didn't answer. Her gaze followed her husband's back until he disappeared into the crowd. She seemed thoughtful.

"What's going on?" Gabriel asked, curious at the mix of emotions on her face. "Has this happened before?"

"Not with Edmond. He's a good boy who's a little out of hand." Emma turned to him. "Has Thomas not told you of my brother Josiah's misadventures during his rumspringa?"

Not likely. Thomas didn't do much storytelling, unless it was for the children's pleasure. "Nee."

Emma glanced at the children sprawled on the quilt. They were already getting to know the flock brought by Emma's brother and sister-in-law, Leah, a dour-looking woman who frowned at them and continued to berate her children for something. Gabriel had missed what they'd done.

"The parade's started. Finally." Emma sank into a plastic folding lawn chair next to the quilt—a concession to the fact that she could no longer sit on the ground, given her girth—and motioned for him to do the same in the chair next to her. He sat while Caleb clamored into what remained of his mudder's lap.

"Josiah ran away to Wichita, got drunk, asked a New Order Mennonite girl to marry him, and then jumped off or fell off—we're not sure which—a second-story balcony when she said no." Emma's

expression and tone didn't change. Gabriel realized she didn't want the child on her lap to know of the seriousness of her words. "We almost lost him only a few months after my parents passed."

Gabriel had met Josiah the previous day. A broad-shouldered, burly man. Married—by the looks of him happily so—and a father of one child with another on the way. He was a hardworking blacksmith with big callused hands and an almost constant grin.

"How long has Edmond's father been gone?"

"You mean how long has Helen been a widow?"

"Jah."

"Seven years."

A man in the house would've had a handle on the discipline. A second thought chased the first: seven years of the kind of loneliness he had experienced for the last three. He never expected to be lonely with eight children in the house, but lonely he had been. Continued to be. Each night when he went to bed alone and each morning when he arose to face another day without Laura. He didn't wish that on anyone.

"Seven years is a long time. Why didn't she remarry?"

"You said it yourself. Everyone comes through that darkness on their own time." Emma fanned herself with a handkerchief and then used it to pat the sweat from her shiny cheeks. "There have been a few who've tried to court her, but it seems she hasn't found the right person."

"Maybe it's because she's so *doplich*."

"She's clumsy because people—men like you—make her nervous."

"Not a sign that she would make a good fraa."

"She was a good fraa."

"Spoken like a true *freind*."

"I didn't know her very well then." Emma leaned forward, her gaze on the parade route. "I know her now. She is a simple, kind woman who works hard and prays hard. You'll like her."

"Again, you are a good friend." Her meaning sank in after a few

seconds. He squirmed in his chair. "You...I...nee...I...her skills as a mother..."

"You've only met her once."

"I have eight kinner, one of whom will need special attention for a lifetime. If I were to marry again, I would need a fraa who can handle that."

"Are you looking for a fraa or a caregiver?" Emma's smile took the sting from the words. "My Aenti Louise says love overcomes many things. Only God knows why and in time, He reveals His plan. Until then, it's best to enjoy the good moments, like a parade, and leave the rest to Him."

Gabriel knew her words were true. Hard as he found it to understand why God would take his wife from him so soon after the birth of their eighth child, there had to be a reason for it. She'd mentioned a headache in the afternoon. By evening, she'd been gone from a blood clot in her brain. The shock of her sudden passing still took his breath away when he awoke in the morning, slowly coming to consciousness. Groggy. Drowsy. Then wide awake and the pain of it sucking the air from his lungs. What greater purpose did this turn of events serve? Not that it was his place to ask that question. *Forgive me.*

A fat drop of rain smacked Gabriel on the nose as if to punctuate the prayer. He glanced up at the sky. The clouds seethed overhead, black and heavy. As much as the region needed rain, Gabriel prayed it would hold off. *Just a few more days, God. A few more days until the wheat is in. Thomas needs that. The whole district needs it.* "We may not have the parade after all."

"As much as we need rain, the timing couldn't be worse." Emma gave voice to Gabriel's thoughts. "Thomas has worked so hard. All the men have."

"Nothing can be done about it."

"I know God will provide even if we lose the harvest." Her steady voice told him she truly meant those words. Thomas had married a stout believer. "But it hurts my heart to see him work so hard to provide

for us only to have the fruits of his labor wash away in a rain that we truly need. God's timing...well, it's God's timing, I guess.”

She held up both hands, palms up as if to ask a question she dare not put into words. Gabriel had no answer. Caleb mimicked her moves and giggled when raindrops splashed in his chubby hands. Emma smiled and Gabriel joined her. Some questions didn't have answers.

Like why he'd moved to this community to escape the world that invaded his old district only to find it overtaking the new one. Had he been wrong to uproot his family? Would he have to do it again?