

THE AMISH *of* WEAVER'S CREEK #3

SOFTLY
BLOWS
the BUGLE



JAN DREXLER


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2020 by Jan Drexler

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO 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

Names: Drexler, Jan, author.

Title: Softly blows the bugle / Jan Drexler.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2020] | Series: The Amish of Weaver's Creek ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2020005245 | ISBN 9780800729332 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800739232 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Amish—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3604.R496 S67 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005245>

Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

The author is represented by WordServe Literary Group.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the Morning Coffee Circle at Greencroft Manor IV in
Goshen, Indiana: thank you for welcoming me into your
group a few times a year and sharing your stories.
I always enjoy your insiders' look at growing up Amish.

Soli Deo Gloria



Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1–2

1

MAY 1865

WEAVER'S CREEK, OHIO

Life and knitting. Each one goes along smoothly, needles and events gliding against each other to form a seamless whole, until the day you look back and see the one missed stitch that has affected the entire fabric.

Elizabeth Kaufman dropped the ruined sock into her lap and closed her eyes, leaning her head against the back of the rocking chair on the shaded front porch. A bird sang somewhere above the roof, its fluid call carrying through the quiet afternoon air like an autumn leaf falling. It rose, then paused. Rose again, then swooped down only to end on a high trilling note.

A shriek from inside the house brought an abrupt end to the birdsong. Katie Stuckey's feet pounding on the stairway and more shrieks brought Elizabeth to her feet, her knitting falling to the porch floor.

"He's coming!" Katie slammed the wooden screen door

open and grabbed Elizabeth's arms, spinning her in a circle. "I saw him from the window! On the road!"

Katie jumped off the porch and headed down the lane toward the road, leaving Elizabeth breathless and alone on the porch.

"Who?" Elizabeth called after her, then laughed to herself. Who else could it be? The long-awaited day had finally arrived. After three long years of serving in the army, Jonas—her brother and Katie's intended—was home.

It was a happy day, for sure. Elizabeth picked up her yarn and needles and went into the house. She added more ham and water to the pot of beans cooking for their dinner. Then she mixed up a big batch of cornbread, knowing *Mamm* would have many mouths to feed today. As soon as Jonas's letter had come telling them he was returning home, *Mamm* had started planning the celebration. They hadn't been sure which day to expect him, but they knew it would be sometime this week. The whole family hung in expectation, but as anxious as Elizabeth was to see her brother, she would let him have some time alone with Katie first. She would arrive at the home farm in time for supper.

When the cornbread was finished baking, she wrapped the dishes in towels and placed them in the back of the pony cart. As she hitched up Pie, a sudden longing to see Jonas swept over her. She hadn't been close to him since she married Reuben, but her life was different now. Jonas was her little brother, and he was home. Had the war changed him?

She hurried Pie along as quickly as she dared with the pot of soup sloshing in the back. As Elizabeth crossed the stone bridge into the yard of her parents' farm, Jonas stepped

out of the door to meet her. She jumped from the cart, not bothering to tie the pony, and ran to her brother. He lifted her in strong arms.

“Welcome home, Jonas,” she said into his ear.

He set her down and looked into her eyes. “How are you?”

“As good as can be, now that you’re back.” She pulled back slightly. “You are home, aren’t you? You don’t have to return to the war?”

Jonas grinned, looking more like the boy she remembered. “Mamm asked me the same thing. *Ja*, for sure I’m home. I’ve been mustered out. The army doesn’t want me anymore.”

Katie appeared behind him. “Come in, Elizabeth. Jonas brought a friend home with him.”

Jonas propelled her toward the door. “I left Aaron in Mamm’s hands, the poor fellow.”

A lean man sat at the kitchen table, a spoon halfway to his mouth. Jonas had been right. Mamm had dished up a bowl full of chicken and noodles for the stranger, and he had already finished most of it. He put his spoon down when he saw Elizabeth and rose to his feet.

Elizabeth forced herself not to stare as the man grabbed a pair of crutches and hobbled toward her, one trouser leg pinned up at the knee.

“Aaron Zook,” he said, thrusting a hand toward her. “Jonas told me about his family. I’m guessing you must be Elizabeth.”

Stunned, Elizabeth shook hands with him. Her thoughts swirled. Aaron spoke in Englisch. He wasn’t Amish.

“Ja . . . Yes,” she stammered. “I’m Elizabeth.”

His lower face was covered with a long red beard and

mustache, but underneath she could see hollow cheeks and pale skin with a gray cast. His welcoming smile stopped at his mouth, not reaching his shadowed eyes. The expression in those dark blue eyes reminded her of the man she had been trying so hard to forget.

“Aaron and I met in the hospital where I was stationed in New York,” Jonas said, grasping his friend’s shoulder.

“Were you a medic too?” Mamm asked.

Aaron’s smile disappeared as he turned away from Elizabeth. “No, ma’am. I was a wounded prisoner. A Confederate soldier.”

Elizabeth’s head swam. A Confederate soldier, just like her husband, Reuben, had been. She took a step back as Aaron went on.

“Jonas saved my life in more ways than one, and I owe him a great debt. With my family and property gone, I had no reason to return to Tennessee. Jonas suggested I come here to Ohio with him before I move on.”

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you like,” Datt said.

Elizabeth took another step back. What was Datt thinking, inviting this man to stay?

“I’d like that,” Aaron said. “I’ll work for my keep. Don’t worry about that.” He patted his right leg. “I don’t let this slow me down much.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Datt said. “Our older son Samuel will be here with his family soon, and his oldest boy has gone to tell Jonas’s other sisters that he’s come home. Today is a day to celebrate.”

Elizabeth slipped out to the porch, then leaned against the wall, her heart pounding. Somehow, she would have to

join with the rest of the family in welcoming Aaron to the community. Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes, dread seeping into the place that had held such joy only moments ago.

She shook her head, trying to clear it away.

He isn't Reuben. He might not be anything like Reuben.

She wiped the dampness off her upper lip and rubbed her palms on her clean apron. If Aaron Zook stayed in Weaver's Creek, nothing could be right again.



The house was crowded, noisy, and hot. Aaron's head pounded with the strain of being pleasant, the flat tones of Yankee talk mingled with the harsh Pennsylvania Dutch words Jonas's family and friends used among themselves, not realizing he could understand only some of what they said.

Finally, supper was over, and Aaron slipped out of the house. He needed quiet. Peace and quiet.

The porch off the kitchen was crowded, too, but folks moved aside for him as he hobbled through. The sun had gone down, leaving an orange glow in the western sky. Aaron went toward the outhouse, then swung past it and ended up at a board fence. A dark meadow faded into the dusk, a horse standing nearby was a black shadow against the night sky. Aaron leaned his crutches against the fence rail and grasped the post, glad for the breeze that cooled his hot skin.

Frogs croaked. Aaron closed his eyes. An early owl hooted from somewhere to his left. The voices he had left behind were faint, then someone laughed, the sound rising above the others for a brief moment.

Footsteps in the grass behind him. Aaron turned to see Jonas. Ever since they had met in the hospital after one of the many battles in the Siege of Petersburg in October, Jonas had been the one to keep Aaron's path straight. But it wouldn't be long before they would go their separate ways. How did he ever come to be friends with a Yankee?

"Are you feeling all right?" Jonas rested his arms on the fence rail next to him.

"You aren't a medic anymore."

Jonas gave a soft chuckle. "It has become a habit." He rolled his shoulders. "It feels good to be home, but . . ."

Aaron let the silence grow between them. He sighed. "It isn't what you remembered?"

"It's still home, but not much has changed. It is as if the war didn't happen at all."

"But the war changed you." Aaron let his mind go back to the angry, fiery young man he had been, hot to kill any Yankee he could find after a scouting party shot Grandpop and left him to die with his blood seeping into the Tennessee land he had loved. "Both of us. War will do that."

Jonas looked out over the meadow. "You're right. We've both seen things that Katie and my family can't fathom. And I don't want to tell them. I don't want Katie to know how terribly cruel men can be."

"Do you still think war is wrong?" Aaron looked at his friend. "Your side won. The Confederacy is dead."

"And the slaves are free." Jonas bowed his head. "But the cost . . . The cost is so great. I was willing to give my life so others could be free, but when I think of how many others paid the ultimate price, it grieves me." He passed a hand over

his face. “Yes, I believe war is wrong. I pray that our country will never be in another one.”

After a few minutes of silence, Jonas changed the subject.

“What do you think of my family?”

Aaron let a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. “You described each one perfectly. Except your sister Elizabeth. I wouldn’t have been able to choose her out of a crowded hog wallow if I didn’t hear your mama say her name.”

“Elizabeth is different than I remember, but she didn’t spend much time with the family when her husband was alive.”

Aaron leaned on the fence post, easing the weight pressing on his good leg. “She’s a widow?”

“Mamm said Reuben was killed at Vicksburg.”

“I thought you said that the Amish don’t fight.”

“Reuben wasn’t Amish.”

Aaron shifted again to ease his aching leg. Elizabeth was a puzzle, but he wouldn’t be around long enough to sort it out. Jonas, on the other hand, was home. He had often talked about his plans on their journey west, and his doubts.

“Did you talk to your pa about getting married?”

Jonas turned and leaned back against the fence, facing the house. “I mentioned it, but Datt didn’t know how the ministers would handle the situation.”

“I don’t see what the problem is. She’s your girl, ain’t she? Just up and marry her.”

“I have to join the church first. I can’t get married until I do.”

Aaron turned and leaned his back against the fence post. Someone had lit the lamps in the house and warm golden light spilled into the yard through the windows.

“I don’t think I’ll ever figure you out. What does joining some church have to do with marrying Katie? They can’t tell you what to do. It isn’t like you’re still in the army.”

“It’s the way we live. I’ve always been part of the church, but to be baptized and become a member means that I am committed to being part of the community. And we don’t allow members to marry before they’re baptized.”

“You’ve got your life all planned out, then, just like you said. You’ll join the church, build your house, marry Katie, and have a passel of youngsters.”

“One step at a time. The first thing I need to do is find out if I’ll be allowed to be baptized after being in the army.” Jonas turned toward him. “What do you intend to do? Will you stay around here for a while? Or will you head west like you keep talking about?”

Aaron shifted again, trying to ease the strain of bearing all his weight on one leg. He missed the silence of the Tennessee woods and the cabin Grandpop had built when he finally settled down after leaving Pennsylvania as a young man, but that peaceful home was gone forever. Burned to the ground by Yankee scum. They had eradicated his past as thoroughly as they had destroyed his future. But they hadn’t succeeded in taking his life. His thoughts shied away from the ravenous black pit of death.

Aaron grasped at the dream he had held fast during the long nights in the prison hospital. “I heard the West is open territory. No one to get in your way.”

“I heard the men talk about that too. It sounds pretty lonely.” Jonas’s eyes reflected the lamplight from the house. “It would be mighty hard for a man to build a home out there.”

“Some men do better alone.” Aaron glanced at Jonas. “You want to be part of this community, with your folks and your girl. That’s what you want. But I’ve always been on my own, taking care of myself most of my life. I’m itching to hear nothing but the sound of the wind in the trees again.”

Silence fell between them. The owl in the woods hooted. Frog song echoed from the creek. Somewhere on the other side of the pasture, a bull complained in the darkness.

“A healthy man with two sound legs might be able to survive on his own,” Jonas said, his voice quiet. “I worry that you won’t. It hasn’t been that long since you nearly died from blood poisoning.”

A familiar flare of anger at his situation rose in Aaron’s chest. “I won’t let a missing leg stop me.”

Jonas chuckled, his face hidden in the darkness. “I don’t imagine you will.”



“Lydia, did you hear about Young Peter Lehman and Margaret Stuckey?”

Elizabeth froze as Salome Beiler’s voice drifted into the front room from the kitchen. She was Bishop Amos’s wife, but where Amos had grown in his tact and wisdom since becoming bishop a couple years ago, Salome was as thoughtless in her comments as she had ever been.

“I know they’ve been keeping company.” Mamm’s words were quiet. She never liked to listen to Salome’s gossip.

“I heard a wedding will take place this summer.”

Mamm didn’t answer and Elizabeth continued tidying up the front room.

“Isn’t it about time your Elizabeth married again?” Salome’s voice took on the wheedling tone that set Elizabeth’s teeth on edge. “She’s been a widow far too long.”

“I’m not concerned,” Mamm said. “The Good Lord knows what Elizabeth needs, and he will provide.”

“Now that she has repented of her unfortunate marriage to that outsider and has joined the church, my Levi might consider marrying her.” Salome sniffed. “The Good Book instructs widows to marry, and your daughter has many good childbearing years ahead of her.”

Elizabeth sank into the chair she had just straightened. The front room was empty now that nearly all the community had returned to their homes. The night was growing late. Elizabeth longed for her own bed and a good night’s rest, but Salome had insisted on staying while Mamm cleaned the kitchen. Elizabeth wouldn’t leave when there was still work to be done, but with Salome in the kitchen, Elizabeth was stuck unless she wanted to face the gossip head-on. Surely the woman knew that she was in the next room, able to hear every word of her conversation. But that had never stopped the busybody before, and it wouldn’t now.

“Abraham and I will let Elizabeth make her own decisions concerning her future.” Mamm’s voice had an edge to it that told Elizabeth she was trying to hold her temper.

Salome grunted. “You should have reined that girl in years ago, before she ran off and married that reprobate. If she was my daughter—”

“She isn’t your daughter, Salome,” Mamm broke in.

Another grunt. Elizabeth leaned over far enough to see Salome cut another slice of cornbread for herself, then smooth

the dish towel over the pan on the table. Mamm was facing the window and didn't see part of tomorrow's breakfast disappearing.

"I think Amos is ready to leave." Salome's chair scraped across the wood floor as she rose from the table. She stood, tying her bonnet. "I'm happy for your sake that Jonas is finally home," she said, moving toward the back door. "The past three years haven't been easy for you with your son off in the outside world, doing who knows what."

Mamm pressed her lips together as she moved a chair out of Salome's way. "*Denki*, Salome. We are very thankful to have him home with us again."

Elizabeth joined Mamm in the kitchen as Salome left. Mamm took a handkerchief from her apron waistband and wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

"That woman." She turned back to the sink to finish washing the dishes while Elizabeth picked up the dish towel. "Every time she visits, I'm happy to see her go. But then I have to repent of my uncharitable thoughts."

"She is horrible," Elizabeth said, drying a plate and setting it on the shelf above. "I don't see why you let her talk to you that way."

Mamm sighed, then smiled at her. "Now you need to repent. Salome isn't horrible. I don't think she knows how hurtful her comments can be, but she can be caring and helpful at times."

"All right. I'm sorry. But she's as prickly as a porcupine." Elizabeth wanted to add more to her description of Salome but didn't. Even though the woman was part of their community and the bishop's wife, Elizabeth couldn't forget the

years Salome had acted as if she didn't exist, only because she had married outside the church.

"Salome did bring up a valid concern, though." Mamm didn't look at her as she immersed a stack of bowls in the dishpan. "It's been two years since Reuben died. Have you thought about marrying again?"

Elizabeth swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. Even though Reuben had left to join the Confederate army nearly three years ago, she still had nightmares about him. She couldn't imagine willingly putting herself at the mercy of another man.

"I am content now, Mamm. I don't really want to marry."

"What about children? A family?"

Elizabeth's head pounded. She forced herself to pick up the next bowl to dry and watched her hand rub the dish towel over the wet surface. She had never told Mamm about the baby she had lost. That baby would have been five years old now, nearly the same age as her nephew Ezra, Gideon and Ruby's son.

"I don't think the Good Lord wants me to have children."

Mamm was silent as she finished washing the bowls and turned to the big pot Elizabeth had brought the ham and beans in.

"We never know what he has planned for us."

Mamm's voice was soft, but sure and steady. Elizabeth wished she could have even half of her mother's faith, but she was sure her future didn't hold the pleasures of a family and her own little ones. The Good Lord might bless others in that way, but not a woman like her.

After the kitchen was cleaned up, Elizabeth said good

night to Mamm and took her empty pot out to the pony cart. Datt had seen her coming and was hitching up Pie. Jonas's friend Aaron sat on the edge of the porch, his crutches next to him. He scooted away from the steps as Elizabeth went down them.

"It was nice to meet you, ma'am," Aaron said.

With the light from the kitchen window behind him, he didn't look as much like Reuben as Elizabeth had first thought. His words were drawn out and slow, nothing like the Englischers Elizabeth was familiar with.

"Thank you." Elizabeth paused, trying to think of what Mamm would say to him. "I hope you feel at home in Weaver's Creek."

"Yes, ma'am, for the time I'm here."

"You don't plan on settling here, then?"

Aaron rubbed his leg, the one that ended just above his knee. It was an unconscious motion, as if the leg often pained him.

"I don't know yet what I'm going to do."

Datt tied Pie to the hitching rail and took Elizabeth's pot from her.

"There's a place for you here," he said, setting the pot in the cart. "There is always room for a Zook in the community."

Aaron didn't answer. Elizabeth untied Pie's reins as Datt went back to the barn.

"Wait." Aaron rose and took a step toward her. "What did your father mean? Is there something special about my last name?"

"It's a common name among the Amish. Datt meant that you would fit in here easily, if you wanted to."

“Grandpop was raised in Pennsylvania. He never had a good word for his Amish family.”

“Then you are Amish.”

He shook his head. “I’m not Amish. I’m not anything.”

“But if your grandfather’s family was Amish, then—”

Aaron pushed back on his crutches, turning toward the porch steps. “I’m not Amish. I don’t care what Grandpop’s family was.”

He swung up the steps and into the house, leaving Elizabeth standing alone with Pie. She stroked the pony’s neck, then climbed into the cart and started for home.

She had thought Aaron was just another man like Reuben when she first met him, but Reuben, as hard as he was, never let her see any weakness. Reuben couldn’t admit any vulnerability. But in her brief conversation with Aaron, she had caught a glimpse of a sad and lonely man.