

School's Out!

Dedication

To my son, Richard Jr., who had his share of fun
with lightning bugs when he was a boy.

And to my grandchildren: Richelle, Philip, and Ric,
who, like Rachel Yoder, enjoy doing many fun
things on their mini-farm.

Glossary

<i>ach</i> —oh	<i>galgedieb</i> —scoundrel
<i>aldi</i> —girlfriend	<i>gretzich</i> —crabby
<i>baremlich</i> —terrible	<i>gut</i> —good
<i>bensel</i> —silly child	<i>jab</i> —yes
<i>bletsching</i> —spanking	<i>kapp</i> —cap
<i>blicking</i> —shelling	<i>kinner</i> —children
<i>boppli</i> —baby	<i>kischblich</i> —silly
<i>bruder</i> —brother	<i>kotze</i> —vomit
<i>bussli</i> —kitten	<i>lecherlich</i> —ridiculous
<i>busslin</i> —kittens	<i>mamm</i> —mom
<i>butzemann</i> —scarecrow	<i>maus</i> —mouse
<i>daadihaus</i> —grandfather's house	<i>naerfich</i> —nervous
<i>daed</i> —dad	<i>rutschich</i> —squirming
<i>danki</i> —thank you	<i>schnell</i> —quickly
<i>dumm</i> —dumb	<i>schweschder</i> —sister
<i>dunner</i> —thunder	<i>verhuddelt</i> —confused
<i>fleb</i> —fleas	<i>wedderleech</i> —lightning
	<i>wunderbaar</i> —wonderful

“Das Lob Lied”

Der Herr sie gedankt.

Em Tom sei hutschle

bin ich leedich.

Gebacht uff?

Guder mariye.

Immer druwwle eiyets.

Kens devun hot's duh kenne.

“The Hymn of Praise”

Thank the Lord.

I'm tired of Tom's neighing.

Do you give up?

Good morning.

Always trouble somewhere.

Neither one could do it.

Introduction

The Amish are a group of people who, due to their religious beliefs, live a plain life without the use of many modern tools. Early Amish people lived in Europe, but many came to America in the 1700s so they could worship freely. More than 150,000 Amish now live in the United States and Canada.

The Old Order Amish wear plain clothes, much like the American pioneers used to wear. Because they believe electricity is too modern, they use kerosene, propane gas, coal, diesel fuel, and wood for heating their homes, cooking, and running their machinery and appliances. Telephones are not allowed inside their houses, but some Amish have phones in their shops, barns, or sheds outside the home. Most Amish use a horse and buggy for transportation, but they ride in cars with hired drivers to take longer trips and go places where they can't drive their buggies.

At one time, most Amish men farmed for a living, but now many work as blacksmiths, harness makers, carpenters, painters, and in other trades. Some Amish women earn money by selling eggs, fruits and vegetables, or handmade items such as dolls and quilts. Others work in gift shops, bakeries, or restaurants.

Many Amish children attend a one-room schoolhouse from grades one to eight. Once they leave school, they spend time learning a trade so they can get a job and earn money to support themselves and their families.

Most Amish do not hold their worship services in a church building. They have church every other week, and it's held in the home, shop, or barn of different church members. In order to keep their religious beliefs, the Amish have chosen to live separate, plain lives.

Chapter 1

The Unforgettable Picnic



*B*oom!

Rachel Yoder shivered when the thunder clapped. She didn't like storms, and she especially didn't want one this evening. She was tempted to bite off the end of a fingernail like she often did when she felt nervous, but she caught herself in time. Nail biting could make you sick if your hands were dirty, and it was a bad habit she needed to break. Her mom often said so.

Rachel poked her head through the flap at the back of her family's dark gray Amish buggy and was glad to see that it wasn't raining. Maybe the storm would pass them and be on its way. Today was Friday, and this evening's picnic was her family's way to celebrate the last day of the school year. She didn't want anything to spoil their fun.

A horn honked from behind, and Pap guided their horse to the side of the road. Rachel peeked out the flap

again, this time sticking her head out so she could get a good look at the fancy cars going by. *Woosh!* A gust of wind came up as she leaned out to wave at a shiny blue convertible. *Zip!* Rachel gasped as the white *kapp* [cap] she wore on her head sailed into the air and landed near the edge of the road. “*Ach! [Oh!] My kapp—it’s gonna get run over!*” she hollered.

“Rachel Yoder, you know better than to lean out the buggy like that,” Pap scolded. “What if you had fallen?”

“Can I get my kapp?” she asked tearfully.

“No!” Mom shook her head. “You might get hit by a car.”

As the blue convertible started to pass, Rachel saw surprise on the face of the blond woman riding in the passenger’s seat. The car pulled over behind their buggy, and the woman got out. She picked up Rachel’s kapp and brought it over to the stopped buggy. “I believe this blew out of your buggy,” she said, handing the limp-looking kapp to Rachel’s father.

“Thank you,” Pap said. “It belongs to my daughter.”

“Thank you,” Rachel echoed as Pap handed the kapp to her.

Rachel’s cheeks heated with embarrassment as she put the kapp on her head.

“Stay in your seat now, Rachel,” Pap said. He waited until the car had passed; then he pulled back into traffic.

Jacob, who was eleven, two years older than Rachel, sat up and yawned. He had been asleep in the seat

beside her. “Are we there? I’m hungry.”

“No, Pap stopped to let some cars go by.” Rachel was careful not to mention that her kapp had blown off when she’d leaned out of the buggy. She knew Jacob would have teased her about it.

Jacob wrinkled his forehead, and the skin around his blue eyes crinkled. “Noisy cars sometimes scare our horse as they whiz by.”

Rachel had seen horses do all kinds of strange things when they got spooked. She felt sorry for the horses. Still, she thought it would be fun to ride in a fast car. She leaned close to Jacob and whispered, “I saw a shiny blue convertible.”

He shrugged. “So?”

“I’d like to ride in a car like that one someday,” Rachel said. It was a secret she’d told no one else.

Jacob looked at Rachel as if she didn’t have a lick of sense. Of course, she knew her brother thought most things she said and did were kind of strange.

“Don’t you ever get tired of riding in this closed-in buggy?” she asked.

“Course not. I like our buggy just fine,” he said.

“If I ever get the chance to ride in a convertible and see how fast it goes, I’m gonna take it,” she mumbled.

Jacob nudged Rachel’s arm. “You’d best not let anyone hear you speak such foolishness. It’s one thing to ride in a car when we need to hire a driver for a reason, like to go to the big city. But just riding in one

so you can see how fast it goes would be seen as a prideful, selfish wish."

Rachel crossed her arms and turned her back to her brother. She decided to drop the subject, but she turned around again and glared at Jacob when their parents weren't looking. He didn't understand the way she felt. He hardly ever did, and neither did their older brother, Henry. But at least Henry didn't act like something was wrong with her, the way Jacob did.

Boom! Rachel shuddered again. "It better not rain and spoil our picnic," she said, hoping Jacob wouldn't notice her hands shaking.

He elbowed her in the ribs. "What's the matter? Are you afraid of a little *dunner* [thunder]?"

"It's not the thunder that makes me *naerfich* [nervous]," she said, elbowing him right back. "It's those horrible bolts of *wedderleech* [lightning] I'm worried about."

"We'll be okay. It's not even raining, so the storm will probably pass over us." Jacob leaned his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes again.

Maybe if I think about something else I won't feel so nervous. Rachel glanced toward the front of the buggy, where her parents and older sister, Esther, sat chatting in the Pennsylvania Dutch language that Amish people often spoke.

"Em Tom sei hutschle bin ich leedich [I'm tired of Tom's neighing]," her father said.

Rachel clutched the folds in her dress. It worried her to hear Pap complaining about their horse Tom. Pap had just said, “I’m tired of Tom’s neighing,” and she wondered if he was planning to get rid of their old horse. Rachel couldn’t bear the thought. Tom was a nice animal and had been their main buggy horse for many years. What was wrong with a little neighing? People talked whenever they wanted to say something. Shouldn’t a horse be able to neigh whenever he felt like it?

Mom responded to Pap’s comment, but another car whizzed past and drowned out her words. Rachel felt left out. She thought she should know if they planned to get rid of Tom.

“*Kens devun hot’s dub kenne* [Neither one could do it],” Esther said.

Who was her sister talking about, and what couldn’t they do? Rachel was about to ask, but Pap pulled onto the dirt road leading to the pond, and she craned her neck to see the water.

“Yea! We’re here, and the storm’s passed by, so we can have our picnic!” Jacob jumped out of the buggy and ran toward the pond.

Esther stepped down next. The small white kapp perched on the back of her brown hair was always neatly in place. Not like Rachel’s head covering, which often came loose during playtime.

Rachel climbed out of the buggy and reached up to

touch her own kapp, to be sure it was still there. Mom often scolded her for not remembering to put it on when they went out in public.

Esther smiled. "It's a *wunderbaar gut* [wonderful good] evening for a picnic."

"*Jah* [Yes]," Mom said. "It *is* a wonderful good evening for a picnic. Too bad Henry didn't want to join us."

"He'd rather be with his *aldi* [girlfriend]." Jacob rolled his eyes so they looked like they were crossed, and he coughed a couple of times as though he were gagging.

"Any sixteen-year-old boy who has a girlfriend wants to be with her. Henry thinks he's in love. That's what some nineteen-year-old girls think, too." Pap gave his brown beard a tug as he winked at Esther.

Esther's cheeks turned pink. Even though it hadn't been officially announced yet, Esther's family knew that she planned to marry Rudy King in the fall.

Rachel leaned into the buggy and grabbed a patchwork quilt from under the backseat. She didn't want to hear all this mushy love talk or think about getting married. She felt the best part of life was playing in the creek near their home, climbing a tree, or lying in the grass, dreaming about the interesting things she saw whenever they visited one of the nearby towns in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Esther followed Rachel to a spot near the pond, and the two of them spread the quilt on the grass. Jacob ran

along the water's edge, throwing flat rocks and hollering every time he made a perfect ripple. Pap unhitched Tom and tied him to a tree. Then he took their ice chest from the back of the buggy. Mom carried the picnic basket, and the two of them headed toward the quilt.

"I'm never getting married," Rachel told her sister.

Esther smoothed the edges of the quilt. "You'll change your mind someday."

"Rachel's probably right. She'll never get married 'cause she's too much of a *boppli* [baby]," Jacob said, as he joined them by the quilt.

"I am not a baby!"

"Are so."

Rachel couldn't let her brother have the last word, so she jerked the straw hat off his sandy-blond head and flung it into the air. "Am not!"

"Hey!" Jacob raced after his hat and grabbed it when it landed near the edge of the pond.

"Settle down, you two." Pap placed the ice chest on the grass. "We came to celebrate school being out, not to see who can shout the loudest or stir up the most trouble."

"That's right," Mom agreed as she opened the wicker basket and removed plates, cups, napkins, and silverware. "Let's put our energy into eating this good food that Esther and I prepared."

Rachel flopped onto the quilt with a groan. "What about me? I did the *blicking* [shelling] of the peas for the salad."

"Do you want me to tell Mom how many you wasted by seeing if you could hit the goose's beak?" Jacob murmured quietly so their parents couldn't hear.

Rachel glared at him. She didn't think anyone had seen her. But the goose was always so mean to her, she couldn't resist the urge to *boing* a few peas at it.

Pap removed his hat and scooted over beside Rachel. "Shelling peas is important business."

Rachel smiled. At least someone appreciated her efforts. Her stomach rumbled as Esther opened the ice chest and set out the picnic food. Scents of golden brown fried chicken, tossed green salad with fresh peas, pickled beets, muffins with apple butter, and homemade root beer filled the air.

"It's surprising we had any root beer to bring on our picnic," Jacob said, nudging Rachel with his elbow. "If you'd dropped a few more jars the day Pap made the root beer, we wouldn't have any to drink."

Rachel frowned. She couldn't help it if she'd accidentally dropped two jars of root beer when she'd carried them to the cellar. They'd been slippery and didn't want to stay in her hands. Then she'd had a sticky mess to clean up.

"Clumsy butterfingers," Jacob taunted. "You're always making a mess."

"Am not."

"Are so."

"That's enough, you two," Mom said with a shake of her head.

Rachel settled back on the quilt. She couldn't wait to grab a drumstick and start eating. But first, all heads bowed for silent prayer. *Thank You, Lord, for this food and for the hands that prepared it*, she prayed. *Bless it to the needs of my body. Amen.*

When Pap cleared his throat, it signaled the end of prayer time. "Now let's eat until we're full!"

Mom passed the container of chicken to Rachel, and she reached for a drumstick. She added a spoonful of salad to her plate, two pickled beets, and a muffin. "Yum. Everything looks mighty gut." She was about to take a bite of the chicken, when Jacob smacked it right out of her hands. "Hey! That's mine!" she hollered.

"You want to eat that after a stinkbug's been on it?" he said, studying the leg.

"What?" Rachel eyed the chicken leg. Jacob was right. There was a fat old stinkbug on her piece of chicken.

Jacob smashed the bug with his thumb and handed it back to her. "Here you go."

A terrible odor drifted up to Rachel's nose. "Eww... that stinks! Why'd you do that, Jacob?"

He gave her a crooked grin. "Didn't figure you'd want to eat a stinkbug."

She put the chicken leg on the edge of her plate and pushed it away. "I'm not eating that stinky thing now."

Jacob snickered. "Jah, I'll bet that could make you real sick. You might even die from eating chicken that

had a smelly bug like that on it.”

“I’m not hungry now.” Rachel folded her arms and frowned.

“Just take another piece of chicken and finish eating your meal,” Mom said as she stared at Rachel over the top of her silver-framed glasses.

Pap looked over at Jacob and frowned. “You shouldn’t be teasing your sister.”

“Sorry,” Jacob mumbled with his mouth full of muffin.

Rachel took another drumstick, and her stomach flip-flopped. What if she’d eaten that piece of chicken with the stinkbug on it? Could she have gotten sick? Her appetite was gone, but she knew if she didn’t eat all her supper, she wouldn’t get any dessert. She probably couldn’t play after the meal, either. She bit into the fresh piece of chicken, trying not to think about the smelly stinkbug.

“I’m glad school’s out,” Jacob said. “I think we should have a picnic every night to celebrate.”

Mom smiled. “We’ll try to have several picnics this summer, but remember there’s plenty of work to do. We women have a big garden to care for, and you’ll help your *daed* [dad] and *bruder* [brother] in the fields.”

“Right now I don’t want to think about working.” Jacob swiped a napkin across his face and jumped up. “I’m going to play in the pond.”

“Don’t get your clothes wet or muddy. I don’t need dirty laundry to do when we get home,” Mom said as

Jacob sprinted off in his bare feet.

"Immer druwwle eijets. [Always trouble somewhere.]” Pap looked over at Mom and grinned.

“That’s true, Levi,” she responded. “There’s always trouble somewhere. Especially when our two youngest children get so excited about summer that they start picking on each other.”

Rachel didn’t like the sound of that. She wasn’t trouble—just curious, as her teacher would say.

She finished her dessert and scrambled to her feet. “I think I’ll go wading, too.”

Mom caught hold of Rachel’s hand. “I hoped you and Esther would pick wild strawberries. Plenty are growing nearby, and they’d taste wunderbaar gut for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Do I have to pick berries?” Rachel whined. “I want to play in the water.”

“Do as your *mamm* [mom] asks.” Pap’s eyebrows furrowed, and Rachel knew he meant what he said.

Esther stood and smoothed the wrinkles from her long blue dress. She looked at Rachel and smiled. “I can pick the berries on my own.”

While Rachel waited for her mother’s reply, an irritating bee buzzed overhead.

“I guess it would be okay,” Mom finally agreed.

Rachel swatted at the bee. Big mistake. A few seconds later, a burning pain shot from her finger all the way up her arm.

"Ach!" she cried, jumping up and down from the shock of the bee's sting. She shook her finger and waved her arm.

"Calm down," Pap instructed as he took a look at her hand. "Scoot over to the pond, take a little dirt and water, then pat the mud on the stinger. That should help draw it out."

Rachel dashed to the pond. She had wanted to go there, but not with a cruel bee stinger making her whole arm throb.

Near the water's edge, she found Jacob building a dam from mud, rocks, and twigs. His dark trousers, held up by tan suspenders, were rolled up to his knees.

He gets to have all the fun! Rachel thought. It's not fair.

She scooped some dirt into her hand and added several drops of water. When a muddy paste formed, she spread it on her sore finger. Soon the throbbing lessened, so Rachel decided to see if she could make a better dam than Jacob's.

She waded into the cool water and giggled as it splashed against her legs. The bottom was mushy and squished between her bare toes.

"You'd better watch out," Jacob warned. "Your dress is getting wet."

Rachel glanced down. Sure enough, the hem was dark from where the water had soaked through. "I wish I didn't have to wear long dresses all the time," she

grumbled. “You’re lucky to be a boy.”

Jacob frowned as if Rachel had said something terrible. “You complain too much. Can’t you be happy with the way things are?”

Rachel stuck her finger between her teeth and bit off the end of the nail, spitting it into the water. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m supposed to be Amish.”

Her brother’s eyebrows lifted. “You were *born* Amish.”

“I know, but sometimes I feel—” Rachel stared into space. Way down inside, where she hid her deepest secrets, she wondered what it would be like if she could do some of the things the non-Amish children her people called “English” got to do. “Sometimes I wish I could wear pants and shirts like the English girls do,” she said.

“Sisters! Who can figure ’em out?” Jacob pointed at Rachel. “Especially you, little *bensel* [silly child].”

“I am not a silly child. If anyone’s silly, it’s you.” Rachel flicked some water in Jacob’s direction, and the drops landed on his shirtsleeve, making little dark circles.

Her brother only chuckled as he kept building his mud dam.

Rachel plodded toward the shore and gathered a few more twigs. She would make her dam even bigger than Jacob’s, and then he would see that she wasn’t a bensel. “Now, what did I do with that twig I was going to use?” she muttered.

"It's in your hand, little bensel."

Rachel's face flushed. She was about to say something, when Mom called, "Rachel! Jacob! Come dry your feet. It's time to go."

Jacob cupped his hands around his mouth. "Coming!" he shouted.

When her brother hurried away, Rachel bent down, placed the twig and another clump of mud on the side of her dam, and stepped back to admire her work. Suddenly, her foot slipped on a slimy rock, and she stumbled. She swayed back and forth for a moment, then *splash!* Rachel landed facedown in the water.

She was still sputtering and trying to stand in the slippery mud when Pap reached her. He scooped her into his strong arms, and Rachel leaned against his shoulder. "I didn't mean to fall in the water," she sobbed.

"You should have come when your mamm called," Pap said harshly, as he tromped up the grassy bank and placed Rachel on the ground near the horse and buggy.

She stood dripping wet, with her teeth chattering. Her kapp had come off and hung around her neck by its narrow ties, and most of her hair had come loose from the bun at the back of her head. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Jacob pointed at Rachel and howled. "Your hair's stickin' out in all directions. You look like a prickly blond porcupine."

"Do not!" Rachel snapped. She knew she might look

silly, but she didn't look like a prickly porcupine.

Mom wrapped the picnic quilt around Rachel's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Mom." Rachel sniffed and swiped at the water dripping from her soggy hair onto her cheeks. She wiped her muddy face, arms, and legs on the quilt.

"Sorry is good, but if you'd come when you were called, you probably wouldn't have fallen into the water," Mom said crossly, looking at the muddy prints Rachel had left on the quilt. "When we get home, you'll have laundry to do."

Rachel frowned. She hadn't meant to get her clothes wet. Why should she have to wash them? After all, the quilt was an old one; that's why they'd taken it on the picnic.

"We'd better head for home," Pap said. He helped the women into the buggy, and Jacob scrambled in after them.

The ride home was not pleasant. Rachel's wet dress stuck to her skin like tape. Shifting on the hard seat, she felt a shiver tickle her spine, and she pulled the quilt tightly around her shoulders.

Jumbled thoughts skittered through Rachel's mind. Jacob thought she was silly, and she knew she'd caused trouble for her parents. She wondered if every day of summer would be as topsy-turvy as this picnic day. She decided she'd better steer clear of trouble!

Chapter 2

Afraid of the Dark



The sun was just beginning to show when Rachel came downstairs for breakfast the next morning. She knew her mother would be up early, getting ready to go to the Millers' house. Mom planned to help Anna Miller do some cleaning in preparation to host the biweekly Sunday worship service at the Millers' house in two days. Since Rachel was eager to call on their neighbors, she found it easier to get out of bed so early.

Rachel took an apple-crumb pie out of the refrigerator and placed it on the table. It was one of her favorite breakfast pies, and her stomach growled as she thought of how good it would taste.

"When breakfast is over, we'll need to hurry through our chores," Mom said. "Esther's already milking the cows. Henry and Pap are hitching the horse to our buggy, and I sent Jacob to the henhouse to gather eggs."

Rachel snickered. “Jacob always says that gathering eggs is women’s work. He must be really *gretzich* [crabby] this morning.”

“I don’t care if Jacob is crabby. If he thinks only women can gather eggs, he’s sorely mistaken. That kind of thinking is just plain foolish.” Mom reached for the kettle of oatmeal sitting near the back of the stove. She pushed a wisp of pale blond hair away from her face, where it had worked its way out from under the kapp covering her bun.

Rachel had just finished setting the table when the rest of the family came into the kitchen. Everyone gathered around the table and bowed their heads for silent prayer. Rachel prayed that she would be allowed to have two pieces of apple-crumb pie and also that she’d have lots of fun at the Millers’.

By nine o’clock, breakfast was over, the kitchen had been cleaned, and Mom and Rachel had finished the rest of their chores. Satisfied and full after eating a bowl of oatmeal and two pieces of pie, Rachel followed Mom outside and climbed into their buggy. She felt certain that today would turn out better than yesterday.

“Are you sure you won’t come with us to the Millers?” Mom asked Esther, who stood in front of the buggy, stroking the horse’s ear.

Esther shook her head and smiled sweetly. “Rudy is picking me up soon. We’re going to the Hertzlers’ place to look at some horses. He’s thinking about

buying a new one."

Mom nodded and handed Rachel her kapp. "I found this hanging on the wall peg in the kitchen. Were you planning to go without it, or were you daydreaming again?"

With a sigh, Rachel put the head covering in place. "Sorry, Mom. I forgot."

"You've been so forgetful lately," Mom said. "What seems to be the problem?"

Rachel shrugged. "I've got a lot on my mind." After all, school was out now, and she had lots of plans for her summer.

Mom gave Rachel a curious look but made no reply. She turned to wave at Esther and started the horse trotting down the lane leading to the main road.

"Sure was a nice picnic supper we had yesterday, jah?" Mom said as they rode along.

"Except for when I almost ate a stinkbug, got stung by a bee, and fell in the pond," Rachel mumbled.

Mom reached over to touch Rachel's hand. "The stinkbug wasn't such a big thing. The bee sting was an accident. And if you had come out of the water when you were called, you might not have fallen in."

"I was just trying to have a little fun."

"I know, but you must learn to listen. That will help you stay out of trouble."

Rachel nodded. "I've been wondering . . . , " she said, changing the subject.

“What’s that?”

“Yesterday on the way to the pond, I heard Pap say something about Tom neighing too much.”

“That horse seems to complain about everything these days,” Mom said with a click of her tongue.

Rachel’s forehead wrinkled with concern. Tom was getting old and couldn’t do everything he used to do. Maybe he had a right to complain.

They soon turned onto a gravel driveway. Howard and Anna Miller’s three-story house was even larger than the Yoders’ home. The Miller family included six boys and four girls—so they needed lots of room. Two of the girls were already married and lived with their husbands on their own farms, but the rest of the Miller children still lived at home.

As soon as Rachel climbed down from the buggy, she spotted Anna Miller chopping weeds in the garden. Her plump figure was bent over a row of strawberry plants. Beside her stood six-year-old Katie. Nearby sat little Sarah’s baby carriage. When Anna saw Rachel and her mother, she waved and set her garden hoe aside.

Mom and Anna greeted each other in the Pennsylvania Dutch language, while Rachel squatted next to the carriage so she could see the baby better. “Sarah sure is a pretty boppli,” she said.

“Jah, we think she’s a pretty baby, too,” Anna replied with a smile.

For the next several minutes, Anna, Mom, Rachel,

and Katie admired the infant and made silly baby sounds.

"I expect we should get busy with the cleaning and baking," Mom finally said.

Anna nodded. "I appreciate you coming to help today, Miriam. Since the boppli came, I seem to be getting further behind on all my chores."

While Mom helped Anna clean house, Rachel looked after Katie and baby Sarah. She liked being in charge of the little ones. It made her feel important. Besides, Mom had promised Rachel some free time after lunch, and she looked forward to exploring the Millers' yard.

"Let's go look for the *busslin* [kittens] that my cat, Missy, had," Katie suggested.

She pointed to a little hole under the front porch. "They could be in there."

Rachel parked the baby carriage under the shade of a maple tree. Then she and Katie knelt and peered into the opening.

"I don't see any kittens," Rachel said as she stuck her hand inside the hole and felt all around. When she pulled her hand out again, she discovered a grasshopper perched on the end of her thumb.

Katie squealed and jumped away. "Eww! I don't like bugs!"

Rachel set the grasshopper in the flower bed. "I think bugs are okay as long as they're not on my food."

“Let’s go see if the kittens are in the barn,” Katie said, tugging Rachel’s hand.

Rachel pushed the baby carriage down the dirt path. When she and Katie entered the barn, she parked the carriage near some bales of hay stacked by the door. Then Katie looked for the kittens inside an empty horse stall while Rachel climbed the hayloft to hunt for them there.

“Ahhhh!”

Rachel’s heart lurched as she heard the shrill scream. She scrambled down the ladder. Katie stood on a bale of hay, trembling from head to toe. “What’s wrong, Katie? Why are you standing up there?”

Katie pointed across the room. “*Maus* [Mouse]. I saw a maus.”

Rachel could hardly believe anyone would be afraid of a little old mouse. She thought mice were cute. And mice didn’t chase you around, nipping at your legs, the way their old goose sometimes did.

“The maus won’t hurt you,” she said, holding her hand out to Katie. “Come on, let’s go outside and swing.”

Katie nodded, and pushing the baby carriage, the two girls headed behind the barn. Rachel loved to swing—and it was hard for her to take turns. But while Katie swung, Rachel pushed Sarah in her carriage so she wouldn’t fuss. Then when it was Rachel’s turn to swing, Katie pushed her sister’s carriage around in the grass.

At noon, the dinner bell rang. Rachel and Katie rushed into the house, where everyone took turns

washing up at the sink. Finally each person was seated at the huge wooden table in the center of the Millers' kitchen. Howard Miller and his six sons ate quickly so they could get back to the fields to work more, but Rachel took her time eating. She enjoyed every bite of the tasty cold meats and cheeses, homemade bread, potato salad, canned applesauce, and chewy peanut butter cookies Anna had served for lunch. Anna and Mom had already begun to clear away the dishes when Rachel swallowed her last bite.

"I'm going to put my *kinner* [children] down for a nap so we can finish our cleaning without any interruptions," Anna said to Mom as she scooted Katie toward the stairs. "If there's time, maybe we can do some baking this afternoon."

Rachel was glad she didn't have to take a nap like the younger children. She helped her mother wash the dishes. When they had been dried and put away, she asked if she could go outside to play.

"Jah, but don't get into any trouble," Mom said, peering at Rachel over the top of her glasses.

"I won't. I promise."

As soon as Rachel opened the back door and stepped onto the porch, she noticed that the sky was filled with heavy, gray clouds. The air smelled like rain, and she drew in a deep breath. She slipped off her shoes, hopped down the porch steps, and skipped across the lawn.

Her first stop was Anna's flower garden. Rachel loved flowers, and she fought the urge to pick a few of the prettiest ones, since she hadn't asked for permission. Besides, too many bees landed on the flowers, and Rachel didn't want to get stung again.

Rachel headed down the path that led to the creek. Howard Miller's waterwheel squeaked as it turned, making the water ripple and gurgle. Rachel knew the wheel was important because it created some of the power used on the Millers' farm. Because electricity was considered worldly, the Amish in her area used other methods of energy that weren't so modern.

While Rachel tossed rocks into the creek, a gust of wind rustled the treetops, and a few drops of rain splashed to the ground. She shivered at first, worried she might be caught in a storm. Then she smiled. If it rained hard enough, there might be some mud puddles she could tromp through. Meanwhile, she would go play in the barn. She was only halfway to the barn when she saw Katie's cat, Missy, run out the open barn door, followed by four little gray and white kittens. *They must have been in there the whole time and we missed them*, she thought.

Rachel called to Missy, but the cat ignored her and kept running. Thunder boomed, and all five cats raced down the steps and through the open doorway of the underground root cellar. The wind blew so hard Rachel had to hold on to her kapp in order to keep it from

blowing off her head.

She hurried after the cats. As she stumbled down the stairs and into the small, cold room, she shivered. Even with the door open, it was dark inside, and she didn't see any sign of Missy or her kittens.

Rachel blinked a couple of times. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she noticed wooden shelves fastened to the wall. They held glass jars filled with home-canned fruits and vegetables. Empty boxes sat on the concrete floor, waiting for the crops of potatoes, carrots, and other root vegetables the Millers would harvest later.

"Here, kitty, kitty," Rachel called. Neither Missy nor any of her kittens responded. Rachel only heard the howling wind and steady raindrops splattering on the steps outside the cellar door.

More thunder rumbled, followed by another gust of wind.

Bam! The cellar door slammed shut, and Rachel screamed as the darkness swallowed her.

Rachel wasn't afraid of much, but two things really frightened her—dark places and thunderstorms. She had taken a risk by coming into the dark cellar. Now she had to be brave and deal with both of the things that scared her most.

Rachel drew in a shaky breath, then inched her way forward. When her fingers touched the doorknob, she turned it and pushed the door. Nothing happened.

Leaning her weight against the heavy wooden door, Rachel pushed and pushed until she had no strength left in her arms. Her heart pounded like a woodpecker tapping on a tree. “I’m trapped! I’m afraid. . .and nobody knows I’m down here.”

Rachel pressed her cheek to the door. “Someone, please help me!”

Plinkety plink. Plinkety plink. No answer except the rain hitting the door.

She stuck her finger in her mouth and gnawed off a fingernail. She tried to pray, but her words came out all jumbled. “Wh—what if they—” *Sniff.* “N—never find me?” *Sniff. Sniff.* “H—help me, Lord.”

Rachel remembered hearing a minister at church once say that heaven has no dark places. That was a comforting thought, but it didn’t help the situation she faced right now.

Something soft and furry rubbed against Rachel’s ankle, and she knew it was one of Missy’s kittens. She bent to pick it up, and the soft ball of fur purred when she lifted it to her face. Then it licked Rachel’s nose with its rough, wet tongue.

Rachel dropped to her knees, and as she touched each lump of fur climbing into her lap, she realized that all four kittens and Missy were there.

She felt a little better knowing she wasn’t alone, but she was still afraid. *There must be an oil lamp down here,* she thought. *I just need to find it.*

Rachel gently pushed the cats aside and stood shakily. She felt her way around the room until her hand touched something cold and hard. “It’s a lantern!” she exclaimed. Her fingers moved up and down, back and forth along the shelf that held the lantern until she touched a book of matches. With a sigh of relief, she picked it up, struck a match, and lit the lantern. A warm glow spread throughout the tiny room, showing the shelves full of canning jars.

Rachel spotted a jar of pickled beets, and her stomach rumbled. It must be near suppertime. Would Mom go home without her? After all, she’d told Rachel to stay out of trouble, and here Rachel was now, in the middle of disaster.

“Maybe I should have a little snack—just in case,” she murmured. “Anna probably won’t miss a few beets from one jar, and I’m sure she wouldn’t want me to starve to death.”

Rachel picked up the old-fashioned glass jar, pulled the heavy wire off the top, and popped off the lid. She loved beets, especially when they were pickled with vinegar, sugar, and cinnamon. “Mmm. . .they smell so good.” She poked two fingers inside, withdrew one spicy red beet, and popped it into her mouth. “Yum.”

As Rachel started back across the room, a kitten darted in front of her, and she stumbled. The jar crashed to the floor, breaking the glass and splattering beets and sticky red juice everywhere. The juice even

dotted the kittens' fur and Rachel's dress. "Ach, what have I done?" she moaned.

She knew beet juice stained clothes. Her mother wouldn't be happy about trying to get the red splotches out of Rachel's dress. She hoped the Millers wouldn't be upset about having a stained floor.

Suddenly, the room went dark again. Rachel had noticed that the oil was low in the lamp, but she didn't expect it to go out *this* soon. Rachel held very still, remembering that she wasn't wearing any shoes and that glass covered the floor.

Unsure of what else to do, Rachel carefully touched the floor to make sure no glass was in her way as she dropped to her knees. She prayed, "Dear God, You know I'm afraid of the dark, so would You please help me not cry?"

Just like before, the kittens and the mother cat hopped into Rachel's lap, which made her feel less afraid. She closed her eyes, leaned her head against the cellar door, and was soon fast asleep.

Chapter 3

A Wunderbaar Surprise



Rachel was dreaming about pickled beets, kittens, and shiny blue cars, when the cellar door jerked open, and she fell backward. She sat up, feeling dazed, and looked over her shoulder. She saw Howard Miller and his sons Jake and Martin, each holding a lantern.

“The little bensel got herself locked in the cellar.”
Jake chuckled and slapped his knee.

Rachel didn’t see what was so funny, and she didn’t like being called a silly child any more now than when Jacob had called her that. “What time is it?” she asked with a yawn. “How long have I been down here?”

“It’s half past six,” Howard answered. “Your mamm has been frantic with worry. She said she’d planned to head for home by five o’clock, but when she couldn’t find you, she sent me and the boys out looking.”

“I followed Missy and her busslin into the cellar. Then

the wind blew the door shut, and I couldn't open it again." Rachel bit her bottom lip to keep it from quivering. "I—I didn't know if anyone would ever find me."

"Aw, sure they would," Martin said with a snicker. "Come winter, when Mom needed some of her canned food, she would have headed straight to the cellar. What a surprise she would have found in here, too!"

Rachel knew Martin was only teasing, but she wasn't amused.

Jake sent a beam of light from his lantern all around the room and made a sweeping gesture with his other hand. "What's all this mess with the broken glass and the beet juice?"

"I—I was hungry, and I—" Rachel's voice broke, and she drew in a deep breath to get control of her emotions. "I know I shouldn't have taken the beets without asking, and I'm sorry about the mess. If you'll leave one of your lanterns here so I can see, I'll clean it up."

"Never mind, Rachel. I'll see that everything is taken care of later on." Howard patted Rachel's head. "I'm glad you've been found. Now we'd best get you back to the house so your mamm can quit worrying."

Rachel pointed to the kittens that lay curled in a ball next to their mother. "What about them? We can't leave Missy and her little busslin alone in the cellar."

"The door's open now, so they can leave whenever they want." Howard nodded at his sons. "Hurry to the house and tell Rachel's mother that we found her."

Jake and Martin took off on a run, and Howard scooped Rachel into his strong arms. She felt safe and secure and so relieved that she had been found. She was glad he'd been so nice about the mess she'd made.

Later that evening, after Rachel had bathed and changed into clean clothes, she sat with her family around the supper table, telling them how she had been trapped in the cellar. "And I only had the company of Missy and her four little busslin," she said at the end of the story.

Mom handed Rachel a glass of cold milk, and Pap passed her a basket of warm bread. "You had quite an ordeal today," he said. "Did you learn anything from it?"

Rachel nodded. "I'll never go into another root cellar without telling someone where I'm going." She didn't mention how scared she had been.

"God was watching over you today," Mom said, as she helped herself to some meatloaf and handed the platter to Esther.

"He was?" Rachel asked as she bit into a piece of bread.

"Sure," Mom replied. "God sent Missy and her busslin to be with you in the cellar."

"Was it dark in the cellar?" Esther asked as she passed the platter to Rachel.

"Most of the time it was." Rachel drank some of her milk. "I was worried that the kittens would be afraid of the dark, so I found an oil lamp and a book of matches. The cellar was well lit until the lamp ran out of oil."

“Like those furry critters needed any light,” her oldest brother, Henry, put in.

Jacob snickered. “I’ll bet Rachel was the real scaredy-cat.”

Rachel wasn’t about to tell her brothers how frightened she had been, but before she could say anything more, Pap gave Jacob a stern look. Rachel figured she would get one of those looks if she said anything unkind to her brother, so she crossed her eyes and wrinkled her nose at him when her parents weren’t looking.

Jacob crossed his eyes and wrinkled his nose right back at her. Then he grabbed a hunk of meatloaf and popped a piece into his mouth.

“Did you get everything done at the Millers’ today?” Esther asked, looking at Mom.

“We finished the cleaning,” Mom said. “But when the rain started, I decided that Rachel and I should go home, so Anna and I never did any baking.” She glanced over at Rachel. “When the wind started howling like crazy, I thought you would hurry back to the house.”

Rachel said nothing. She just stared at the blob of spinach Pap had put on her plate. Then she reached for the bowl of mashed potatoes, added a scoop to her plate, and stirred the ugly, green, slimy-looking blob in with the potatoes. Spinach was her least favorite vegetable, and she hoped if she mixed it with the

potatoes, the yucky stuff might go down a little easier.

“When the dunner and wedderleech started and you still didn’t return to the house, I began to worry.” Mom reached past Esther and patted Rachel’s hand as Rachel was about to take a bite of her mashed potatoes. The spoon flipped out of her hand, and the gooey glob flew across the table and landed on Jacob’s plate, spattering the blob of slimy spinach and potatoes all over the front of his shirt.

“Ugh!” Jacob scowled at Rachel. “You did that on purpose, Rachel-the-scaredy-cat, who’s afraid of thunder and lightning.”

“Did not.”

“Did so.”

“Did not.”

“Did—”

“That’s enough!” Pap clapped his hands, and Rachel and Jacob stopped arguing.

Rachel knew better than to act like this at the table, but Jacob made her so angry she could hardly control her temper. *I know God loves everyone*, she thought, *but I'm guessing Jacob tries the Lord's patience as much as he does mine.*

Mom pointed to the sink. “Jacob, you had better get that mess cleaned off your shirt before it leaves a stain. I’ve had enough dirty clothes to deal with for one day.”

Rachel knew her mother was talking about the dress stained with beet juice that she had worn to

the Millers'. She figured no matter how much Mom scrubbed that dress, the ugly red stains would probably never come out.

Jacob glared at Rachel and pushed away from the table with a groan. He marched across the room, opened the cupboard door under the sink, and dumped Rachel's potato-spinach mess into the garbage can. Then he wet a dishrag and started rubbing the front of his shirt real hard.

Mom passed the bowl of spinach to Esther, who handed it to Rachel.

Rachel knew she would be in trouble if she didn't take some, so she dipped the spoon in and plucked out a tiny piece, placing it on the edge of her plate.

Mom clicked her tongue, and Pap raised his dark, bushy eyebrows. Rachel added a little larger piece and felt relieved when Pap nodded and said, "Jah, okay."

"How did the Millers know where to look for you?" Henry asked, as Rachel held her nose, popped the spinach into her mouth, and washed it down with a gulp of milk.

"Howard sent two of his boys to look down by the creek," Mom said before Rachel could reply. "Two of his sons went to their neighbor's place to see if Rachel had gone there, while Jake, Martin, and Howard searched their own farm. When they had looked in all the obvious places, Howard decided to try the root cellar. I'm glad they found you before we got the whole

neighborhood in an uproar."

Rachel sighed, remembering how scared she had been during most of the ordeal. "I'm glad he thought to look there. I wondered if I would ever get out of that terrible place."

Just as Jacob was about to sit down again, someone knocked on the back door. "I'll get it!" Jacob raced across the room and flung the door open.

Esther's boyfriend, Rudy, entered the kitchen. He carried a wicker basket draped with a piece of green cloth. "Sorry to disturb your supper," he said, glancing at the table.

"That's all right. Would you like to join us?" Mom asked.

"No, thanks. I stopped at the Millers' place this evening to drop off benches for our church service on Sunday. Howard asked me to deliver this special surprise to Rachel." He smiled and stepped toward the table, holding the basket in front of him.

Pap nodded at Rachel. "Why don't you see what it is?"

Rachel didn't have to be asked twice. She loved surprises.

Rudy handed her the basket, and when she lifted the cloth, she gasped. "Oh, it's one of Missy's busslin!" She stroked the kitten's head. "I'm going to call you Cuddles."

Esther's eyebrows rose. "Cuddles?"

Rachel nodded. “All of the busslin were so cuddly when they kept me company in the cold, dark cellar.”

“Howard told me about your ordeal. He said you seemed worried about the kittens,” Rudy said. “He wanted you to have one of them, and this is the *bussli* he chose for you.”

The gray and white kitten, with a speck of red beet juice still on one paw, nestled against Rachel’s arm and purred. Rachel leaned over and nuzzled its wet nose. “Can I keep her?” she asked, looking at Mom and then at Pap.

Mom smiled. “If it’s all right with your daed, it’s fine by me.”

Pap tugged on the end of his beard. “I suppose it’ll be okay, but you must promise to take care of it.”

“And the bussli will sleep in the barn with all the other animals,” Mom quickly added.

Rachel placed the kitten on the floor and ran to the table to give Mom and Pap a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “This is such a wunderbaar surprise! I promise I’ll take good care of Cuddles.”

Jacob groaned and shook his head. “What a dumb name for a cat.”

Rachel hurried back to the kitten and lifted it into her arms. “It’s not dumb. You’re just saying that because you’re jealous.”

“Am not. You should name it Trouble since that’s all you ever get into.”

Rachel didn't feel like arguing with Jacob anymore. And she didn't want to think of the trouble she'd caused that day for her mother and the Millers. She felt happy to be holding one of the sweet little bundles of fur that had snuggled in her lap and kept her company while she was trapped in the cellar.