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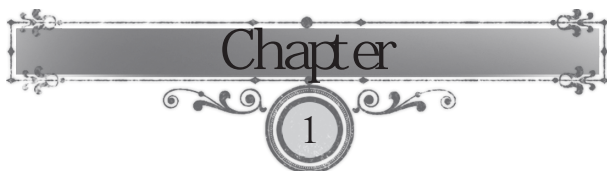
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Chapter

1

Rebekah Stoltzfus sat on the sidelines in her wheelchair, watching with envy as the others who had come to the young people's singing played a game of volleyball.

Sixteen-year-old Harold Beachy zipped past Rebekah, nearly bumping into her wheelchair. "Oops, sorry."

Rebekah opened her mouth to reply, but Harold had already raced to the other side of the volleyball net to join the game. She sighed. "What's the use? No one seems to know I'm here anyway."

Self-pity was a common occurrence for Rebekah these days, as she struggled to deal with her insecurities and envy of others who could do all the things she couldn't do. Take her cousin, Mary Ellen Hilty, for example. Mary Ellen had lots of suitors and could probably have her pick of any of the young men if she wanted.

Rebekah and Mary Ellen had become cousins by marriage when Mary Ellen's father, Amos, had married Rebekah's aunt Miriam. The young girls had been friends before that, but after the joining of their families, they had become even closer, despite the fact that they were nothing alike.

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Mary Ellen had dark brown hair and hazel-colored eyes, while Rebekah had light brown hair and pale blue eyes.

Mary Ellen, who had been teaching at the Amish one-room schoolhouse for the last year, was fun loving, self-assured, and outgoing, which was probably why all the young men admired her. Rebekah, on the other hand, was quiet, self-conscious, and certain that no one except her family could possibly love her. She lacked the confidence seen in most young women her age.

Rebekah hadn't always been shy, however. In fact, when she was a little girl, she used to be as outgoing as Mary Ellen was now. But thirteen years ago, everything had changed when a freak accident left her crippled.

Rebekah still remembered the details of the accident as though it had happened yesterday. A storm had come up just as Aunt Mim, who'd been the schoolteacher back then, had dismissed the class to go home after school ended for the day. Aunt Mim had promised to give Rebekah a ride home, and Rebekah had gone outside to wait in the buggy while Aunt Mim finished cleaning the blackboard. Rebekah had just reached the buggy, which had been parked under a tree, when she heard a terrible snap and was knocked to the ground.

The next thing she knew, she was in the hospital with doctors and nurses standing over her bed, looking ever so serious. Her distraught parents stood nearby, and Mom was weeping for all she was worth. When Rebekah had asked what was wrong, she'd been informed that a branch had broken from the tree and fallen across her back, knocking her unconscious. The blow had injured part of her spinal

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cord, and she would probably never walk again.

The reality didn't truly sink in until one month later when Rebekah was allowed to go home. It was then that she'd come to realize exactly what her limitations would be. She would be confined to a wheelchair, unable to walk, run, and play the way other children could do. Her grandmother Anna Stoltzfus had moved into their house in order to help care for Rebekah. That gave Rebekah a clue that she would always be a burden to those she loved. She would never be able to live a normal life—never marry, never have children of her own.

"Are you havin' fun?"

Rebekah's thoughts came to a halt when Emma Troyer skidded to a stop in front of her wheelchair, red-faced and panting for breath.

How can I have fun while I sit here on the sidelines watching you and the others play games? Rebekah kept her thoughts to herself and nodded in reply. After so many years of being left out of things, she had come to realize that there was no use in complaining, as it would do nothing to change her condition. She'd learned to suffer in silence and put on a brave front as though her handicap didn't matter. Trouble was it did matter because it singled her out as being different from the rest of her family and friends.

"We should be eating soon," Emma said, nodding toward the refreshment table.

"Jah, I expect so."

"Well, guess I'll go see if I can get in on the next game of volleyball." Emma patted Rebekah's shoulder, offering her a sympathetic-looking smile; then she hurried away.

Rebekah hated to see pity on anyone's face. It wasn't

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their sympathy or pity she wanted. What she needed was a miracle. Some said she'd already had one miracle. Leastways, that's what everyone had called it when, after several months of physical therapy, Rebekah had been able to stand and even take a few steps on her own. Of course, in order to do it, she needed leg braces and a pair of special crutches strapped to her arms. Some miracle that was! It took a lot of effort to walk that way, so Rebekah spent most of her time in her wheelchair. One of the few things she did that she would consider useful was the monthly column she wrote for *The Budget*, an Amish newspaper. As one of the scribes for the paper, she often wrote about some of the major happenings in their area of Lancaster County, but that was nothing compared to what other people her age got to do.

Rebekah caught sight of Mary Ellen running through the tall grass across the yard with several young fellows right on her heels. Mary Ellen lifted her hand in a wave, and Rebekah waved back, wishing that she, too, could run through the grass with even one suitor following her.

It was obvious by the smile on Mary Ellen's face that she enjoyed all the attention she'd received this evening. And why wouldn't she? Rebekah was sure that any woman who had so many men interested in her would take pleasure in it, too.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself not to give in to the threatening tears. Crying wouldn't do her a bit of good.

Rebekah opened her eyes and wheeled herself back to the barn. She spotted the refreshment table inside the door and headed over to get something cool to drink, hoping it

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might help wash away that awful, familiar lump.

“Want some punch?”

Rebekah jerked her head to the right. There stood Daniel Beachy, one of the young men she had seen talking to Mary Ellen earlier this evening. “*Danki*, but I can get it,” she muttered. “It’s one of the few things I can do by myself.”

“It’s no bother. I was about to get something for myself anyway.” Daniel ladled some punch into a paper cup, then handed it to Rebekah in spite of her refusal. “So, are you enjoying the singing?”

Rebekah smiled as she took the offered punch. “It’s all right, but I wish we could do more singing and less game playing.”

“Volleyball’s a lot of fun, though.”

Rebekah wondered if she should explain that the reason she enjoyed singing was because it was all she could do well. Game playing, at least the kind that required running and jumping, was out of the question for someone like her. However, she never got the chance to express those thoughts because Mary Ellen showed up.

“Rebekah, you should have heard some of the silly jokes Johnny Yoder told me,” Mary Ellen said breathlessly. “I’ve laughed so much tonight, I don’t think I’ll have to laugh again for the rest of the month.”

Rebekah feigned a smile as Mary Ellen related a couple of the jokes Johnny had shared. Her cousin’s cheeks were bright pink, and her eyes shone with obvious enthusiasm. No wonder so many of the young Amish men wanted to court her. Rebekah couldn’t be mad at Mary Ellen, though. It wasn’t her fault she was so cute and such fun to be around. If Rebekah

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had been able to join in the games, maybe others would like her more, too. Some of the boys might want to court her if she could run, jump, and laugh at their silly jokes.

Mary Ellen leaned over Rebekah's wheelchair and whispered in her ear, "Johnny's asked if he can give me a ride home in his courting buggy tonight. You don't care if I go with him, do you?"

"But you came with me and Simon."

"I know, but I'm sure your brother won't mind not having to drive me home." Mary Ellen smiled. "After all, he has to go to the same place as you're going, and if I go with Johnny, then Simon won't have to travel clear over to my house."

"Jah, sure. Go ahead and ride with Johnny." Rebekah wasn't about to make a fuss over Mary Ellen riding home with someone else. She might appear to be jealous.

She glanced over at Daniel. Was that a look of envy she saw as he shifted from one foot to the other and stared at the concrete floor? Maybe he'd been waiting for the chance to ask Mary Ellen if he could give her a ride home and was disappointed because now he wouldn't get that opportunity. If Daniel hadn't wasted so much time getting punch for Rebekah, he might have been able to seek Mary Ellen out. Then it would be his courting buggy she would be riding home in tonight, not Johnny Yoder's.

Why do I always feel so guilty about things? Rebekah fretted. After all, it wasn't as if she had asked Daniel to get her some punch or kept him here on purpose. She hadn't intentionally spoiled his chances with Mary Ellen. He should have realized he was missing out on his chance and gone looking for the girl he wanted to escort home.

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Rebekah tried to shake aside her contrary feelings as she said in her most cheerful voice, "I'm getting kind of tired, so I think I'll go find Simon and see if he's ready to head for home."

"Johnny and I will be leaving soon, too, I expect," Mary Ellen said with a nod. "Probably after we've had something to eat."

"I'd better see when my sister, Sarah Jane, wants to go. My two brothers will probably have dates to take home." Daniel glanced down at Rebekah and smiled. It was the kind of smile she'd become used to seeing—one of pity, she was certain of it. "*Gut nacht*, Rebekah." He looked over at her cousin and nodded. "*Gut nacht*, Mary Ellen."

"Good night," Rebekah and Mary Ellen said in unison.

As Daniel walked away, Mary Ellen leaned close to Rebekah's ear again. "He's kind of *gutguckich*, don't you think?"

If you think he's so handsome, then why aren't you riding home with him instead of Johnny? "He seems to like you," Rebekah muttered.

Just then, Johnny rushed up to Mary Ellen and grabbed hold of her hand. "Come on. Let's play one more game of volleyball before we eat, and then we'll head for home."

"All right, Johnny." Mary Ellen gave Rebekah's arm a little pat. "See you in two weeks at preaching, if not before."

"Jah," Rebekah murmured as she wheeled away in search of Simon.



As Mary Ellen walked away with Johnny, she couldn't help

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but feel sorry for her best friend. She could tell by the dejected look she had seen on Rebekah's face that her friend was upset—probably because Mary Ellen wouldn't be riding home with her and Simon. As much as Mary Ellen wanted to please her cousin, she didn't want to give up the chance to ride home with Johnny tonight, knowing it could be the beginning of their courting days. At least she hoped it would be because Johnny was a lot of fun, and she really enjoyed his company.

Johnny squeezed Mary Ellen's fingers. "What's with the sour expression? I thought you enjoyed playing volleyball."

"I—I do. I was just noticing how glum Rebekah looks tonight, and I'm concerned about her."

"Ah, she always looks that way. How does she ever expect to get a man if she goes around lookin' like she's been suckin' a bunch of sour grapes all the time?" Johnny offered Mary Ellen a wide grin. "Sure am glad my girl likes to laugh and smile."

My girl? Did Johnny really think of Mary Ellen as his girl? Or was he only flirting with her the way so many of the other fellows had done tonight?

Mary Ellen thought back to the days when she'd been a young girl attending the one-room schoolhouse. None of the boys had showed any interest in her then—except to tease and taunt. Her *mamm* had died when Mary Ellen was still quite young, and many students had teased her due to her unkempt appearance.

But all that had changed after Pappy married Mama Mim. From that time on, Mary Ellen's dresses were mended and her hair put neatly in place. She'd felt a new sense of

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confidence, having both a mother and a father. Mama Mim had always taken good care of her, and Mary Ellen felt as though Pappy's new wife loved her as much as if she were her own flesh-and-blood daughter.

Now, as a young woman, Mary Ellen not only had more confidence, but she also taught at the one-room school-house she had once attended. She had a host of male admirers like Johnny, who seemed determined to win her affections. She just wished that at least one of those fellows would notice Rebekah. It might help her smile more if she knew someone had an interest in her, and it would surely boost her confidence.

"Are you gonna stand there all night watchin' the backside of Rebekah's wheelchair, or did you plan to play volleyball with me?" Johnny asked, breaking into Mary Ellen's contemplations.

She forced her lips to form a smile, knowing she needed to put on a happy face if she was going to keep fun-loving Johnny's attention. "Jah. I'm ready to play."



Rebekah's sixteen-year-old brother, Simon, pushed her wheelchair up the wooden ramp Dad had built soon after her accident, and they entered the house through the back door. Rebekah spotted her parents right away, sitting at the kitchen table, playing a game of Scrabble.

Dad didn't seem to notice them as he tugged on his beard and studied the wooden letters on the tray in front of him.

However, Mom looked up right away and smiled. Her

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eyes, much bluer and brighter than Rebekah's, seemed to dance in the light of the gas lantern that hung above the table. "Sit yourselves down and talk awhile. Tell us about the singing. Did you two have a good time?"

"Jah, it was great!" Simon pushed a lock of sandy brown hair off his forehead. "Just about every Amish teen we know was there." He opened the door of their propane-operated refrigerator, obviously looking for something to eat.

"And you, daughter?" Mom asked. "Did you have a good time?"

Rebekah shrugged. "It was all right, I guess."

"Just all right? It's been a good many years for me now, but as I remember, singings were always a lot of fun." Mom glanced over at Dad, who was still studying the Scrabble board as if his life depended on the next move. "It was right after a singing when your *daed* asked me to marry him, you know."

"Jah, well, I expect our family might be in for another wedding soon," Simon said, as he helped himself to a thick slice of apple-crumble pie and took a seat at the table.

Mom's eyebrows lifted. "Is there something you've been keeping from us, Rebekah? *Kumme*—come now—tell us your news."

Rebekah wheeled her chair closer to the table. "It's not me. I think Simon's referring to Cousin Mary Ellen."

"I see. So who's her lucky fellow?" Mom prompted. "Or aren't we supposed to know that yet?"

"It could be anyone. Mary Ellen's popular with several young men in our community. She can probably take her pick of whomever she pleases." Rebekah drew in a quick

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breath and released it with a moan. “I think Daniel Beachy is the one most in love with her, but Johnny Yoder won’t give him a chance.”

“Hmm. . .” Mom gave a slight nod of her head. “It sounds as if Mary Ellen might have to make a choice then.”

“She’ll pick Johnny,” Simon said with his mouth full of pie.

“Really, Simon, didn’t you get enough food at the singing? Sometimes I think all you ever do is eat,” Mom scolded, though she was smiling when she spoke.

“Aw, leave the boy alone, Sarah. He’s growin’ so fast these days and needs all the nourishment he can get.” It was the first time Rebekah’s father had spoken since their arrival. Suddenly, he slapped the table and hollered, “My word is *zealot!* The *z*, which is normally worth ten points, is on a double letter square. The other letters are worth one point apiece. The *l* lands on a double word square, so my entire score is fifty!” He gave Mom a playful nudge on the arm. “I have only one letter left, so beat that if you can!”

Mom laughed and tickled Dad beneath his full beard, which had recently become sprinkled with a few gray hairs. “All right, Andrew, you’ve won the game fair and square, so now you’re deserving of a reward. How about a piece of pie? If your growing son hasn’t eaten it all, that is,” she added with a wink.

“You two act like a couple of *kinner*,” Rebekah said with a mock frown. “Watch out now, or you’ll end up waking Nadine and Grandma Stoltzfus.”

Dad chuckled. “Well now, we wouldn’t want to do that, would we? Grandma might eat all the pie before any of us

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could make it to the refrigerator.”

“Dad,” Rebekah said with a snicker. “You know Grandma doesn’t eat so much.”

Dad bent down and tapped her under the chin. “That’s true, but if Simon or little sister Nadine should decide to help her, then I might have to take on a second job just to pay for the grocery bills.”

“You’re such a tease,” Rebekah said, as she propelled her chair quickly away from him.

“You’re right, I am. That’s why your mamm agreed to marry me. She loves to be teased.” He turned his attentions on Mom again, tickling her in the ribs and under the chin.

She tickled him right back, and soon the two of them were howling and tickling so much that Rebekah was sure they really would wake Grandma or Nadine.

As Mom and Dad chased each other around the table, a pang of jealousy washed over Rebekah like the rippling creek running across the back of their farm. She couldn’t help wondering how it would feel to laugh and run around with a young man—someone she loved as much as her folks obviously loved each other. *But that would take a miracle, and miracles only happened back in the Bible days, didn’t they?*

A silent prayer for an honest-to-goodness miracle floated through Rebekah’s mind as she directed her wheelchair toward her downstairs bedroom. What she really needed was to quit thinking about miracles and be alone for a while.



“I wonder what’s wrong with Rebekah tonight,” Andrew said to Sarah as they started another game of Scrabble. He

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squinted at the board and reached for two letters from his pile. “She sure didn’t act like she enjoyed that singing so much.”

“She didn’t enjoy it at all,” Simon chimed in before Sarah could respond. “You should have seen the way she sat there in her wheelchair watching the others play games with a big old scowl on her face. Guess she felt left out because she couldn’t join in the fun, but I don’t think that’s any excuse for being such a stick-in-the-mud.”

Sarah glanced over at Andrew. “I hate to see our daughter hurting so. Maybe it would be best if we didn’t allow her to go to any more singings or young people’s functions.”

Andrew’s eyebrows lowered as he frowned, causing deep wrinkles to form on his forehead. “We can’t shield Rebekah from everything, Sarah. She’s not a little girl anymore, and she needs to mingle with others her age, don’t you think?”

“I—I suppose so, but—”

“It’s time for her to grow up and realize that even though she can’t do everything others can do, she’s still a capable person and can do many things quite well.” He added two of his letters to a word already on the Scrabble board, which gave him another ten points.

Sarah took her turn, making a five-letter word and racking up fifteen more points.

Simon chuckled. “You’d better watch out, Dad, or Mom might skunk ya on this game.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“Back to the subject of my moody sister,” Simon said. “I read in the paper the other day that there’s going to be a convention in Ohio next month. It’s for Amish folks who are handicapped, like Rebekah. Maybe the two of you could

hire a driver and take her there. That would give her the chance to be with some people she could relate to better, and maybe she'd even learn a few new things about how to cope with her disability."

Sarah opened her mouth to comment, but Simon rushed on before she could get a word out. "If you're worried about Grandma, Nadine, and me, I'm sure we can get along fine by ourselves for the couple of days you'd be gone."

Andrew squinted as he continued to study the board. "I read about that handicap convention, too, but I'm not sure I could get away from the farm that long, so your mamm might have to be the one to take her." He glanced up from the board and looked over at Sarah. "How do you feel about it? Do you think Rebekah would agree to go?"

"I don't know. I suppose we could ask her."

"You want to bring it up, or should I?"

"I'll mention it tomorrow," Sarah replied. "In the meantime, I'll be praying that she will be open to the idea."

Andrew nodded. "I'll do the same."



All the way home from the singing, Daniel thought about Rebekah—how cute she was, how sad she had looked sitting in her wheelchair all alone.

"It must be hard for her not being able to run around and play games like the other young people do," he muttered as he guided his horse and open carriage up the long driveway that led to his father's house and dairy farm. He had enjoyed his brief conversation with Rebekah tonight, even though she hadn't said all that much. He wished he'd

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been able to get up the nerve to ask if he could give her a ride home from the singing in his courting buggy.

Daniel pulled up to the barn and climbed down from the buggy. “ ’Course it ain’t likely that she’d have agreed to go,” he mumbled as he kicked a couple of small stones with the toe of his boot. After all, there had been a lot more interesting fellows at the singing tonight than him—some with fancy buggies they’d fixed up to impress the girls, some with fun-loving personalities like Johnny Yoder. “Wish I could be more like him instead of being afraid I’ll say the wrong thing or do something stupid.”

He quickly unhitched his horse and led him toward the barn as a feeling of regret threatened to weigh him down. “Even if I had found the nerve to ask if Rebekah would take a ride in my rig, it ain’t likely she would have been interested in riding home in my simple courting buggy with an ordinary fellow like me.”