

The Saddle Maker's Son

By Kelly Irvin

A Sneak Peek

Chapter 1

Alone at last. Rebekah Lantz tugged the creaking shed door shut and leaned against it. The folded piece of paper from her sister Leila weighed heavy as a stone in her hand. When had she managed to tuck it into the two-seater Rebekah drove with Susan to and from the school five days a week? Did she slip in while Rebekah was helping Susan by listening to the younger scholars read aloud? Surely not. Leila had a baby daughter to think about now and a husband. She couldn't be roaming the countryside delivering notes. The fact that she had made Rebekah's stomach rock. Guilt swirled there, mixing with a swelling ache to see her sister and a baby niece who would see her aenti as a complete and utter stranger. A Plain woman such as herself should forgive. No matter how much Leila's flight hurt. No matter how it left Rebekah with little chance of finding love herself among the young men who looked at her and knew exactly what Leila had done.

Just because Leila had given up everything to follow Jesse into the Englisch world didn't mean Rebekah would leave too. She longed to scream out those words at the next singing. Put them to music. Write her own song. Still, it wouldn't change the look on the faces of those boys she'd known her entire life. Deer caught in the headlights of an Englisch truck barreling toward them on the highway.

Still, she had to open the note, read it. Its weight seemed to increase as each second ticked by. The cracks in the weathered boards of the shed allowed afternoon sun to filter through

in stripes like bars. The April sun was warm, as if reminding Rebekah Texas didn't wait around for summer like the northern states did. Her eyes adjusted to the dusky interior after a few seconds. The smell of mold, decaying wood, and dirt floated in the air. Old egg crates, a broken desk, a stack of chairs, a wooden door with white, peeling paint filled the small room. She wasn't a coward. Swallowing against the knot of apprehension that always choked her when she did something of which her *mudder* would not approve, Rebekah unfolded the single sheet of notebook paper and peered at Leila's neat, block writing.

Dear schweschder,

Hope you are well. We must meet. I need to talk to you face to face. Come to where the school path meets the road Friday at lunch. I'll be driving the green VW bug. Can you believe I drive? Give Hazel a kiss for me. Love Leila

Inhaling the ripe scents that reminded her of how everything returned to the earth in the end, Rebekah reread the note a second time. Leila skipped along in life with nary a thought for how her actions affected others. Her abdication from her family. Or inviting Rebekah to a meeting that would cause her great trouble if Mudder or Mordecai found out.

Rebekah's job as an aide to teacher Susan King wasn't much, but it was all she had. She would never be allowed to get a job in town after Leila's decision to leave her Amish faith and family to marry Jesse Glick, who'd done the same. Everyday since since that Christmas Eve night, Mudder and Mordecai had watched Rebekah, never letting her go far from their sight, as if waiting for her to take flight.

Mudder blamed Leila's exposure to the Englisch world while working at the daycare in town for her decision to follow Jesse. Not love. For surely it was love that made a person do

these strange, inexplicable things. Rebekah wouldn't know. How could she when not one of the boys had to ask her to take a ride in his buggy. Not one invitation since Leila left.

Pressing the note to her chest, she closed eyes that burned with tears she refused to shed. In the two years since Leila had left, Rebekah had seen her sister a mere three times. She'd seen baby Grace, now ten months old, a grand total of two times. Why now? And with such short notice. Plenty of time to forgive and forget, as she was called to do. Yet, here she stood with pain and anger barricaded together in a hardened heart.

She had to see Leila. If for no other reason than to say the words, "I forgive you." Saying them was the first step in making forgiveness happen. Leastways, that was what the bishop would say.

A sound, like a muffled sneeze, broke the silence. Rebekah jumped and dropped the note.

The one place she'd thought to be alone.

"Hello?"

Nothing. Apprehension filled her lungs, making it hard to breathe. Her heart pounded in an out-of-sync rhythm. Rebekah scooped up the note and took two steps back. She put her shaking hand on a desk that leaned against the wall, its front legs missing. "Who's there?"

Something or someone scuttled along the far wall behind the stack of egg crates. Rebekah took a step toward the door. "I know you're there. I'll go outside and you can come out. I won't hurt you."

Such bravado.

What if a prisoner had escaped from the prison near Beeville again? Memories of her brother-in-law Phineas's bruised face and bloodied arm spun through in her mind's eye. Phineas

and Deborah had escaped and the prisoner from the McConnell Unit had been captured, but not before damage had been done.

She whirled, jerked open the door, and stumbled into the fresh air and light.

A young girl shot past her, dragging a little boy by the hand. The boy, dressed in faded blue jeans and a gray T-shirt that might have been white at one time, stumbled and fell to his knees. A filthy, bedraggled Mickey Mouse backpack weighed him down. The girl, who looked eleven or twelve, paused and jerked him to his feet. They were both all bones and no flesh, all angles and points. Their faces were dirty, and their dark hair matted to their heads. Tears streaked the boy's face.

"Wait, wait, who are you?" Rebekah hurled herself after them. The girl sped up, headed for the stand of live oaks, hackberries, and junipers at the edge of the schoolyard. "Stop! We have food. *Comida.*"

The girl halted. She swiveled and stared back at Rebekah, the expression on her brown face a mixture of hope and suspicion. Her arm went around the boy, who looked about Rebekah's little sister Hazel's age, maybe five or six. His almond colored eyes were huge in his thin face. "*Comida?*"

Rebekah had studied Spanish in an old textbook she'd found in a secondhand bookstore for almost three years now, in hopes of one day being allowed to cross into Mexico when the older folks made their trips to Progreso to the dentist or to buy medicines. She knew what the words were, but had no idea if she were pronouncing them correctly. "Food. *Co . . . mi . . . da.* Are you hungry?"

The girl nodded hard. "*Mi hermano tiene hambre.*"

They were brother and sister. Who they were and why they were in the district's schoolhouse shed didn't matter as much to Rebekah as the idea that children were going without food. She pointed to them, then the schoolhouse, and put her hand on her chest. "You come inside with me."

The boy began to back away, dragging his backpack with him. He shook his head, fear etched across his features.

"You want me to bring the food to you?"

The girl tugged at her brother. "Sí."

"No one will hurt you, I promise. What's your name? *Nombre?*"

The girl cocked her head toward the boy, who pressed his face against her shirt. "Him Diego." She thumped on her chest. "Lupe."

"I'm Rebekah." She tapped her chest with her index finger. "Wait here. I'll be back. Don't go anywhere. No one will bother you out here."

She dashed across the yard, hopped over the two steps that led to the small porch, and tugged open the door. Inside, she skidded to a stop. The first graders were at the front of the room, reading aloud to Susan. The middle grades were writing essays while the older boys and girls graded the younger children's arithmetic tests. She sidled over to where Susan stood, arms crossed, a patient smile plastered on her plump face. "There you are. You said you were going to get your lunchbox from the buggy. I thought maybe you decided teaching wasn't for you and went home." Susan chuckled and patted Mary on the shoulder. "Good job. Molly, you're next."

"I need to tell you something." Rebekah leaned in and whispered, not wanting to get the entire school riled up. "Over by the stove."

Susan's eyebrows arched. "Caleb, come listen to Molly read for me."

Grinning, Caleb popped from his seat. Knowing her younger brother as she did, Rebekah assumed he was thrilled to get out of writing his essay, even if it were only for a few moments.

Susan followed her to the long cabinets that lined one wall, providing storage space for lunchboxes and school supplies. “Something wrong?”

“*Nee*. Well, maybe. I don’t know.” Rebekah drummed her fingers on the countertop. She had a peanut butter and wild grape jam sandwich in her cooler. Two oatmeal cookies. An apple. And pickled okra. Not enough for two hungry children. “I found two kinner hiding in the shed.”

Susan swung around toward the rows of desks. Her hand went up, her index finger pointing, and she began to count in a whisper.

“*Nee*, not ours. I’m not sure where they came from, but they’re hungry—”

“Did you ask them where they came from?” Susan’s schoolteacher voice commanded an answer. “What were they doing in the shed?”

“Hiding, I guess—“

“Why?”

“I don’t know. They don’t speak much English.”

“They’re from Mexico?”

“I don’t think so. They sounded . . . different.”

“Why did you leave them out there?”

“They were afraid to come in.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“What *do* you know?”

“Just that they’re scared and dirty and it doesn’t look like they have anybody to take care of them and they’re hungry.”

She closed her mouth and waited. Susan rubbed her upturned nose with one finger, her lips puckered and forehead wrinkled. “We might need to get Mordecai.”

Susan’s brother—Rebekah’s stepfather—would know what to do. And he was the deacon. Still, it would take thirty minutes round trip in the buggy to get to the farm and back. And then most likely Mordecai would be in the fields tending his beehives. “Can’t we feed them first? They looked starved.”

Susan chewed on her lip for a second. “I can’t abide by seeing a child go hungry.”

“Me neither.” Rebekah grabbed her lunchbox. “I have one PBJ sandwich.”

Susan scooped up the red cooler that had her name written in black marker on both sides. “I have venison sausage on a biscuit.”

The reading had stopped sometime during their conversation. Rebekah looked over her shoulder. Their scholars numbered fifteen and every one of them stared at Susan and her.

“Teacher, what’s going on?” Of course Caleb, as one of the cheekiest, had the nerve to voice the question written across all their faces. “Is someone out there?”

“We have visitors.” Susan made it sound like the typical parent visit. They did come by occasionally, sometimes with a hot meal or dessert, but runaway children who spoke another language, that never happened. “Mind your business and keep working.”

Rebekah scurried to the door, the lunchboxes in her hands. Susan followed. “You’re sure they’re alone. There’s no one waiting in the trees out there?”

“No one I saw. They seem completely alone.”

She waited while Susan opened the door for her. Her aunt looked back at the classroom, her expression stern. “Sally, you’re in charge. Everyone continues doing exactly what they’re doing now.”

“Yes, teacher,” the scholars responded in unison.

Knowing how much they wanted to please Susan, Rebekah had no doubt they would do as they were told. She couldn’t fathom how Susan did it, but her scholars not only obeyed her, they loved her and wanted to please her. She scurried across the small porch, gaze on the steps. “Lupe! Diego!”

“Nee, I’m Tobias Byler. Who are you?”

Rebekah craned her head. A man sat in a wagon, his face hidden in the shadow of a straw hat haloed by the mid-day sun. An older man, cookie cutter in size and lean build, sat ramrod straight next to him, mammoth hands resting on bended knees. Behind them, five children of varying ages filled the back of the wagon. Rebekah settled the lunchboxes on the ground and raised her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes. “There was a boy and girl out here. Did you see where they went?”

“The little boy and girl ran away when Tobias yelled at them.” A little girl with a lisp who held two dolls clutched to her chest, volunteered this startling information in a tone that said she didn’t approve. She stood and pointed. “They ran into those trees.”

“You yelled at them?” Rebekah knew better than to scold a man, any man, but especially one she didn’t know. Still, she couldn’t help herself. “They’re hungry. They’re children.”

Tobias lifted his hat, revealing brown hair over green eyes in a tanned face that held a bemused expression. He found her outburst funny somehow. He slapped the hat back on his head

as if he had all the time in the world to consider her comment. “I just missed running over the boy when he ran out in front of the wagon. I thought yelling was in order.”

“Tobias.” The other man had the same deep voice and accent that spoke of somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon line. “We’re newcomers. Let’s not get off on the wrong foot.”

“But *Daed*—”

“We brought the kinner by to see where they’ll start school tomorrow. I know there’s only a couple of weeks left, but they’re chomping at the bit to meet some of the other kinner around here.” Tobias’s daed smiled at Susan, who stood next to Rebekah, her hands on her hips. “I reckon they’re not so excited about school itself, sorry to say. I’m Levi Byler, your new neighbor. You must be the teacher.”

Why didn’t he think Rebekah was the teacher? She opened her mouth. Susan’s hand touched her arm. She shut her mouth.

“Pleased to meet you.” Susan seemed to have lost her schoolteacher voice. The words were soft, almost hesitant. She tilted her head as if looking around Levi. “Five of you? That’s a nice addition to our numbers. Y’all are welcome to come in and meet the other scholars.”

“What about the boy and the girl—”

Susan’s glare forced Rebekah to stop.

The children tumbled from the wagon and trotted to the door, each introducing himself to teacher as they tromped by. Rebekah caught the names of *Rueben*, *Micah*, *Ida*, *Nyla*, and *Liam* offered in tones that ranged from soft and respectful to downright giggly. Liam, the youngest, barely whispered his name with a cheeky grin before he scampered up the steps. Susan and Levi followed. Tobias hopped from the wagon and then planted himself next to Rebekah. He towered over her. Up close he looked even more solid and broad through the chest.

“I’ll help you look.”

Tearing her gaze from his beefy arms, Rebekah took a breath. “Why would you do that?”

“Because it’s obvious you’ll never forgive me if I don’t.”

“We’re called to forgive, no matter what.” Her tone sounded tart in her ears. If he only knew how hard it was for her to take her own advice. What a hypocrite she was. She worked to soften her tone. “It would be wrong to hold a grudge.”

“Do you always do what’s right?”

Her hand went to the spot where she’d tucked Leila’s note inside a torn seam on the backside of her apron. He asked too many questions and his green eyes seemed to see too much. “I try.”

“Me too.”

His shadow made him seem ten feet tall. Rebekah’s neck hurt from looking up at him. “I don’t think we should go off on our own.”

“They’re only children. You’ll be safe with me.”

The faint sarcasm that tinged his words didn’t make her feel safe.

Just the opposite.