

# The Four Horsemen

## Chapter One

*(June 3, 2005)*

“The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as promised by John in the book of Revelations are here!” Walter Rempel pounded his large fist onto the pulpit. “War has always been present, but fear of war, hatred leading to war, is not just about the fighting between countries. Our families are increasingly divided, with one sibling fighting another, children fighting with their parents.” The preacher paused to let his words sink in. The low-ceilinged church was hot from an early-summer heat wave and the overflowing congregation, many of whom had travelled great distances to hear him.

Walter Rempel was not an imposing physical figure. He was rather short, a little stocky, with dark-brown, slightly dishevelled curly hair pasted against his head from the sweat he generated from his passionate preaching. His voice, however, was compelling. It was bold, rose and fell in volume, and held a sonorous timbre, his total conviction about the truths he was expounding sounded in every word. He waved and gestured with his large hands as he spoke, further drawing the crowd’s rapt attention.

“Conquest is no longer just one country attempting to expand its borders by taking land from their neighbours, or the rich taking from the poor. Instead, it is about taking power over others, denying the authority of those rightly in charge and living only for themselves.” Walter continued, his piercing gaze roaming around the room, letting each person know that he was speaking directly to them, imploring them to listen not only to the urgency of his voice, but to the urgency in his message. He was living up to what people had said about his preaching as he attempted to connect with each person in the audience.

“In Africa and Asia there are more famines now than ever before. Food supplies in many parts of the world are dwindling, and people are lining up for food that simply isn’t there. But famine is not only an absence of food for the body. What about when there is no satisfying food for the soul? A child’s, a parent’s, a person’s soul withers when the love, the understanding, compassion from the surrounding community, is withheld from them. And with each of these abominations, the angel of death walks hand in hand! People are dying, emotionally, psychologically, as well as physically from the plague that is a lack of care, from the loss of love,

from battles waged when one has no desire to understand the other.” Walter’s voice grew stronger with each utterance of death’s many doors.

“Should we be afraid? Should we hide from this? Or can we answer the call of God to be a light shining in the darkness? Who will be the light to their family? Can we be the candle on the top of the hill, shining hope and spreading good news ...” Walter glanced to his left as he caught sight of an usher almost running down the side aisle of the church. She paused for a moment with fear and hesitation carved on her face before timidly ascending the stage. The usher kept her eyes on the floor, allowing her long brown hair to fall forward, covering her face, as she approached the pulpit, where Walter’s pause grew longer.

The usher leaned toward Walter, turning away from the congregation. He took a slight side-step away from the microphone and flinched upon hearing the message she whispered into his ear. Then she turned and fled down the aisle with tears streaming down her face. The congregation sat transfixed. What was important enough to interrupt a preacher?

Walter straightened himself, swallowed, and stepped back behind the pulpit. “Will you answer the call of God?” The keyboard player started playing the hymn “Just as I Am,” very softly as once again Walter’s voice rose in pitch and fervour. The audience knew the climax of the service was now upon them. They had heard the message, heard the invitation to respond, and now it was a question of commitment. “Will you stand with Jesus? Will you leave your sins behind and walk to the front to become a fisher of men?”

He paused, took a deep breath and continued. “Whatever you may be facing, Jesus is there with you. You do not have to face it alone. Come to the front. We have elders who will pray with you. There is nothing too big for God, he can save you from whatever comes ...,” Walter’s voice cracked, “whatever comes your ....” He sobbed, cleared his throat, and then cleared it again. “God has a plan for your life. Nothing just happens. Will you surrender yourself into his loving hands?”

Tears poured down Walter’s cheeks as he stood behind the pulpit, both hands gripping its sides, knuckles white. Four people had already knelt at the front of the church, with an elder wearing a nametag standing behind each one. Another six repentant souls were walking down the aisles.

“Just as I am without one plea, I come, Lord, I come to thee ... Fully surrender yourself.” Walter’s voice was weaker now, and he began swaying back and forth. “I come, Lord, I come.” And then he stepped from behind the pulpit and joined the others kneeling at the front of the church, his face wet with tears.

An hour later all the prayer partners had finished recording personal information on their cards, most lights were turned out, and the parking lot outside the church had only a few cars left. Walter sat on the front pew, leaning forward, his head in his hands. The pastor of the church who had invited him to come speak stood at the back of the auditorium, tentatively looking at the back of Walter’s head, at the clock on the wall, at the floor, and then at the pulpit. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and then took a step forward.

Halfway down the aisle the pastor stopped and looked at the pulpit again, turned to look at the clock over his shoulder, and then rested his hand on the pew beside him. He cleared his throat. “Chmmm, chmmm.” He took another step before stopping once again. “Hhhmmm hhhmmm hhhmmm ....” He hummed “Just as I Am” softly as he slowly took one step after another toward Walter, finally arriving and sitting down beside him.

“Walter,” the pastor whispered. “Walter, the usher told me. She told me about Agatha. Do you want me to give you a ride back to Steinbach? I can have a brother drive your car behind us and deliver it to your house so you don’t have to drive.”

Walter didn’t lift his head, his hands still wet with tears. He strained to speak. “God’s plan. God has a plan that is His perfect will for each of us. He will never give us more than we can endure....” He sobbed through his hands. The pastor put his hand on Walter’s shoulder for a moment, quickly removed it, and then slowly, deliberately put it back.

“All things work together for good to them that love the Lord and are called according to his purpose,” the pastor quoted. Walter nodded. “And you, Walter, have been called, you have a purpose, the most noble purpose. You are bringing salvation to the lost. You are the shining light on the hill. Are you alright, Walter?”

Walter coughed, cleared his throat, and leaned back. The pastor removed his hand and shifted a little further down the pew.

"I'm fine. But I had better leave now. The children were with Agatha. I had better leave now." Walter hung his head as he lumbered toward the back of the church. A few lingering congregants moved toward him, beginning to extend their hands, but, seeing his face, they dropped their hands and took a step backward. Walter didn't look up as he took his coat from the hook beside the door and stepped into the night air.

It was still warm, and a breeze blew gently against Walter's face. He paused a moment with the door of the church still open behind him. Another tear rolled down his cheek, and he crunched over the church's gravel parking lot toward the navy-blue Dodge Durango waiting beside the road for him. Walter pulled open the door and climbed in before slumping his shoulders and head against the steering wheel. "God has a plan, has a perfect plan for you," Walter whispered, then shook his head a few times and sat up. He turned the key and the engine fired to life.

"I've anchored my soul in the haven of rest," came singing from the radio that was always left on in the car. "Ten bells and all's well ...." Walter reached for the knob and turn off the radio. He turned on the car's lights, looked over his shoulder, and pulled onto the road. The sound of his tires rolling over gravel and the cloud of dust rising behind him automatically engaged Walter with the task at hand, and he steered the car south toward Steinbach.

"When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thy rod, and thy staff, they comfort me," Walter recited, then sobbed. "What can I do now? Who will preach if I don't? Who will look after my children? Lord, I have spent almost my whole adult life sacrificing time with my family to serve you. I have missed their birthdays, their parent-teacher meetings, to hold revival meetings. How was that not enough for you? I thought that if I took care of your flock, you would take care of my family!"

Walter wiped the tears at the corner of his eyes as he drove. "What will I say to them? What if they are still there with her? What if they are there alone with her? Oh God, I need you! I need more than thy rod and thy staff to comfort me. My children need you. God's will for her life ... this is God's will for her? God, please reveal your will to me!" He kept a steady stream of words directed at the heavens as he approached the north end of Steinbach.

Without thinking, he flicked on his right blinker and turned toward the Steinbach Bible School at the edge of town where he had his office and drove past it toward the house the school

had provided for him and his family. There were three cars in the driveway and yard, but no ambulance or other type of emergency vehicles, and it looked like all the lights in the house were on. Walter stopped the car in front of the house and looked through the large dining room window into his house. Initially he only noticed the peeling paint from the cracked window frame. He shook his head and looked again and saw three of his children sitting at the kitchen table together with two ministers from his church.

## Chapter Two

Walter leaned his head forward onto the steering wheel and swallowed. "God's will ... God's perfect will ... I will fear no evil." He wanted to believe it, and if he said it often enough, he might. Two minutes later the door nearest to the garage opened and Arnold Dueck, one of the ministers Walter had seen through the window, stepped out. Walter opened his car door and got out.

"Walter, are you alright? Are you coming inside? Your children have been wondering, have been asking for you for almost two hours. Wasn't your service in Landmark tonight? Do you have any idea of the time? Where have you been?" Arnold wasn't giving him any time to answer.

Walter closed the car door gently and took a few steps toward the house before stopping once more. "What do I say to my children, Arnold? Can I actually tell them that there is a God who has a plan for his children that looks like this? I don't know if I can do that." Walter's voice was almost a whisper by the end. Arnold quickly pushed the door to the house closed and stepped up to him, placing both his hands firmly on Walter's shoulders.

"Look at me. Walter, look me in the face. This is God's will! You cannot question that, you cannot ever question that. God knows all things. He knows why he does what he does, even when we don't understand. This is hard enough; you can't take away the certainty of God, who God is, how God works, from your children at this time. Remember God loves you and remember also that you love God. You committed yourself to serving God, regardless of the cost. All things work together for ..." Arnold had started quoting from the book of Romans and Walter picked it up.

"...good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Walter finished the phrase. "I love God, and this is his purpose? My children love God, and this is his purpose?" Arnold tightened his grip on Walter's shoulders. He added a short but definite shake.

"It is not for us to question God. Doubting the authority of God, doubting his ability to make bigger plans than we might understand is a sin, Walter, a sin! This is no time to begin doubting and begin sinning! Your children need you. And tomorrow your church will need you. And next week the rest of the province will need you. There are souls that need to be saved!

They will need you to know who God is if you are to provide them with comfort and guidance.” Arnold’s voice was hard and stern. “Do you understand me?”

Walter’s whole body began shuddering involuntarily, sobs wracked his body, and he attempted to lean forward to support himself against Arnold, whose hands were still on his shoulders.

“Get ahold of yourself, Walter,” he said as he stepped back and pushed against Walter’s sagging body. “Take a breath, a deep breath. We have already begun praying with your children, but now that you are here, they need you to continue that. We called Elizabeth over from the dorm. She came to put the youngest one to bed. She is in the bedroom with him, telling stories and consoling him. But there are three who need you to be strong. Be strong, brother!” Arnold patted Walter on the shoulders, again pushing against them to help straighten Walter’s body.

Dave Hoepfner, the other minister who had been at the table with Walter’s children, opened the door and stuck his head outside. “Are you coming in? What’s happening here? Walter, is everything alright?” Dave looked first toward Walter, then toward Arnold. “Arnold, is everything alright?” The light shining from above the door created shadows on Walter’s furrowed brow and glowed off the sweaty forehead of Arnold Dueck.

“Walter just needed a moment to prepare himself, to remind himself of God’s calling for his life, of his responsibility to his children, to his church, to the lost and to his God. Yes, everything is in order now,” Arnold replied. He straightened his tie, adjusted his black suit jacket, took a step forward and put his arm around Walter’s body, pushing him toward the door. “All things, Walter, all things. Remember that.”

“Dad!” shouted Darrel as he leaped from the table, rushed to the door, and wrapped his arms around his father. At eighteen, Darrel was a full head taller than his father and had to lean down to embrace him. Eight-year-old Sonya and thirteen-year-old Anna were right behind him. Walter wrapped his arms awkwardly around his children. Darrel whispered, “Mom’s ...,” he took a deep breath, “Mom’s ...”

“Dead,” blurted Anna. “She’s not ...,” Anna drew a deep breath, “here anymore.” She took another deep breath. “The hospital took her away,” her voice squeaked out between gasps. Walter brushed dark curls from her face, which was wet with tears. He stroked her head a few

times before resting his hand on Sonya's head. A few tears welled up in Walter's eyes, and he quickly wiped them back.

"Why did they take her away? Where did they take her?" added Sonya, her face buried deep in Walter's stomach. She looked up toward Walter's face, hoping he would be able to offer a different response than that of her older brother.

Elizabeth appeared in the hallway, with a teary-eyed Benjamin in her arms. Six-year-old Benjamin was wearing only his pyjama bottoms, and his bare chest heaved with sobs. She hesitated a moment and then released Benjamin's wriggling body so he could squeeze into his father's embrace too. For a moment it appeared that Elizabeth would step forward and join the group, but after a hesitant step forward, she retreated back into the hallway once more.

"What happened to Mommy?" Benjamin looked directly into his father's eyes. "She was making supper when she fell down, and then she didn't get up again. Where is she now? Why did that big car take her? Where did they take her? When is she coming back?" Walter tightened his embrace around his children, unable to provide an answer to the questions.

"I don't think she's coming back," whispered Anna. Benjamin's sobs grew louder and stronger. Anna wrapped both her arms around him.

"Don't say that to him," hissed Darrel into her ear. "He's too young to know what happened."

Slowly Walter opened his arms. "Let's sit down at the table, everyone." He looked toward the hallway. "You too please, Elizabeth. I think I might need your help tonight." Walter avoided looking at Arnold Dueck and Dave Hoepfner as he directed his children toward the table. Arnold was quick to take a seat on one side of Walter and waved Dave toward the seat on Walter's other side.

Elizabeth, with her light-brown hair hanging loosely around her shoulders, sat across the table from Walter and pulled Benjamin onto her lap. He snuggled against her as his sobs subsided. Elizabeth wiped away his tears, stroked his back, and then kissed him on the cheek. He shifted his arms to give her a hug as she continued to draw circles and lines on his back. He closed his eyes for a moment, then pried them open. He blinked, closed his eyes again, and deep, rhythmic breathing took over his body.

"Children," Walter began. He took a deep breath, looked around the table at the young faces staring into his eyes, and at the adults carefully avoiding his gaze. "Children," Walter

began again. “You know how ... how the Bible teaches us that God has a perfect plan for our lives ...” Darrel nodded. He sat perfectly still, his hands resting on the tabletop, keeping his piercing hazel eyes on his father.

Sonya gasped, looked up and then looked down at her shoes under the table. Her skinny arms gripped the chair and began to quiver. She took a deep breath, a sob breaking out, took another deep breath and used one arm to try and stop the other from quivering. Her sobs grew stronger and she put both arms on the table and hid her face in them. Elizabeth shifted Benjamin in her lap and placed her free hand on Sonya’s shoulder. Gradually Sonya’s sobs settled, but she kept her face hidden.

Anna squinted toward her father, shook her head, and closed her grip on the chair beneath her. She opened her mouth to say something but stopped herself. Her mouth hardened into a thin line, and she began kicking her heels against the legs of the chair. “You’re not actually going to tell us ...” Anna blurted out toward her father, blinking rapidly.

“Anna, this is no time to speak to your father like that,” Arnold Dueck stated coldly toward her. Anna glared across the table at him, biting her lip to keep from spitting out more words.

Walter threw an imploring look at his daughter. “Anna, Anna, please. This is a very difficult time, but God promises to never give us more than we can handle. Together, God walking with us, we can find our way through this too.” Anna got up and walked toward the hallway. “Anna, please. We need to be together as a family now.”

Sonya looked up, then quickly averted her eyes back down toward her shoes. Darrel stood up and took a step toward Anna.

“Anna, let me give you a hug.” Darrel moved to put his arms around her. “We all love you too. It’s not just God who loves you.” Anna pulled away from Darrel at those words and stood in the entrance of the hallway, her back to the people around the table. Dave Hoeppner threw questioning glances from Walter to Arnold to Anna, and around the circle at the table, convulsively swallowing.

Walter stood up, stepped toward Anna, and placed his hands on her shoulders. She flinched at her father’s touch. “Anna, come back to the table just long enough for us to pray together. Then maybe we all should go to bed. It is very late.” Walter used his hands to turn Anna around and move her toward the table. He led her to his chair, then firmly put his hand on

Arnold's shoulder and moved him out of his chair. "I'll take this chair, Arnold, beside my daughter. You can take her chair." Arnold stood up and moved around the table without looking at Walter or Anna.

Dave Hoepfner put both his hands, palms upward, on the table as if to hold hands with Sonya and Arnold, who sat on either side of him. Neither responded and he left one hand on the table while removing the other. Elizabeth gently rocked Benjamin, who was taking deep breaths, eyes shut tightly, no longer aware of what was going on around him.

"Let's pray," Walter said. "Lord, you have a plan for each one of us. Help us to understand, or at least accept what you have for us. Let us rest in the knowledge that you know best, you knew that Agatha needed to come home to you now, even though we ... we ... were not ... ready for that." Walter's voice faltered before he continued. "Lord, keep us in your comforting hands as we walk through this valley of the shadow of ... Amen."

No one looked up. A chair scratched on the floor as Elizabeth pushed back from the table. "I'm going to put Benjamin into his bed."

Walter looked at her, stood up as if to follow her, then stopped. "Thank you. Once he's in bed, would you help Anna and Sonya to bed? That was always Agatha's ..." Elizabeth stood up slowly, allowing Benjamin's head to nestle against her shoulder, and then moved toward the last bedroom along the hall.

Darrel got up from the table and walked toward his father. "Dad, we're going to be okay. Don't worry. We'll just keep praying, and God will just keep taking care of us. Right?" There was a hint of fear in Darrel's question. He hugged his dad, and then sat down at the table again, his lips quivering for the first time. He rested an elbow on the table and let his forehead drop into his hand.

Walter took a step toward his daughters. "Goodnight, Anna. Goodnight, Sonya. I pray that God will give you a good rest and tomorrow, we will start on our new journey together." Sonya stood up and wrapped her arms tightly around her father's legs.

"Goodnight, Daddy," she whispered.

"I love you, Sonya, and God loves you," Walter said, leaning forward and rubbing his daughter's shoulders. "I love you, Anna. Tomorrow is a new day." Walter stepped toward Anna to give her a hug, but she stood up from her seat and side-stepped him before darting into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Arnold Dueck stood and motioned toward Dave Hoepfner before turning to face Walter. “It’s time for us to go. We called the hospital to come pick up Agatha as soon as Darrel called us to tell us about her fall. We will be back tomorrow. I’m sure we have many plans to make about the next few days and then your preaching engagements in Saskatchewan over the next few weeks.” Arnold shook Walter’s hand, then Dave gripped it with both of his and held it for a few moments before letting go. “I’m sure we can ask Elizabeth to look after your children while you are away. She’s done that before, I think, but that too can wait until tomorrow.”

“I’m so sorry, Walter. There is one thing you can count on—the Lord will take care of you and your family,” Dave mumbled as he let go of Walter’s hand and shuffled toward the door.

“Goodnight. See you tomorrow,” Walter said toward the door, without moving to see his guests out. Elizabeth returned to the dining room and moved beside Sonya, who was leaning against her father.

“Sonya, let’s go brush your teeth, and then I’ll help you into your pyjamas.” Elizabeth put her hand on Sonya’s shoulder as she spoke. “And then I’ll draw some pictures on your back and tell you a bedtime story. Any bedtime story you want.”

Sonya kissed her dad on the cheek, and Walter kissed her forehead and placed her hand into Elizabeth’s. “I want a story about my mommy. About when she and Daddy had Darrel and then got married.” Sonya tightened her grip on Elizabeth’s hand as they walked toward the closed bathroom door.

Elizabeth glanced at Walter, who showed no signs of having heard his daughter’s request, or else simply didn’t have the energy to react to it. Elizabeth knocked on the bathroom door and tried the handle. The doorknob turned, and she gave it a slight push. Inside she saw Anna sitting in the tub with her knees curled up against her chest, her whole body shaking as she cried, making no attempt to control the waves of pain. “Sonya, wait here for just a minute, okay?”

Elizabeth stepped into the bathroom, slid the door closed, and knelt beside the bathtub. Anna glanced up, threw her arms around Elizabeth, buried her face in Elizabeth’s shoulder and wept. “Why, Elizabeth? Why did God do this to us? Why does he hate us so much? Why can’t God just leave us alone? Why does he always mess up everything? I hate God! I hate him so much,” she cried.

Elizabeth's eyes grew wide at Anna's questions and declarations. Questions she had never imagined asking, statements she knew were a sin. Elizabeth simply held Anna tight, rubbed her back with one hand while stroking her hair with the other. Elizabeth turned her head when she heard the door open. Sonya peered in and then rushed toward the two who were wrapped in an embrace. She draped one arm around Anna and one around Elizabeth, leaning her head on top of her sister's.

Elizabeth started humming while stroking Anna's hair and Sonya's back. This embrace lasted a few more minutes before Sonya opened her mouth wide with a yawn. "Anna, I'll be right back," Elizabeth said. "I'm going to tuck Sonya into bed." She stood, took Sonya's hand, and pulled her toward the door, then led her to the bedroom Sonya shared with Anna.

Elizabeth helped Sonya into her pyjamas and considered suggesting a night-time prayer, but left it unsaid. She tucked Sonya under a blanket, stroked her hair a few times, bent and kissed her on the forehead. "Good night, Mommy," Sonya murmured as she drifted into sleep. Elizabeth returned to the closed bathroom door and hesitated before brushing her hand against the door.

"Anna? Are you alright?" Elizabeth asked. "Can I come in?"

The door opened and Anna stepped out. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Goodnight, Elizabeth." Elizabeth followed Anna with her eyes, and when the door to the bedroom was closed, she turned and walked slowly toward the dining room. Walter and Darrel were still sitting at the table across from each other, both staring straight ahead without seeing anything.

Darrel broke his blind gaze first and looked at Elizabeth, at his father, then toward the hallway. "Thank you for putting the little ones to bed. Whenever I try to do that, they tell me I'm not their parent, and that they don't have to listen to me. It was a tough night, but you made it a little easier. Thanks."

Elizabeth wrapped her sweater around her and nodded toward Darrel. "You're welcome. Sometimes eighteen years are enough for your brothers and sisters to listen to, but not always. I guess tonight was one of those complicated nights. I was happy to help. I'm sorry for your loss. And Reverend Rempel," Elizabeth turned toward Walter, "of course I'm sorry for your loss too."

Walter nodded in Elizabeth's direction, while continuing to stare blindly ahead of him. "Dad, I think you should go to bed too. You've got a busy day ahead of you tomorrow," Darrel said while getting up from his seat and going to get Elizabeth's coat. "Perhaps, Elizabeth, you

might be able to come over tomorrow to help out with Benjamin, Sonya, and Anna?” Darrel added handing the coat to her.

“Of course. I’ll be here shortly after seven if that’s alright with you. I’ll be here on time to make breakfast for the children when they wake up,” Elizabeth responded. She cast a glance toward Walter, who appeared not to have heard any of the conversation. She nodded one more time toward Darrel and then stepped out the door, gently pulling it closed behind her.

“Dad? Dad? Do you need anything from me? Are you ready for bed?” Darrel asked, moving behind his father and placing his hands on his father’s usually strong, but now hunched shoulders. Walter crumbled into weeping under Darrel’s touch. Darrel moved around his father’s chair so he could kneel in front of him and wrap him in his arms. Walter grabbed his son in a tight embrace and continued to weep uncontrollably. Tears streamed down Darrel’s face as he held his father.

“Dad, remember that God is with us, God loves us and never gives us more than we can handle, remember?” Darrel paused, then leaned into his father. Walter gasped, inhaling deeply, then wiped his tears from his face onto his pant legs. Darrel gave his father one more squeeze, then let go of him and stood up. “Are you okay, Dad? Should I call someone? Whom should I call?”

Walter took a deep breath and wiped at the last few tears still on his cheeks. “Darrel, you’re a good son. Thank you. Thank you for your strong faith. Thank you for your words and reminders tonight. And thank you also for sorting things out with Elizabeth. She always does such a good job with the children. They really like her, don’t they?” Walter stood up beside his son, put one arm around his shoulder, and guided him toward the hallway. Walter turned off the dining room lights and the hallway nightlight guided them down the hall. “Benji’s sleeping? He should be sleeping. I’ll just look in on him and then the girls. Will you sleep with Benji tonight, Darrel? So that when he wakes up he won’t be alone?”

“Of course, Dad.” Darrel eased Benji’s bedroom door open, where a nightlight cast an orange glow across the room onto the bed where Benji lay. Walter sat on the edge of the bed, reached out and caressed Benji’s forehead. Tears began to flow down Walter’s cheeks once again, and he allowed them to flow uninterrupted. Darrel stood by the door and watched his father and brother. “I’ve got him now, Dad. I’ll climb into bed with him.”

Darrel pulled off his T-shirt, his socks, and then his jeans before getting under the blanket with his six-year-old brother. Walter stood by the door and smiled as his older son snuggled into bed with his much-younger brother. Darrel stroked Benji's short, dark hair a few times before the child began to breathe deeply, and his arm fell naturally around Benji's shoulders. Walter smiled through his tears and closed the door before going down the hallway. He stopped at the bedroom door, the room he had shared with his wife for the past eighteen years, since he took the job as a bible teacher and they gave him this house to use as long as he worked there.

Walter reached out and stroked the door frame, opened the hallway linen closet, and pulled out a quilt. He took the quilt back through the dining room into the living room, wrapped himself in the quilt, and lay down on the couch. Walter tossed and turned on the couch for what seemed like hours before he finally dropped into a fitful sleep.

### Chapter Three

(November 2008)

“You’re not actually my mother! Why can’t you just leave me alone?” nine-year old Benjamin shouted at Elizabeth, who was on her knees picking up toys. Benjamin violently kicked a little plastic car across the room just before Elizabeth’s outstretched hand reached the car. “Besides, I didn’t make this mess. Your little brat did that!” Benjamin looked at the almost year-old baby who was sucking on the corner of the blanket in which he was wrapped.

“Oh, Benjamin, you’re telling me that little Jacob did that?” Elizabeth smiled despite Benjamin’s tantrum. “Jacob isn’t even one. How could he possibly dump all these toys across the dining room? Come on, help me put them back in the box. Then you can choose three toys to play with here in the dining room while I prepare dinner. The box with the other toys will be waiting for you in your room when you want them. Or, if you want to spread them all out on the floor, you can do that in your room, but not here in the dining room. The others will be here for dinner soon, and you don’t want someone to step on them and break them.”

“They won’t break them! Only you break them,” Benjamin burst out, and picked up a marble. He looked at Elizabeth, then turned and threw the marble at Jacob, just missing the gurgling baby.

“Benjamin! Stop it. Right now! Go straight to your room, wait there until your dad comes to get you.” Elizabeth put her body in front of Jacob. She placed her hands on her hips, biting her lip. Benjamin burst into tears and ran down the hall to his bedroom where he slammed the door.

As soon as the door was closed, Elizabeth slid down to the floor beside her baby, picked Jacob up and cradled him with one arm, the other hand reaching up to hold the small opal amulet hanging around her neck. “I need your strength, I need your wisdom,” Elizabeth whispered over Jacob’s head before looking down into his face.

“Oh Jacob, what kind of home have you been born into?” Elizabeth wiped her eyes on her apron, got up with Jacob and went into the kitchen. She placed the baby into a bouncy chair on the floor beside her, where he began rocking himself. Elizabeth washed her face in the kitchen sink, dried it on her apron, and then took a deep breath.

Three open cans of No-Name tomato soup sat on the counter beside an empty pot. Elizabeth poured them into the pot and placed it on the stove. *What else can I put in there, she*

thought as she turned the heat onto medium. *Macaroni. Cook up some macaroni and add that. Tuna? Maybe a can of tuna? How would that taste? Maybe just the macaroni for now.*

Elizabeth pulled a bag of uncooked macaroni from the cupboard beside the stove, measured two cups into another pot and then filled it with water before turning the heat to high on another element.

“What did you do to Benji? He’s crying in his bed and won’t open the door for me. It’s locked, you know,” Sonya asked in a cold voice from behind Elizabeth. Elizabeth turned quickly and took a step closer to where Jacob was still rocking himself in his chair. “Well? What did you do this time?” Sonya’s angry whisper hissed across the kitchen.

“Sonya, dear ...”

“Don’t call me dear. I’m just Sonya to you.” Her voice was firm.

“Sonya, Benjamin tried to hurt Jacob and I sent him to his room until his dad comes home,” Elizabeth answered quietly, taking a deep breath.

“He wouldn’t have tried to hurt Jacob if you wouldn’t have had him, you know. We already had four kids in this family. None of us wanted another one. You’re not going to have more, are you?” Sonya paused, suddenly imagining more additions to the family. “Seriously? You’re going to have more? How many babies do you think we need to have in this house?” Sonya screamed toward Elizabeth.

“Sonya! What has gotten into you? What makes you think we’re going to have another one, or more babies? Jacob is nine months old. What are you thinking?” Elizabeth’s perplexed voice shook. “Sonya, please. I have to finish making dinner. It’s almost six, and your brother will be here with his girlfriend very soon. Do you know where Anna is?” Elizabeth turned back to the stove and saw a bright-red element in the corner of the stove and the still-cold pot of macaroni on the other element at the rear of the stove.

“Oh, please! What next?” Elizabeth’s voice broke. She moved the cold pot over to the hot element, turned the now-boiling soup to low and stirred it a few times, scraping the bottom to peel off a thickened layer of soup. “Bread. There must be some bread left. And cheese? Please let there be cheese in the fridge.” Elizabeth opened the refrigerator door and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of a large block of bright-orange cheese.

Sonya tilted her head to the side and asked, “Why do you always talk to yourself? That’s really weird.”

Elizabeth smiled as she pulled the cheese from the refrigerator and turned to Sonya, who was still standing at the corner of the kitchen staring at her. "I'm just reminding myself of what is left to be done. Sometimes talking to myself helps me think my way through a situation. Do you want to help me? Would you cut some slices of cheese? Maybe a dozen, and put them on a plate, and then put the plate on the table?" Elizabeth tried hard to keep her voice calm as she placed the block of cheese onto a cutting board.

Sonya took an exaggerated step around Jacob's chair, making it clear she was avoiding stepping on him. She took a knife and started cutting the cheese into pieces. Each piece was a different size, thickness, and shape. She made a point of standing between Elizabeth and the block of cheese so Elizabeth wouldn't see what was happening. "Done!" Sonya announced as she took another exaggerated step over Jacob and placed the plate on the table.

"Thanks, dear. I mean, thanks, Sonya. Do you know where Anna is? Or did I ask you that already?" Elizabeth filled a basket with the whole-wheat buns she had bought that morning. "Okay, macaroni's almost ready, which means the soup is almost ready, bread is ready, cheese is ready. To drink? Oh, let me think. There must be some iced tea powder still in the cupboard."

Elizabeth opened another cupboard door and let her hand do the searching on the topmost shelf. She closed her hand on the desired container of iced tea and pulled it down. "That will do." She dumped some of the sugary powder into a large jug, then filled it with water. She caught herself just as she was about to use the tomato soup spoon to stir up the drink, and instead she opened a drawer and pulled out a long wooden spoon to mix the drink.

Elizabeth looked at the clock above the kitchen sink. "Ten minutes till Darrel's here. Where's Walter? Yes, Jacob, Darrel is coming home with his girlfriend. I think he is very serious about her. And I think Walter approves of her too. What about you, little one? Do you approve of your biggest brother getting engaged soon? Wouldn't that be wonderful for him!" Jacob gurgled toward his mother. "And what about Walter? Where is that father of yours, little one? He should have been here by now." Jacob gurgled again.

The door swung open and Walter came in, leading Anna ahead of him. She shook his hand from her shoulder and dashed to the bathroom. Elizabeth looked toward Walter with inquiring eyes. "Welcome home. What happened with Anna? Oh, and by the way, I need you to speak with Benjamin. He keeps shouting 'you're not my mother' at me, and just a few minutes ago, he threw a marble at Jacob's head."

“Of course you’re not his mother. I thought we had all agreed to that when you and I married. And he would never try to hurt Jacob. I’ll go get him for dinner. I see Darrel has arrived.” Walter lumbered down the hall with heavy steps to the last bedroom door. He tried the knob, but it was locked. There was a knock on the door, and Darrel came in just ahead of Marigold, whom he had been dating for four months.

“Darrel, Marigold, welcome home, welcome here.” Elizabeth smiled as she moved toward them and took Marigold’s coat. “Let me hang this up for you, dear,” Elizabeth offered. “And why don’t you take a seat at the table? Oh my goodness, I guess we need some dishes, don’t we?” Elizabeth ran back to the kitchen to find the appropriate bowls, spoons, knives, and cups for the meal.

“Let me help you, Mom,” Darrel said as he walked up behind Elizabeth. She flinched at the sound of the title ‘mom.’ *Why did it sound so easy, even that it fit, when Darrel used that word, and seemed to create barriers for the three younger children?*

Walter returned to the table holding Benjamin’s hand. Benjamin refused to look at or acknowledge Elizabeth. “Hi, Darrel,” he said to the floor.

“Hi, Benji. This is Marigold. She’s going to have dinner with us tonight,” Darrel responded.

“Is she going to try and be my mother too?” Benjamin looked up at Darrel with tears in his eyes.

“Benji, that is not a good question,” Walter scolded, gripping his son’s shoulder.

Darrel knelt down in front of Benji, and then, with a look invited Marigold to kneel beside him. Darrel reached out a hand and tussled Benji’s hair before pulling him into a bear hug. “Benji, before you had Agatha as your mother, and she’ll always sort of be your mother, even though she isn’t with us anymore. Now you are lucky enough to have Elizabeth be a sort of mother to you too. She’s taking very good care of you, of Daddy, and of your sisters too. Marigold is going to be like a sister, but an older sister than either of Anna or Sonya are. That’s all. A sister. Another sister. We’re all going to keep on trying to be one big, happy family.”

Benjamin dug his face into Darrel’s chest and squeezed his arms around Darrel’s neck as if planning to never let go.

“Oh, good grief. Little brother having another meltdown? My, that’s so different,” sneered Anna as she slid past the kneeling group and sat at the table. “What’s for dinner, Elizabeth?”

“You mean ‘what’s for dinner, Mom?’ don’t you?” corrected Walter, applying downward pressure on Anna’s shoulder with his big, strong hand. Marigold looked toward Anna, then toward Benji and Darrel, who were still wrapped in an embrace. She stole a glance toward Elizabeth in the kitchen and thought she saw her wiping her eyes with a tea towel.

Elizabeth sensed a gaze and quickly dropped the tea towel. She picked up Jacob in one arm and the pot of soup in the other hand and brought it to the table. “Oh my, I need a potholder. Please ...” Walter dashed to the kitchen and returned with the recently discarded tea towel. He folded it up and placed it on the table, taking the pot from Elizabeth’s hand.

“Here, let me finish setting the table,” Walter said. He practically dashed to the kitchen to find the jug of iced tea. He brought it to the table before asking, “Is there anything else? Should we all sit down at the table now? Sonya, are you coming?”

Darrel lifted Benjamin in his arms and carried him to the table. He put him on a chair and sat down beside him, gesturing toward a chair on his other side, inviting Marigold to take a seat. Sonya appeared out of the living room door and took a seat beside Benjamin, nodding toward Marigold. “Sonya, this is Marigold. Marigold, this is my sister Sonya.” Marigold smiled and held out her hand toward Sonya.

Sonya took it, looked at the table, and gave it a slight shake. “Hello.” Sonya dropped Marigold’s hand and tucked her hands into her lap. Elizabeth took the last open chair, holding Jacob in her lap.

“Who wants to pray?” Walter tried to sound cheerful about the prospect. There was no response from anyone around the table. “Son ...”

“It’s not my turn,” Sonya shot out toward her father, then lowered her eyes again.

“Don’t look at me. I don’t ever pray anymore,” said Anna, narrowing her eyes to glare at her father, daring him to call on her.

“I’ll pray,” offered Darrel. “It’s been a little while since I’ve sat at this table and prayed with my family.” Darrel swept the table with his eyes, casting smiles all the way around. “Let’s pray. Lord, let this food to us be blessed, and let us use it as a source of nourishment for our bodies while we also seek nourishment for our hearts, souls, and minds in You. Amen.”

“Please help yourselves.” Elizabeth waved her hand across the table. “There’s some bread and chee...” her voice drifted off and her face turned red when she saw the way the cheese had been cut. “And some cheese too.” She swallowed, casting a glance toward Sonya, whose whole face was lit up, her eyes smiling and her mouth smirking back at Elizabeth.

“This soup sure smells good,” said Marigold cheerfully. She took a bun from the basket Darrel offered her and then reached for the plate of cheese. “I always wondered about the best way to cut cheese. I see now that there are many ways to do that, and the cheese still tastes the same.” Marigold had seen the brief visual interaction between Elizabeth and Sonya and thought she might be able to help diffuse some tension.

Walter served himself some soup before looking across the table at his oldest son sitting proudly beside his girlfriend. Walter smiled, remembering the first time he had sat at his girlfriend’s table with her family. “Marigold, tell us a little about yourself. You’re not from Steinbach, so we don’t know your family.”

Marigold smiled back at Walter. “Of course. My parents are George and Helena Barkman from Greenland. They are part of the Holdeman church there. They raised me in that church as well, but I left it when I was fourteen. The pastors came to tell me they wanted me to quit school and go to work on my father’s chicken farm. I wanted to keep studying.”

“I think I’ve bought some chickens from your father at the corner of Greenland Road and the highway. Does he ever sell his chickens there?” Walter asked.

“He used to, but not anymore. The government has rules against that. At first he said ‘God’s law is above man’s law, so I don’t need to listen to them,’ but when they fined him for continuing to sell after he had been warned four or five times, then he stopped.”

“And you said you stopped going to church when you were fourteen?” Walter asked. Anna rolled her eyes and groaned audibly at her father’s question.

“I would quit going too if you would let me,” Anna muttered. Walter acted as if he hadn’t heard his daughter’s comment. Elizabeth responded by offering her some more bread. “No, I don’t want more bread, this bread or the bread of life, stuffed down my throat.” Elizabeth pulled the basket of buns. Walter continued to ignore his daughter’s comments.

Benjamin took turns putting a spoonful of soup in his mouth, taking a bite of bread, taking a bite of cheese, and taking a look at Darrel. He stole an occasional glance at Marigold too, and when he saw that she was resting one of her hands on Darrel’s leg, he put one hand on

Darrel's other leg. Darrel smiled down at Benjamin, and patted him on the shoulder before continuing to eat.

"I have something to tell everyone here," Darrel announced. He coughed a little, wiped his mouth, and stood up. He stepped behind Marigold and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Last night I spoke with Marigold's father, asking permission to marry his daughter." He beamed around the table, and Marigold's whole face radiated her smile. "And after that, I asked Marigold to marry me, and she said yes!"

"Ahhh, I hate weddings! Do I have to go?" Sonya burst into tears and ran from the table, slamming the bathroom door behind her. Elizabeth got up quickly and placed Jacob into Walter's unsuspecting arms.

"Oh my, congratulations. This is indeed wonderful and exciting news, Darrel and Marigold. Please excuse me for a minute." Elizabeth followed Sonya to the bathroom and tapped on the door two times. "Sonya, it's me, Elizabeth. Can I come in?" She waited for a moment, tapped again, and tried the knob. It turned and Elizabeth opened the door just wide enough to allow herself in.

Sonya sat huddled in the bathtub, her arms wrapped around her legs, her face pressed into her knees. Elizabeth knelt down beside her and gingerly placed one arm around her shaking shoulders. Sonya didn't react, so slowly Elizabeth wrapped her other arm around her and gave her a tight hug. Sonya leaned into Elizabeth's shoulder and then turned to face her, wrapping both her arms around Elizabeth and pulling herself in close.

"I just don't know what to do with myself," Sonya blurted out. "When Daddy said he was going to marry you, I thought life was going to get better. I thought weddings were supposed to be beautiful," Sonya sobbed. "But before your wedding, I could only think about my mommy. Why did she have to die? I didn't want her to die. So I cried the whole night, and Daddy got really angry at me." Sonya gulped in some air. "He keeps saying we're not allowed to cry for Mommy, that God had a plan, and that crying means we don't accept God's plan. I don't want to go to hell! What can I do? I cry so often. I miss my mommy so much. I don't want to sin 'cuz I know what happens to sinners. I'm sad almost all the time, and when I'm not sad, I'm so scared!" Sonya's whole body shook with her tears and fears pouring out.

Elizabeth stroked Sonya's back and caressed her hair before she said anything. "Oh, Sonya, life can be so hard to understand. I try to have the same faith as your father, but I just

don't know how. What I do know is it's not a sin to be sad or angry. I think you can miss your mommy, you can cry, and you can tell me any time you are afraid or sad or just don't know what to do with yourself."

Elisabeth reached up and pulled at the thin chain she wore around her neck until the small opal amulet appeared. "Sometimes I don't know what to do with myself either. Sometimes I'm scared. Sometimes I'm sad, too." Elizabeth fondled the opal as Sonya shifted slightly to get a look at the stone. "I got this opal from my mother just before she died. I was sitting beside her, holding her hand, when she took this off and gave it to me," Elizabeth explained. "She told me her mother had given it to her as a wedding gift. My grandma told her, 'when you need to remember that you are loved and lovely, when you think you are alone, touch this stone and remember me. Know that I am always close to you because you are always in my heart, and I believe I am always in yours.' My mother then said those same words to me. Those were her last words." Elizabeth's hand closed around the opal for a moment.

Then she dropped the amulet and wrapped both arms around Sonya. "I think it's okay to be both sad and scared. Sometimes I don't know what God's plan is for me, for you. Or why He has such plans, plans for our lives that are so difficult." Sonya took a few deep breaths, her sobs slowing down.

"Really? It's okay to be scared? To be sad isn't a sin?" Sonya started, then continued, "I'm just afraid that I'll keep sinning if Darrel gets married. I thought I'd be able to forget my mommy now that you are here, but I can't, and I can't tell Daddy that. He doesn't want to hear that. I've heard what he says to Anna about her soul, and I don't want to go to hell, even if Anna will be there. I want to go to heaven, 'cuz that is where Mommy is. But if it's another wedding, I'm scared I'll just think about Mommy, I'll miss her again, and then I'll cry. And then Daddy will be angry with me again."

Elisabeth kept stroking Sonya's hair. "Let's make a deal, Sonya," Elisabeth offered. "When you are scared, when you are missing your mommy, when you think you need a good cry, you come to me. We'll tell each other stories about Agatha, the things we remember about her, the beautiful things we remember about her. We will find a way to be sad together, without sinning. Okay?"

Sonya looked up into Elisabeth's face. "Can we do that? What will God think? What will Daddy say?" Sonya's voice reflected a little hope, but a skeptical hope. Having someone to

confide in when she felt sad had been lost for Sonya when her mother died, and Anna refused to talk about any sort of sin or ‘such nonsense,’ leaving Sonya alone with her fears.

“I’ll talk to your daddy and let him know that sometimes you and I will share stories about Agatha. I don’t think he’ll be upset with that. But don’t you worry, dear, I’ll talk to him.” Elizabeth pulled Sonya into a tight embrace before releasing her and standing up. “I’ve got to get back to the table to share this special moment with Darrel, Marigold, and the family. When you’re ready, you come back and sit beside me at the table, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom,” Sonya said, wiping away tears from her eyes. “I’ll be there soon.”

Elizabeth smiled at Sonya, placed a hand on top of her head for a moment and then closed the door behind herself as she returned to the dining room table. Walter handed Jacob back to her and then cleared his throat. “Darrel and Marigold are planning to get married next month, dear. And they will have their first child in just six more months.” Elizabeth’s smile twitched at the final statement. Anna grinned at the resigned tone of her father’s voice and Elizabeth’s twitching smile.

Darrel and Marigold smiled at Elizabeth and broke the brief silence. “We surprised Dad with our news about expecting a baby, before we’re married and all, but we want to be honest with you. We wanted to get married right after we met, we knew we were right for each other, didn’t we, dear?” Darrel looked at Marigold, who nodded.

“Like father, like son.” Anna giggled. “God knows best and always has a plan, right, Dad? Nothing happens without God wanting or allowing it to happen.” Walter looked at Anna briefly, opened his mouth to respond but decided against it. Both Darrel and Marigold blushed a little and briefly averted their eyes. Elizabeth ignored the statement and redrew the smile on her face.

“I’m so happy for both of you. Our Lord speaks about the sanctity of marriage, and how that is part of his plan for his people. And of course having a baby, in time, is supposed to be a gift from God.” Elizabeth’s voice didn’t sound like the coming baby was such a great gift.

Sonya re-emerged from the bathroom, a few drops of water still lining her face. She smiled around the table and realized she had missed something important. “What is it? Have you set the date for the wedding?” she asked.

Darrel reached out his hand and placed it on hers. “We want our wedding next month to be a very happy and special occasion. Do you think you would be willing to stand up with us?”

Would you be one of the bridesmaids?” Marigold looked across the table toward Sonya, and then at Anna.

“Anna, we would like you to be a bridesmaid too, if you would,” Marigold said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You want me to be a bridesmaid? Oh my goodness! I don’t know if I can do that. I don’t like going into that church anymore. Or ... where are you getting married? Maybe I don’t have to go into that church.” Anna sounded hopeful.

“We haven’t worked out all the details yet, so we’re not sure. Our church doesn’t usually let people get married in it if they are already pregnant, so I don’t think we’ll get married there. But we don’t know what our options are just yet. And of course Marigold’s family church is out. When she quit the church, that door was closed tightly. She isn’t allowed back in unless she wants to repent and rejoin.”

“And I don’t want back in, and won’t do that,” added Marigold. “I don’t care where we get married, I just want to get married to the man I love.” Marigold kissed Darrel. Benjamin’s eyes grew wide and he moved back a little in his chair. Walter coughed and blushed.

Sonya looked confused. “What do you mean ‘if they are already pregnant?’ That’s a sin, being pregnant before being married. Who would do that? Darrel, who is ‘they?’”

Walter coughed before interjecting, “Enough talk about being pregnant for now. Let’s just finish dinner and get ready for bed. It’s been a busy day and we probably all need to get some rest.” Walter reached for the plate of oddly cut pieces of cheese. “Does anyone need some more cheese? Some bread? More soup anyone?”

“I want a cookie,” Benjamin said, shaking his head when the cheese plate passed. “Where’s the dessert?”

“I didn’t have time to make any dessert today, Benji. But there is some ice cream in the freezer. Who all wants some ice cream with raspberry jam?” Elizabeth stood up, cradled Jacob in one arm, and walked to the kitchen. She reached into the freezer compartment and found the pail of ice cream near the back. She brought it back to the table before turning toward the kitchen once again. “Anna, would you please clear the table? And Sonya, would you give everyone who wants some ice cream a bowl, please?”

“Okay, Mom,” Sonya responded. Anna froze in her seat, staring at her sister.

“What did you just say? Did you just call Elizabeth ‘mom?’” Anna’s voice was incredulous. “Elizabeth, what did you do to her?”

Sonya started crying. "I'm so tired of being sad. Elizabeth said it wasn't a sin to be sad, and that I could be sad if I was sad. I just don't want to be sad or scared anymore. I want Elizabeth to be my mom, and I want to be happy again." Sonya hid her face from the others by wrapping her arms around her head and leaning it on the table.