

Flee My Father's House

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Chapter 1

Growing Pains

Tears stung my eyes as rain drummed against my bedroom window. Angry clouds belched thunder, rattling the window panes. Frightened yet fascinated, I pressed my nose against the glass to better view my cozy little world going berserk.

A boom of thunder and a charge of lightning merged into one terrifying jolt. The sound of splintering followed by a crash tingled me with fear as a massive limb from the oak tree across the road hit the ground. *Poor Patches*, I thought, *he's probably covering under the front porch.*

I glanced about the eerie black-and-gray world inside my bedroom. Even the red-and-yellow calico quilt draped about my shoulders looked gray. I buried my face in my arms. The violence of the lightning storm mirrored the hurricane growing within me. My tumbling thoughts pushed and shoved like a batch of kids yammering for licorice sticks.

Growing up isn't fair! If I had my way, I'd stay ten years old forever. That's the year before Worley, my pesky brother, was born and before my older sister, Hattie, broke her hip by falling off the back of the wagon during a church hayride. The six years since had grown nothing but worse. I hardly noticed when my oldest brother, Riley, left home to work as foreman for Mr. Holmes, a gentleman farmer, or when my second oldest brother, Joe, got a day job at the Chamberlain stables.

However, when Hattie's twin, Myrtle, married Franklin Stone and moved into town, my childhood came to an end. Overnight, I was expected to pick up Myrtle's share of the household and farm chores while my former responsibilities moved down the line to my little sister, Orinda, Ori for short.

I learned early that being the fifth child in a large family had its advantages. At times, my rank allowed me to become almost invisible. Whenever I found the work too disagreeable or the task too boring, I'd pass it down to a younger brother or sister.

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If that plan failed, I'd complain until, in sheer desperation, Ma would assign the chore to one of my older siblings. And if worst came to worst, I would wait until no one was watching, then sneak away to my own special hiding place, a room in the attic of the barn where Pa dried and stored his herbs.

The sight and smell of drying mustard, parsley, and oregano plants hanging from the rafters made me feel safe. I knew better than to touch any of the containers or tamper with the assortment of tools strewn across Pa's heavy oak workbench.

Tucked under the eaves, behind a massive camelback trunk where Ma kept her treasures from Ireland, I stored my treasures, a stack of books from the town library. There I would curl up with the family mongrel, Patches, and read by the light seeping in between the wallboards until either the daylight faded, the crisis passed, or the next mealtime arrived. Other times I would sit on the floor with my arms wrapped around my knees and watch my father create his healing elixirs.

Joseph Riley Spencer's knowledge of herbs came from his Scottish grandmother, Chloe Mae McRiley, after whom I was named. Since the only other medical person, Doc Simms, lived in the town of Bradford, on the western side of Potter County, Pa assumed the responsibility of caring for our neighbors as best he could. He depended on Auntie Gert, the local midwife, to take charge of the birthings.

In addition to his medical practice and the small herd of Jerseys he milked, Pa worked for the Standard Oil Company as a pipeline inspector. His job was to check the pipes for leaks and damage. Whenever I wasn't in school, he would take me with him.

On these excursions, Pa loved to talk politics, from the Indian uprisings out West to President Cleveland's money policy, from voting rights for women to Japan's war on China. He ranted against the railway strike in Chicago and praised the president for breaking it. He applauded the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's battle to destroy demon whiskey and cursed William Jennings Bryan for wanting to cheapen the nation's gold standard with silver. My father knew everything

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there was to know in the whole wide world. Whenever my enthusiasm bubbled over and I told him so, he would chuckle and tug one of my waist-length, flame-red braids.

“Chloe Mae, you’re good for me,” he would say. And I would tuck away the praise for the days I didn’t feel quite so special. We shared something else—fiery red hair, freckles, and green eyes. The other children in the family inherited Ma’s sandy brown hair. With the birth of each new baby, I secretly prayed that my specialness would remain intact.

The day my mother went into labor with Dorothy, my sister Hattie, Ma, and I spent the entire day in the backyard doing the family wash. Scrubbing canvas breeches and linsey-woolsey shirts was hard work. Good old Patches dodged between our feet, thinking the three of us were there for his pleasure. I had pinned the last sheet to the clothesline when I spotted Pa and my older brothers coming up the road.

I hurried around to the back of the house, where Ma and Hattie were dumping the rinse water. “Pa’s comin’ home.”

Exhausted, Ma straightened and stroked her lower back. The bulge produced by the unborn baby threatened to topple her forward. The men’ll be wantin’ supper right away, I suppose.”

Hattie limped to Ma’s side and guided her toward the house. “Now don’t you worry about supper, Ma. Chloe and I can take care of everything.”

I glared at Hattie. *Thank you very much for volunteering my services!* After all, I was tired too. My glare passed unheeded. Hattie wrapped an arm about Ma’s shoulders and led her toward the back door. “Chloe, you finish up out here while I help Ma inside and get the johnnycake bakin’.”

Grumbling about the unfairness of life, I dried out the washtubs and returned the laundry supplies to the storage shed. The aroma of bubbling hot vegetable stew erased all thoughts of mistreatment from my mind as I stepped inside the kitchen pantry. I could hear my seventeen-year-old brother, Joe, telling Hattie and the younger children about his first day of work at the Chamberlain stables.

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Cyrus Chamberlain, Jr., the manager of Standard Oil Company's interests in Shinglehouse, as well as Pa's supervisor, owned the finest stables in Potter County. So when Mr. Chamberlain wanted to hire the finest groom in the county, neighbors recommended my brother Joe. Joe had a knack with horses. Pa said Joe spoke their language.

"How did it go today, Joe?" I called as I breezed into the kitchen through the pantry door. Amby, Jesse, and Worley sat at the table, eagerly listening to Joe, while my little sister Ori carried steaming bowls of stew to the table for Hattie.

"Oh, Chloe Mae, you should see those horses—every one of 'em a thoroughbred." For some reason, Joe and I always sought one another's approval. Now I was a bit jealous that he was being paid to do just what he wanted while I stayed at home, scrubbing dirty work pants on a washboard and chasing bratty little brothers and sisters out of the pantry.

"Humph!" I snorted. "Seems to me that a horse is a horse is a horse, regardless of its folks."

Pa stepped into the kitchen, closing my parents' bedroom door behind him. "Hardly! Bloodlines will tell in a quality horse or a quality human being. Look at all of you children—every one of you a thoroughbred."

We laughed as Pa sat down at the head of the table and opened the family Bible. "John 6:13: Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten. Then those men ...'"

As Pa read the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, Amby's stomach growled in protest. Pa glanced his way and smiled. "Guess we have a few hungry stomachs of our own here tonight. What do you say we have the blessing?"

It didn't take long after Pa's amen to empty our bowls and to clean every crumb of corn bread from the platter in the center of the table. Hattie looked at our pitiful faces and laughed. "Don't worry; I made an extra pan of johnny cake."

While I dished up seconds of the stew, Hattie removed the second pan of corn bread from the oven. She turned to set the

hot pan on the breadboard at the same moment I whirled about to place a bowl of stew in front of my nine-year-old brother, Jesse. Instinctively, I squealed and leapt back.

Hattie's limp prevented her from moving as quickly. The pan thumped to the floor as she lifted her hands to protect herself from the stew. The scalding liquid splashed across the palms of her hands and her bodice. She screamed in pain.

Pa leapt from the table and rushed her to the wet sink. Thrusting her hands under the spout of the pump, he grabbed the handle and began pumping. Well water gushed out onto her hands. "Hattie, keep your hands under the cool water. Joe, take over the pumping while I run to the barn for some burn ointment."

The younger children and I scrambled to clean up the food that spilled on the floor. Before Pa could return with the ointment, Patches started barking at the front door. Jesse looked out the hall window, then opened the door before the visitor could begin knocking. Pa entered the back door as George Neff, a farmer from over Sunnyside way, burst in through the front. "My son Merton fell off the roof of the barn. He's hurtin' real bad!"

"I'll get my doctorin' bag." Pa shoved the jar of ointment into Jesse's hand and ran into the bedroom. "Annie, will you be all right while I..."

I didn't hear my mother's reply, but within seconds, Pa reappeared. Grabbing his hunting jacket from the peg behind the door, he shouted orders at each of us. "Hattie, apply the ointment to your burns. Chloe, after you clean up here, get the little ones settled down for the night. Joe, you help her, especially with the boys." He shook his finger at six-year-old Worley. "And, you, young man, don't give Joe or Chloe a rough time, you hear?" Pa handed his medicine bag to Mr. Neff and hauled on his jacket.

"Chloe, keep checking on your mother. She's actin' like it's her time, but she has a good three weeks to go." Joe and I assured him we could take care of everything.

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Joe put ointment on Hattie's burns while I heated a kettle of water on the stove for the supper dishes. He appointed twelve-year-old Amby to oversee the dishwashing crew before he helped Hattie upstairs to her room. When I finished cleaning the kitchen, I hurried upstairs. I found Hattie sitting on the edge of the bed, rocking back and forth and moaning.

"Oh, Hattie, I am so sorry. Honest, I didn't know you were right behind me." I wept as I guided the sleeves of her dress over her bandaged hands.

She smiled through her tears. "It was an accident. I should have looked where I was going."

By the time I tucked her in her bed, Ori appeared, her lower lip quivering with disappointment. "Joe says I'm supposed to go to bed, and without my story too!"

I scooped my little sister into my arms and carried her to the massive bed she and I shared. "If you hurry and get into your nightdress, I'll tell you a story while I brush out your braids, all right?"

The little girl nodded eagerly. She scurried about the room getting ready for bed. The sounds of my younger brothers' griping filled the stairwell as Joe herded them up to their room across the hall. *Thank goodness for Joe!* I thought. At least I didn't have to settle the boys down for the night.

When Ori finished dressing for bed, I unwound her braids and drew the hairbrush through her brown, shoulder-length mane. "Once upon a time there was a beautiful queen..." My imagination soared as I described my favorite Bible character. "Of course, Queen Esther had shimmering red hair."

"Oh, Chloe," Ori groaned. "The beautiful ladies in your stories always have to have red hair like yours."

"Because I'm the one telling the story. When you tell the story, you can make them have black hair or golden hair." I tickled her stomach. "Or no hair, for that matter!" She giggled. I guided my sister to the bed and tucked the covers up around her chin.

"Where was I? Oh, yes, the beautiful queen had long, fiery-red hair. That's what the handsome king fell in love with—her

hair!” Ori snuggled down and closed her eyes. My story grew far beyond anything the Bible writers intended. Long before I executed the dastardly, evil Haman on his own gallows, my little sister was sound asleep. I brushed a stray curl from the sleeping child’s face, kissed her forehead, then stood up. Tiptoeing to the side of Hattie’s bed, I asked, “Are you going to be all right? Can I get you anything before I go downstairs to see about Ma?”

She shook her head. “I’ll be fine.”

I stole one last glimpse at the sleeping Ori and stepped out of the room. Joe met me in the hall. “Ma needs you. I think that baby isn’t going to wait any three weeks to be born.”

My eyes widened in horror. Pa was gone. Hattie couldn’t deliver the baby with her burned hands. Myrtle was in town. So was Auntie Gert. Neither Joe nor I knew anything about birthing. I grabbed my skirt and petticoats and descended the stairs three at a time. Joe bounded after me, shushing my every step. “You’re going to wake Worley!”

At that moment, I didn’t particularly care as I rushed into my parents’ bedroom. My mother lay on her side, moaning. Sweat beaded on her frighteningly pale face. Sweat drenched the pillowslip beneath her head. I pushed aside the locks of heavy brown hair pasted to her forehead.

Why would any woman in her right mind be willing go through such torture? I remembered Pa reading from Genesis about Eve’s being cursed to bear children in pain. Right then and there, standing beside my parents’ bed, I decided marriage and babies were absolutely not for me. And when I got to heaven, I’d have a thing or two to tell Mother Eve too.

Gathering my courage about me, I inched closer. Suddenly Ma’s eyes flew open. She gasped, “Chloe, the baby’s coming. Get Auntie Gert!”

“Oh, right—get Auntie Gert!” I bolted from the room, colliding with Joe in the doorway, his eyes bulging with fear.

“What are we going to do? Should I go for Pa?”

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Terrified, I shouted in his face, “No, go get Auntie Gert!” As he ran to saddle Dulcie, a cry came from the bedroom. I whirled about and rushed back to my mother.

“Chloe! Forget Auntie Gert! The baby...just do as I...”

I leapt away from the cast-iron bedstead. “I can’t! No! Joe’s getting Auntie Gert.”

My mother rolled her head from side to side and panted as if she’d run all the way to Haney’s Mercantile without stopping. “No! I need you. Listen, do everything I say...” Her words crumbled into a grimace. When the contraction subsided, she moaned, “Get the birthing linens out of the chest at the foot of the bed. Go boil some water.”

Step by step, she explained everything I would need to do throughout the delivery. Determined to carry out her instructions, I argued with myself all the way to the hand pump. *I can do this; I can do this! No, you can’t; no, you can’t!*

Standing in the middle of the kitchen, I threw my hands up in the air and wailed, “Oh, dear Father, I can’t do this. I just can’t. Please help me help Ma.” After my cry for help, I can’t say I felt filled with a sudden surge of confidence, but I did sense a flicker of hope. While I didn’t really know Pa’s God very well, I figured my father had established a strong enough relationship over the years that He would at least help me for Pa’s sake. *Yes, God, Ma and I will get through this ordeal. It wouldn’t hurt if the baby helped a little too,* I decided.

As I dashed about the kitchen, I could hear Hattie upstairs quieting the younger children, whose sleep had been disturbed. I grabbed a clean washcloth, filled Ma’s porcelain wash basin with cool water, and carried it to the bedside. I found her writhing in pain. I couldn’t bear to see my mother suffering. Tears streamed down my face as I rinsed the sweat from her forehead and face. “Don’t worry, Ma. Joe will be back with Auntie Gert in no time at all, you’ll see.” My words sounded hollow, even to me.

“It’s too late!” she cried out in agony. “It’s too late!”

I wanted to run, to hide, but I couldn’t. For the first time in my life, Pa, Riley, Myrtle, Hattie, and Joe couldn’t help her. My

mother had only me. She needed me; she depended on me. Terrified I'd make some irreversible mistake, I recited aloud the directions she'd given me, all the while trying to comfort Ma. In spite of my fear, at some point in the delivery, my actions seemed to feel almost instinctive, natural.

Finally lusty squalls filled the air as I held my slippery newborn sister in my hands. Indignation filled her scrunched-up face. I laughed as she waved her arms and kicked strong little legs. The more she kicked, the harder I laughed, all the while sniffing back tears of relief. She was alive, and so was my mother. Shouting above the infant's squalls, I lifted her heavenward.

"A healthy baby girl—thank You, Father, thank You!"

When I heard Ma's weak laughter, I remembered that my task was not yet completed. I don't know how she did it, but Ma patiently guided me through the rest of the birthing process. As I carried out her instructions, my attention kept wandering to the tiny, flannel-wrapped bundle by her side. I was sure I'd never seen anything so beautiful, so perfectly formed as that precious girl-child.

"What are you going to call her, Ma?" I asked as I gathered up the soiled linen to take to the back porch.

"Your pa and I chose the name Dorothy Estelle, after his great aunt." My mother glanced down and held out a pinkie finger to the infant. The baby wrapped her little fist around her finger and tried to draw it into her mouth. "However, if it's all right with him," Ma looked up at me, her eyes glistening with tears, "I'd like to name her Dorothy, after his aunt and Mae, after you."

I bit my lip and nodded. "I'd like that, Ma." I'd never felt as close to my mother as I did at that moment. Maybe our natures were too different—maybe too similar, I didn't know which—but we always seemed to be at odds. Pa said I'd inherited Ma's Irish temper and his Scottish stubbornness.

I deposited the bundle of linens on the canning shelf on the back porch and hurried upstairs. Hattie would be waiting to hear the news. I tiptoed up to our bedroom. "It's a girl, a baby

girl,” I whispered. “Her name is Dorothy Mae. She’s beautiful, utterly beautiful. She has big blue eyes and a shock of bright red—”

I stopped midsentence. For the first time I realized I hadn’t even considered the color of the baby’s hair. I put my hand to my mouth to suppress my laughter. “Dorothy has red hair. Isn’t that amazing?”

Delighted with my discovery, I hugged Hattie and hurried back downstairs. My mother had drifted off to sleep. Her lips curved upward into a gentle smile, replacing the earlier lines of agony. A hint of blush highlighted her delicately carved cheekbones. For the first time in my sixteen years, I saw her as a young girl instead of an overworked housewife and mother.

The infant squirmed in the crook of her arm. As I reached for the baby, my mother’s eyes opened slowly. “Would you like me to hold Dorothy so you can rest?”

Ma smiled and nodded. Reverently, I took the baby into my arms, walked over to Ma’s mahogany rocker, and sat down.

The sleeping infant nestled against me. I couldn’t believe how perfectly the tiny bundle fit in my arms. As natural as breathing, I began to rock and hum a lullaby. The words soon followed.

“Hush, little baby, don’t say a word; Papa’s gonna buy you a mockingbird...” The lullaby affected me in the same way it did my newborn sister. I closed my eyes for a moment and felt someone lifting Dorothy out of my arms. My eyes flew open. “No.”

“Shh, it’s all right, Chloe Mae. It’s just me.” Pa’s six-foot frame towered over me. Joe stood behind him in the doorway. Auntie Gert stood on the opposite side of the bed, her face flushed with happiness. Suddenly I realized my work was done. Grown-ups were there to take over. I sighed with relief. “Oh, Pa, I’m so glad you’re home. I was so scared—”

“Shh, your mama needs her sleep. Why don’t you come out to the kitchen and tell us all about it? Auntie Gert says you did a fine job.”

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I followed the three of them from the room. Before my parents' bedroom door had closed behind me, Auntie Gert clapped her gnarled hands with delight. "Praise God! He has answered my prayer! Now I can rest in peace."

Pa nodded. "Yes, it looks like He has answered your prayer, old friend." My father went on to explain that arthritis made midwifery increasingly difficult for the seventy-five-year-old woman. He paused and eyed me curiously, then turned to Auntie Gert. "Would you be willing to train Chloe, kind of as an apprentice? The child's got a good head on her shoulders."

The woman's eyes danced with enthusiasm. "If she is willing to learn."

Everyone looked my way. "I-I-I guess so..." I went to bed that night uncertain of what I might have gotten myself into.

A few days later, when Pa discussed Auntie Gert's offer with Ma, she demurred. She believed that a girl my age shouldn't be delivering babies or even be knowledgeable of the process of childbirth until after marriage. Yet, she freely admitted that I had a genuine gift of comfort and healing. After thinking about it a couple of weeks, Ma reluctantly gave her permission.

I began accompanying Auntie Gert when she attended deliveries, and found I enjoyed being her assistant.

When school opened in the fall, my mother decided it would be best if I didn't attend. As Ma explained, mothers would feel it unseemly for me to attend classes with their sons and daughters during the day and deliver their "young-uns" at night.

I missed my friends. Pa tried to make up for my loss by allowing time whenever we went into town for me to go to the library for books to read. Each day after work, he'd pick me up at Auntie Gert's. On the ride home, he not only shared his ideas on local and national events, but encouraged me to voice my own opinions too. Usually they echoed his.

Heavy gray clouds blotted out the sun as Pa and I headed home one Monday evening. I tightened my woolen scarf about my neck and face, then burrowed deeper into my coat.

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Overhead, a flock of geese disappeared over the southern horizon. I sighed. "Looks like Indian summer's over for this year."

Pa grunted. "Probably so. I suppose those Yukon prospectors have given it up for winter by now." For the last several months the newspapers had reported tales of the fabulous caches of gold found in the Yukon Territory.

Pa stared off into the distance. "Yep, they called it 'Seward's folly.'" A glint of adventure flashed in his eyes. "Sure would like to get me a grubstake and head north."

I listened as he spun his dreams of life in the frozen northland. *Imagine growing up in the land of the midnight sun—living in a snow house and eating walrus blubber. Eeagh!* My imagination halted at that thought.

"Maybe next spring..." His voice drifted off into the silence of knowing that his roots sank too deeply in the Pennsylvania soil for him to do much more than dream.

Eager to maintain the moment of magic he'd created, I voiced my own fantasy. "Oh, Pa, when I grow up, I'm going to travel all over the world. I want to see everything there is to see."

He chuckled into his bushy red beard. "You have the heart of an explorer, Chloe Mae. Too bad you were born female."

I cocked my head to one side. "What does being a girl have to do with traveling?"

As he halted the team in front of our house, Patches bounded around the house. Pa glanced toward me and smiled sadly. "A woman was made to serve her husband and to bear his children. That's God's plan." His tone of genuine regret fueled my zeal.

"Well, it's not my plan. I don't mind delivering babies, but I sure don't intend to bear any of my own."

Twelve-year-old Amby raced from the house as Pa helped me down off the buckboard. "Unharness the team, son."

My father draped his arm over my shoulders and sighed. His sigh rankled me further. I pulled away from his touch.

“How can you be so out of date? We’re living on the brink of the twentieth century. Four states already have granted women the right to vote. In no time at all, the rest of the country will follow suit—you said so yourself.”

He shook his head and walked up the steps to the porch. “Chloe Mae, it’s going to take more than the right to vote to change the course of history.”

I stormed past him into the house. Tugging my bonnet off my crown of braids, I tossed it onto an empty peg behind the door. I thundered up the stairs with a parting prophecy. “You wait; you’ll see. I’m not going to spend the rest of my life chasing after a passel of kids—female or not!”

“Chloe?” Hattie stood beside the table, slicing a loaf of fresh bread for supper. By the stove Ma dished out the boiled potatoes onto a platter.

I threw myself onto my bed and buried my face in a down pillow. In spite of the pillow, I heard the front door slam and my mother greet my father. “What bee got into Chloe’s bonnet?”

I thought, *Ab, she’ll understand. She’s a woman; she’ll set him straight.*

Instead, when she heard his answer, she snapped at him. “Serves you right, Joseph Riley Spencer. I’ve been telling you all along not to fill her head with world events and—and all that man stuff. How did you expect her to react?” Ma continued to sputter. “You’ve allowed her to read and to learn things far beyond her station in life. You’ve applauded the appalling behavior of those insufferable suffragettes.” I could hear dishes slamming and cooking utensils clanging about the kitchen.

My father’s soothing tones drifted up the stairs. “Now, Annie, don’t get your Irish up. When the time comes, she’ll know her God-given place and fill it admirably.”

“Humph! Well, that time isn’t so far off, you know! Remember, she turns seventeen in August. And if your rule was good enough for Riley and good enough for Myrtle, and now for Joe, it must apply to your precious Chloe as well!” The back

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door slammed. My brothers thundered in from doing the evening chores, ending my parents' discussion.

The aroma of gravy simmering on the back burner coaxed me back downstairs. The look of defiance on my face went unnoticed when Joe burst into the house. He shed his coat and hung it on the empty peg beside my bonnet. "Looks like a storm's brewin'. Could have snow by mornin'. Hey, what's up?"

Ma set the platter of potatoes in the center of the table with a thud and narrowed her eyes toward Pa. "Nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

Clearing his throat, Pa strode over to Ma and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Remember what the Pennsylvania Dutch say, son. 'Kissin' don't last; cookin' do.' And your ma sure knows a lot about good cookin'! So let's say we enjoy some of it while it's hot."

We took our places about the table. Pa opened the Spencer family Bible that his parents had brought from Scotland. The mantel clock ticked off the minutes while Pa searched for a verse to read. When he finally began to read, I recognized the passage instantly and sank lower into my chair, my arms tightly folded across my chest.

"Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies." He read all the rest of Proverbs 31. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see determination on my mother's face. While my younger brothers and little sister wriggled with impatience and Hattie fidgeted with her fork, Joe frowned, his face wreathed with confusion.

After the blessing, the usual banter of the dinner table replaced the earlier tension. The storm inside the farmhouse subsided, while outside, the first snowflakes of the season drifted past the kitchen window. By the time we'd each devoured a serving of apple cobbler, the topic was forgotten.