

"Finally, an apocalyptic novel ablaze with hope. . . . A must-read."

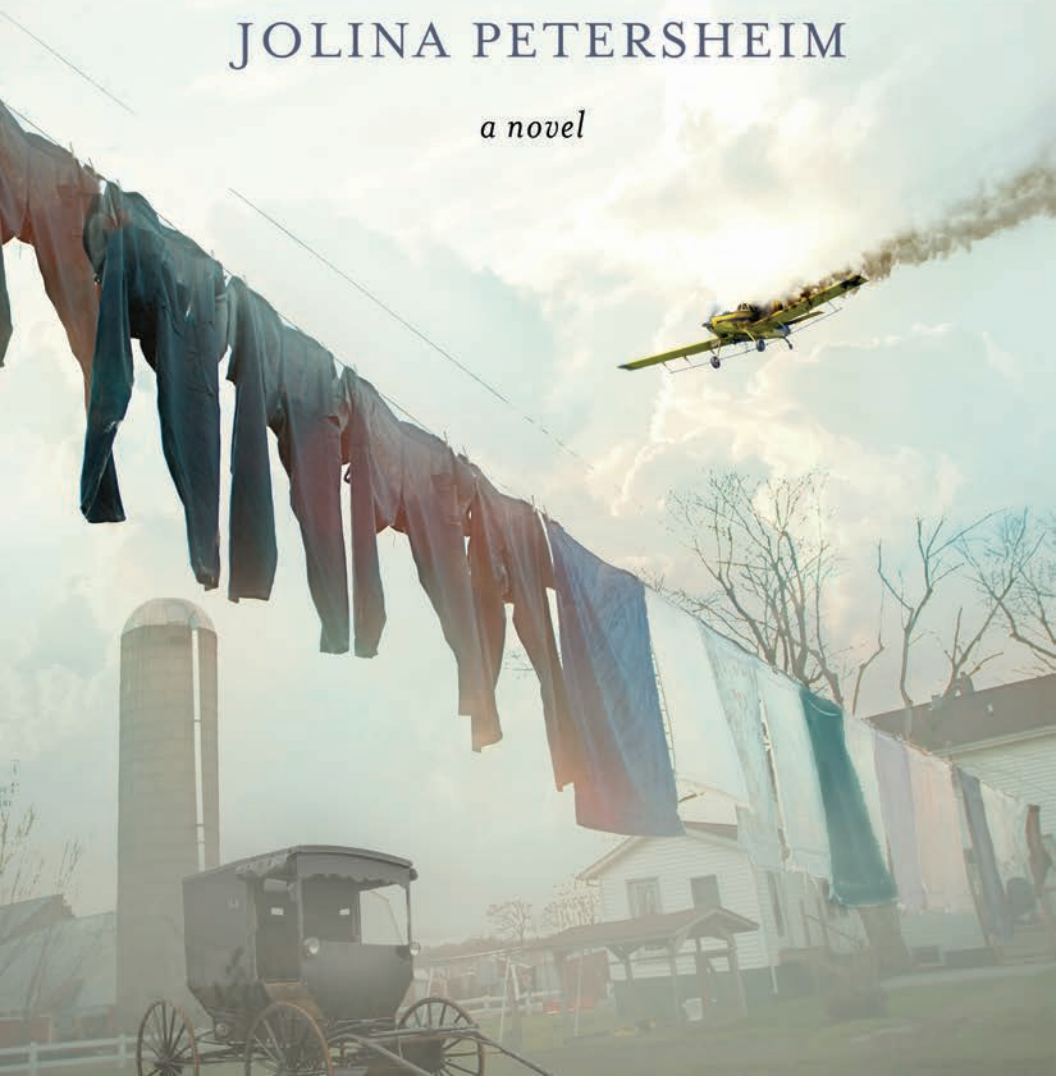
— SARAH MCCOY —

New York Times bestselling author of *The Mapmaker's Children*

T H E
A L L I A N C E

JOLINA PETERSHEIM

a novel



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The Alliance

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RELZ REVIEWZ

T H E
A L L I A N C E

JOLINA PETERSHEIM

a novel



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The Alliance

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CHAPTER

1

Leora

BUFFERED BY GRASSLAND, the collision is strangely quiet. Dirt sprays as the small plane scrapes away the top layer of Montana soil, coming to an abrupt halt in the middle of our field. Black smoke billows as fire leaps to life on the front end of the mangled plane. Standing for a moment in shock, I leave my sister, Anna, eating cold peach *supp* at the table and run out the open back door. The corners of my mouth stretch as I scream for Jabil, who is down the lane, working beneath the pavilion. I cannot see him, and I doubt he will be able to hear me. But over the din of the devouring flames, I do not hear anything. Not the whine of the saw blades that sometimes soothes my sister's tantrums. Not the fierce roar as Jabil and his crew power-wash bark from the once-standing dead trees that will soon become the walls of another log house.

On the back porch, I grab a piece of firewood left over from winter and leap down the steps. I cross through the gate and wade into the meadow and see that, around the plane, a diameter of grass is seared by the heat of the fire. I scream for Jabil again, and then I scream for my younger brother, Seth, who is working down at Field to Table at the end of the lane.

I run up to the plane and stare into the cockpit. The windshield is shattered. The pilot is slumped over the control panel. Blood trails down half his face like a port-wine stain. For a moment, I think he is already dead. Then I see his fingers twitch near the throttle.

“Can you hear me?” I yell. The man groans and tries to look at me without turning his head. I use the butt of the log to hit the door handle, because the handle itself is too far off the ground for me to reach. When it won’t budge, I try to break the side window, thinking it’d be better for the pilot to be cut by the glass than burned to death. But the glass is too thick and the window, same as the handle, is too far off the ground for me to put any leverage behind my swing. “You have to help! I don’t know how to get you out!”

The pilot says nothing. His deep-set eyes close as he loses consciousness, his jaw slackening beneath a tangled beard. I hear a sound over the crackling flames and turn to see Jabil and his logging crew charging down the lane. Some of the men are still wearing hard hats or protective goggles, and the sawdust from their work sifts from their bodies like reddish sand. Their uniform steel-toe boots stamp the meadow as they surge toward us—about ten of them—and create a circle around the wreckage. Jabil is carrying a crowbar; his brother Malachi carries a shovel; Christian, a fire extinguisher; and the *Englischer*, Sean, a bolt cutter.

They did not need me to scream for help because, of course, they would have seen the plane crash on their own. The entire community must have seen it. I keep holding my worthless piece of firewood to my chest and watch the crew extinguish the fire and pry open the cockpit door; then Jabil tries to lift the pilot out by his arms. The man falls toward him, but his feet remain lodged under the crumpled floorboard. Jabil uses the crowbar to work the pilot's feet free. Christian tugs on the pilot's shoulders, and he slides out into the waiting loggers' arms. The plane's metal ticks and acrid smoke from the charred engine burns my throat and eyes. I back up from the plane in case it catches on fire again.

Jabil turns to me. "We take him to your house?"

"*Jah.*" I gouge the wood with my nails. "Of course."

Jabil Snyder has been foreman of the logging crew since his father's sudden passing last year, when, literally overnight, Jabil became the wealthiest man in the community. At twenty-one, he is only two years older than I, but next to his uncle, the bishop, he is also the most revered. Therefore, when Jabil calls out commands, the men respond in unity. They move across the meadow as one, the pilot's broken body borne by their work-hardened arms. Running in front of them, I open the gate and prop it with an overturned wheelbarrow. I dart up the steps into the house, and Anna looks up from her bowl.

“We need the table,” I say in Pennsylvania Dutch. “You’ll have to move.”

My sixteen-year-old sister continues watching me with the eyes of a child, her smile serene despite the bedlam outside. “I mean it,” I continue, because sometimes she understands more than she lets on. I take her bowl of *supp* over to the countertop. Anna frowns and stands to retrieve it, as I expected she would. I drag the chairs away from the table and remove the tablecloth and quart jar full of weeds Anna picked and arranged like flowers.

Knowing the pilot’s appearance will upset my sensitive sister, and the small crowd in our home will upset her even more, I carry the *supp* bowl, cloth napkin, and spoon into the back bedroom we share.

“Read to you?” Anna asks, glancing up at me with an impish smile. What she really wants is for me to read the book to *her*.

“Later,” I promise.

I tug my sister’s dress down over her legs and kiss the white center part of her twin braids. Closing our bedroom door, I hurry down the hall and see Jabil is supporting the pilot’s head and shoulders and Malachi the legs as, together, they maneuver his body onto the table. His clothes are singed, and blood from his head wound stains the grooves of the beautiful pine table that—like most of the furniture in this house—was crafted by my *vadder*’s skillful hands.

“You have scissors?” Jabil asks. I withdraw a pair from the sewing drawer and pass it to him. Touching my hand, he meets my eyes. “Sure you want to be here for this?”

At my affirming nod, he turns and cuts off the pilot’s *Englischer* clothes by starting at the breastbone and working his way down. His thick, calloused fingers are so confident and swift, it seems he’s been performing this action all his life. My face grows warm as the T-shirt falls away, exposing the pilot’s chest. Besides my younger brother, I have never seen a shirtless man, as such immodesty is prohibited in the community.

The pilot is smaller-boned than Jabil, who, along with his brothers, I once watched lever a main barn beam from horizontal to vertical without breaking a sweat. But the pilot is still muscular and lean. A thick silver band hangs from a chain around his neck, engraved with the words *Semper Fi*. A cross, ends elongated like spears, is tattooed from the pilot’s left clavicle down to his pectoral—biology terms I recall from the science book I borrowed from the Liberty Public Library, back when I had time to spend studying, simply to absorb knowledge, and not to prepare for the tedious classes I did not want to teach.

I turn and see that Jabil is extracting a pistol from the holster on the belt threaded through the pilot’s jeans. I pivot from the sight—and the fear it evokes—and wrap my arms around my waist. “Has somebody tried calling 911?”

Sean, the *Englischer*, says, “Tried ten times. My cell wouldn’t work.”

I dare a glance over my shoulder, being careful not to look at the table where the pilot lies. “Did you try the phone in the shop?”

Malachi says, “We tried that, before we came here to help. It didn’t work either. Electricity’s all messed up. Our equipment shut down too.”

There’s the clunk of soft-soled shoes dropping to the hardwood floor.

“That doesn’t look good,” Jabil says.

Willing myself to maintain a clinical eye, I turn yet again and walk to the end of the table. The ball of the pilot’s right ankle is distended. I cradle the pilot’s foot in my hand and gently rotate it to see if the ankle is broken or just strained from the men wrenching him from the plane. The pilot’s eyes fly open, and he yells, the force of it whiplashing throughout his body. The cords of his neck stand out as he bites down. Concerned that—in his panicked state—he is going to hurt himself, I do not let go, but keep the ankle braced between my hands.

“It’s all right,” I soothe. “You’re safe.”

The pilot’s eyes meet mine. They are the color of Flathead Lake in summer, the clarity only slightly muddied by the haze of his pain. Then he closes them again and the foot in my hand relaxes. I hear the back door open. My

thirteen-year-old brother, Seth, strides across the kitchen. He takes off his straw hat and wipes the sweat from his hairline with his forearm.

Leaning over the table, he peers down at the pilot's head wound. "Was he trying to land?" Seth turns toward Jabil. "Did you see anything?"

"No, just the crash."

I look down at the pilot's right foot, feel the knot of his stockinged heel cupped in my palm, and for some unknown reason it brings me comfort. "We need to get him to the hospital," I say. "We have no idea what injuries he has."

"I don't know how we can get him to the hospital." Seth straightens and looks at me. "The electricity at Field to Table shut down and none of the customers' cars will start. And with him being in this shape, it's too far to take him to Liberty by buggy."

The logging crew stops speaking among themselves. The silence draws attention to the dripping faucet and rhythmic snoring of *Grossmamma* Eunice, napping in the living room.

I ask Seth, "Why won't the cars start?"

"No clue. The *Englischers* are trying to figure out how to get home, but they can't get ahold of anyone because their cell phones won't work. Bishop Lowell and the deacons are asking everyone to meet at the schoolhouse so we can come up with a plan."

I glance down at the table, where the bleeding stranger lies. The pilot's in no condition to be moved, because we don't know what is broken. But neither can he just stay here in our house unsupervised. "You all go ahead," I say. "Take Anna. I'll stay here with him and *Grossmammi*." I look over and see that Jabil's eyes are trained on the gun, glinting on the table. The smooth, polished weapon appears so out of place—almost vulgar—among our rustic, handcrafted things. "And take that with you."

"You're sure?" Jabil asks me again, motioning toward the pilot. And I cannot tell if he's asking if I'm sure that I want to remain behind, or if I'm sure that I want him to take the gun.

"I'll be fine," I say. "Just leave me here."

The strident tone of my request rings in the uneasy quiet. Without a word, Jabil turns and leaves through the back door.



Hearing the tapping cane behind me, I turn from the sink and see *Grossmammi* Eunice. She must be having a good day. She has taken time to put her dentures in, which she keeps in a jelly jar beside her recliner, and to tidy her hair beneath her *kapp*. Her sparse eyebrows are also jauntily cocked behind her pince-nez glasses, which serve as little purpose as mine, since she's legally blind but still too stubborn to admit it.

“Have a good nap?” I ask, drying my hands. “You look rested.”

Grossmammi harrumphs and moves into the kitchen, using her cane like an extension of her arm. Her eyesight is so poor, she doesn't notice the shirtless male lying on the table beneath a sheet. She pulls out the chair and sits across from him, waiting to be served her tea. I stand frozen in the kitchen—bucket and rag in hand—not sure how to tell her about all that's happened during her nap without causing my grandmother to drop dead from fright.

“Ginger and rose-hip blend?” I ask, buying myself some time.

Grossmammi nods. “*Jah*, and some *brot*, if you have it.”

Setting the bucket down, I splash hot water from the cast-iron kettle into a mug and fill the strainer with a scoop of *Grossmammi* Eunice's favorite tea blend, which I set in the liquid to steep. I pray she keeps her doll-sized hands in her lap rather than on the table, where she would inadvertently touch warm flesh.

“Would you like your tea in the living room?” I ask. “You might be more comfortable there.” She harrumphs again. “It's just that—” I rack my brain for a valid-sounding excuse—“I'm about to mop the floor, and I know you don't care for the Pine-Sol fumes.”

She pushes up from the chair. “Why didn't you do it while I napped?”

“I should’ve; you’re right.” I would agree with about anything, just to get her out of here before she discovers the pilot, or—worse—he pops up from beneath the sheet like a jack-in-the-box. I hurriedly slice off a heel of bread and slide it on a tray, along with a knife and two small pots containing butter and jam. I stride across the floor with the tray, trying to herd my cantankerous, eighty-pound grandmother back into the living room.

She shifts her whole body to glower at me, though her milky eyes are missing their mark, scorching the wall over my shoulder. She takes the tray from my hands and backs into the living room. Setting it on the coffee table, she pulls the door closed between us with something akin to a slam. My whole body deflates with relief. All in all, I got off easy.

Carrying the bucket back to the table, I prepare to clean the pilot’s head wound, like I’d planned before my grandmother’s interruption. My hands shake as I dab the hair matted with so much blood, it appears ruddy. But once the water’s tinted copper, the hair reveals its hue: pale blond, like Silver Queen corn in summer. The strands are also just as fine as corn silk. I watch the pilot’s eyes skitter back and forth beneath the pale lids. His jaw is coated with beard, but his upper cheeks and nose are speckled with freckles that make him appear boyish, despite the tattoo on his chest and another on his bicep, though I cannot decipher the latter’s design.

In our community—which adheres to a strict set of rules resembling a hybrid between Mennonite and the more conservative Amish—the pilot’s beard would be a symbol that he’s married. But he would have to remove the mustache, which Amish leaders deemed too militaristic back during the Civil War, when full facial hair became a symbol of combat and control. Therefore, Amish men were forced to shave their mustaches in order to set themselves apart as pacifists who would never raise arms against another man.

I’m continuing to inspect the pilot when the sheet covering him flutters at the movements of his bare chest. I scrape my chair back across the floor, my own breath short. I look toward the living room door and wait. I hear only the tinkling of china as my grandmother enjoys her tea. Before the loggers and Seth left, we debated moving the pilot to the couch in the living room, where he would be more comfortable. But we did not know if that was wise. We have no way to gauge whether his neck and spinal cord have suffered injuries as well, which could have been exacerbated by the force the loggers used to free him from the cockpit. Plus, I imagined that if *Grossmammi* Eunice awoke to the presence of a half-naked man asleep in our living room, she might have a heart attack and fall into her cross-stitch pattern. I never anticipated the fact that *she’d* wake up before he did.

My stomach taut with anxiety, I place two fingers against the side of the pilot's jaw to check his heart rate. The hairs of his beard are rough against my fingertips, and the throb of his blood beneath the pad of my index finger makes my own pulse speed up. I have almost counted to a minute when the pilot comes to and bolts upright, clenching my hand. Choking on a scream, I struggle to free myself, but the pilot won't let go. He draws me in closer, his strong hand still clamping mine. I can smell the tang of his sweat mixed with the residual blood from his head wound as he rasps in my face, his blue eyes blazing with terror, "Where am I?"

My throat goes dry; my head swims. Swallowing, I command with far more authority than I possess, "Release me first."

The pilot looks down at my hand, as if surprised to see he's holding it. He lets go and reclines on the table. His face whitens, and I can almost see the wave of adrenaline receding.

"Your plane crashed in our field." I point to the door, which Jabil left open, as if that would encourage propriety between me and an unknown *Englischer* pilot who sports tattoos and a gun. "The logging crew got you out and brought you here."

The pilot tries to get up again.

"Don't!" I force his shoulders down to the table. I step

back, mortified by my impulsive behavior, but the pilot obeys. He keeps lying there with his hands shuttered over his eyes. “You want some water?”

“Please.”

I go over to the sideboard and pour water from the metal pitcher. I carry the glass over to the pilot, but he makes no effort to sit up. “Are you going to be sick?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll try drinking in a little while.”

“No. Here. I’ll help you.” Skirting around the kitchen chair, I place one hand on the pilot’s upper back and bring the glass to his lips. He drinks greedily, the water trickling down his chin, catching in the strands of his beard. My hand burns where it touches his skin.

The pilot pushes the half-emptied glass away. “Thanks. Can you help me off the table?”

His left pupil looks more dilated than the right—the blue iris a thin Saturn ring orbiting the black—and his breathing is heavy. Possible signs of a concussion? But I don’t have the right or the power to restrain a grown man. I step closer to the table and wait as the pilot puts an arm around my shoulders so that he can use my body like a crutch.

He must be around five-ten or -eleven, since he’s only a few inches taller than I am. But I can feel his sinewy power through his arm alone. The pilot winces at the pressure on his hurt ankle and curls the foot up again, balancing on me

and on the table in front of him. He seems to think nothing of our proximity; I can think of nothing else.

“Can you tell me where I am?” he asks.

“An Old Order Mennonite community called Mt. Hebron.”

“But what state?”

“Northern Montana, near Glacier Falls. Not far from the Canadian border.”

“That close.”

“You were going to Canada?”

He doesn't say yes or no or offer any more explanation, so I gesture toward the open door and the pilot nods. We hobble together for a few labored steps. Then he leans against the jamb to catch his breath, eyes glimmering. “What's your name?”

“Leora Ebersole.” I pause. “And yours?”

He looks at me with those odd, concussed eyes. “Moses. Moses Hughes.”

“Moses,” I repeat. “Don't know many *Englischers* with that name.”

The pilot stumbles and his injured foot touches down, a knee-jerk reaction for stability. He curses, and my eyes grow wide. “I've never known *anyone* with your name,” he says. Removing his arm from around my shoulders, he touches the railing and hops over to the edge of the porch. He stares out over the meadow—at his plane that looks

like the smoking carcass of an enormous yellow bird—and sighs.

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“What’s that?”

“Where are you from?”

“Kentucky,” he says, looking ahead, “but I’ve moved around so much these past few years, I can barely remember where all I’ve been.”

I gesture to his plane. “Looks like you’re going to be here awhile. The community’s having a meeting at the school-house because the electricity shut down at Field to Table, the community’s bulk food store. My brother also said that the *Englischers’* cars won’t start. Nobody can go home or even call out on their cell phones. It’s like someone—” I snap my fingers—“flipped a switch.”

The pilot turns from the porch post and looks at me. I had tried to keep my manner light, but his expression is now so grave that a wave of panic courses throughout my body, raising the fine hair on my arms. “The deacons and bishop are trying to figure out what to do because the *Englischers* want to go home but have no way to get there.”

Moses faces the woods again, holding the porch railing. “When did this happen?”

“About two hours ago, I guess. Seth, my brother, wanted to get up here to help right after your accident, but there was such chaos at the store, he couldn’t get away.”

“And when did my plane crash?”

“Around the same time.” I stare at Moses’s bare back. Freckles, the color of those on his face, dot his shoulders like paint chips. “Why? Do you think they’re connected somehow?”

The pilot sinks one fist into the pocket of his jeans and turns to face me while being careful not to put more weight on his injured foot. My eyes are drawn like lodestones to the cross tattoo on his chest. My face grows hot. I look away from him, but I feel his gaze on me until I am forced to look back. “There’s no way to know for sure just yet,” he says. “but I think it could’ve been an EMP.”

“What does that mean?”

“An electromagnetic pulse. A special warhead, probably set off hundreds of miles above the earth, gives off this huge electromagnetic pulse that wipes out technology because of how the pulse reacts with the earth’s magnetic field. It’s harmless to humans and animals, but it can take out the power grid and everything that relies on a computer, throwing civilization back a couple hundred years. I’ve heard it can be over a few states, or—” he glances out at the land—“it could knock out half of our hemisphere.”

“How . . . how do you know about this?”

He shrugs. “I probably read more than I should.”

I glance away from him and stare at the field, where his ruined plane is backdropped by the chiseled mountain peaks,

piercing through the sea of softwoods as if from a volcanic eruption. “You think this—this bomb is why you crashed?”

“We can’t really call it a bomb, because there’s no obvious detonation. But, yeah—that’s a pretty likely explanation, if everything else is off the grid too.”

“How do we fix it?” I ask. “How do we get it all back?”

He turns and I glimpse his eyes again—a brilliant hue that seems to mirror the entire spectrum of the wide Montana sky. “That’s the thing. If I’m right, then . . . we don’t.”

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I guess you could say I had a slightly different childhood. When I was six and my brother ten, our family stood in a field at the camp where my parents were caretakers, and my parents told us that this was where we would meet if we were separated when the world “blew up.” From this field, our family would travel by foot to our friends’ elaborate, fairy-tale home and live in the blue room hidden behind their bookshelves.

My parents did not mean to instill fear in us. Now that I’m a parent, I see that they were trying to assuage their own fears by coming up with a plan. But I was born with an overactive imagination, and therefore this plan planted in me the seed of fear—and subsequently, a driving need to control my environment.

I wish I could say I uprooted this fear once I became an adult, but after I had my firstborn daughter, my fear grew worse, for not only did I have to control *my* environment;

I also had to control hers. When my eldest was six months old, an unnerving exchange with a logger deepened the roots of my fear and caused me to ask whether I would ever use lethal force to protect myself and my family. I believed I would, even though, growing up, I sensed my own father would adhere to his pacifist heritage if placed in such a situation.

The final puzzle piece for my book, *The Alliance*, slid into place when my father told us that we needed heirloom seeds to last us until the next harvest season. I remember standing in my darkened kitchen and repeating that phrase to myself—*the harvest season*. Initially, I believed this would be the title of the book, but over time, I knew a community having enough food to last until the next harvest season was only a small element of the story. The larger element came from the protagonist, Leora Ebersole, and her driving need to control her environment, even after society crumbles around her, because she believes if she controls her environment, she will be able to keep her orphaned family safe.

With every one of my books, God's been faithful to allow me to experience some portion of whatever topic I'm addressing. *The Alliance* has been no exception. My family and I moved from Tennessee to Wisconsin shortly before I finished the rough draft. Eight weeks later, my husband went in for a CAT scan, which revealed a tumor near his brain stem. He had surgery the next morning, and all

through that night next to his hospital bed, I feared for my family. I feared for our two young daughters—our firstborn was two and a half and our second, four months old at the time. I feared that I would be a widow, living on a grid-tie solar-powered farm six hundred miles away from our immediate families. In a matter of hours, one of my worst fears had come true, and I didn't know how to handle it.

However, all through my Garden of Gethsemane night, during the hours my husband was in surgery, and in the critical weeks that followed the craniotomy, I felt God's presence as if he was sitting beside me. I then understood that God had allowed me to face one of my greatest fears so that I would learn that inner peace can never be acquired through my futile attempts to control my environment—and therefore keep my family safe. Moreover, I can only achieve inner peace if I continually surrender my life and the lives of my family to the One who called us into being.

So I pray, dear reader, that you will discover the author of the peace that passes all understanding and daily surrender your life—and the lives of your family—to him.