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chapter one ON THE RIGHT TRACK

IT WAS FRIDAY NIGHT and that meant pizza. It was one of the things that tied all of us together—that and the Buffalo Bills. No matter which side of town you lived on, you could count on your dad bringing home a large pizza or two after work every Friday. Joe and I practically grew up on the stuff, and we knew where to get *real* pizza—the kind with imported pepperoni and whole-milk mozzarella from the Italian cheese plant on the West Side.

This particular Friday was a little different though. Joe pulled into our narrow driveway with two steaming pizzas on the back seat of the station wagon and our two-year-old son strapped into the car seat beside him. Colin was too young to say so in words, but you could tell by the way his little booted feet kicked up and down that he was delighted that this time his daddy had taken him along to pick up supper.

When Joe carried Colin into the house and set him just inside the door, the toddler nonchalantly held out his arms, clearly indicating that he expected his dad to help him get out of his snowsuit. Joe unwrapped the child who, now liberated, ran off

to find his mom and older sister. Joe headed back outside to bring in the pizza.

He opened the front passenger door but the pizzas weren't on the seat. He must have put them in the back. No, they weren't there either. When he looked through the back window, he saw only an empty seat. The boxes were gone! In the time it had taken him to carry in and unwrap his son, maybe five minutes at most, someone had walked up his driveway—his driveway—opened his car door, and stolen his supper!

Joe scrutinized the neighboring porches, stared along the sidewalks, listened for a closing front door, but there was no sign of the thief.

“This is ridiculous!” Joe fumed over his bowl of boxed macaroni and cheese a half-hour later. “First someone steals Meghann’s bike, then we find used needles on the curb, and now someone’s got the nerve to steal pizza from the car when I’m practically on the front porch. They must have known I would be right out to get it. How could they be so bold?”

Joe was angry—and troubled. And he was worried for the children. He put a large gate across the driveway, but he still did not feel like they would be safe playing outside alone. The neighborhood was full of bullies and thieves. He had not forgotten that just a few months before, a drunken gunman had calmly walked into the corner pizzeria and shot the delivery boy because he wanted the money brought in from a single night of business. The delivery boy died, and now a sheet of bullet-proof glass separated the customers from the workers who had become almost a part of their families.

And those were just the physical dangers. How could we teach our little ones to follow God in a place that tolerated,

even encouraged, violence and immorality like this? Few of our neighbors were practicing Christians, and even the ones who were, allowed their children to do things we never wanted our children to do.

It was an impossible dream, though, to get out of the city. Nobody ever left. You were born here and you died here. That's just the way it was. Only the wealthy could afford to move, and we did not even have a savings account. Besides, Joe was a computer technician, and we could not imagine finding very many technical jobs in the countryside that surrounded the city of Buffalo. So we put up the gate and prayed.

During the long wait, God sent us two more sons. And even though we pulled Meghann out of school and began to homeschool them all, the children were starting to show the strain of living in two worlds. The homemade soup and Bible memory verses they were fed at our house were countered with junk food and violent video games at their friends' homes. Even three-year-old Evan and little Nate were asking to play with toys from children's TV shows rather than with the trikes and Legos we had bought for them. And we didn't watch TV.



Meghann 11,
Colin 5,
Evan 22 months,
Nathan 2 weeks

Joe and I begged God for relief for six years. We switched churches several times in a desperate search for other families—for even one that believed like we did. But it seemed that everywhere we went people spoke more righteously than they acted. Even youth groups and Sunday schools seemed like dangerous places for children.



Colin teaches
Evan to paint.



Three little
homeschoolers

Then one day—with a bit of humor—God began to answer our prayers. It happened at the statewide homeschool convention we attended during our second year of homeschooling. We went there to find a seventh grade curriculum for Meghann and something that would do a better job of teaching six-year-

old Colin how to read. We thought we might also like to get a few little workbooks for Evan, who was almost three, and very interested in his older siblings' schoolbooks. The convention featured a huge curriculum sale where dozens of vendors from around the country came to sell what were, in their opinions, the best books on the market.

Dizzy from walking up and down the countless rows of tables, trying to sort through all the choices we had to make, our attention was grabbed by several small groups of people in unusual, but not unattractive, clothing. They were called Mennonites. The men all looked like they were on their way to a meeting, with their neatly trimmed hair and button-down shirts. And the women wore lovely dresses with an extra cape built over the bodice for modesty. We figured the ladies all had long hair, but it was covered by some sort of cap or headscarf, so it was hard to tell.

The most unusual thing about them, though, was not their clothing—it was their teenagers. I can still picture a trio walking past the tables, arm in arm, giggling like best friends do when they are talking about what they did over the weekend. At first I thought they were three teenagers, but then I noticed it was really a mom with two teenage daughters. I couldn't take my eyes off them.

They talked and smiled and related to one another as if they actually enjoyed being with one another. It was so different from the haughty disdain and downright rebellion I was used to seeing in young people. The smaller girl, her head scarf merrily swinging as she continued with the conversation, looked up into her mom's eyes and said something that made the older woman chuckle. Then the taller girl noticed something on one of the