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Peace Like A River Chapter Summary

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Introduction to Peace Like A River

Leif Enger's debut novel, **Peace Like A River**, is a richly layered work of American fiction that blends faith, family, and the stark realities of the American Midwest. Published in 2001, the novel quickly garnered acclaim for its lyrical prose and its ability to weave the miraculous into the fabric of everyday life. This detailed **Peace Like A River chapter summary**will guide you through the novel's intricate plot, exploring the journey of the Land family as they grapple with justice, miracles, and the unbreakable bonds of love. For readers seeking a deeper understanding of this modern classic, this breakdown offers a chapter-by-chapter analysis that highlights the novel's key themes and turning points.

The story is narrated by Reuben Land, an asthmatic boy who believes in miracles because he has witnessed one: his father, Jeremiah, simply spoke his name into the wind, and Reuben's breathless body began to work again. This act sets the tone for a narrative where the sacred and the secular are inextricably linked. The novel follows the Land family—Jeremiah, a schoolteacher and man of quiet faith; Reuben; his older brother, Davy; and their younger sister, Swede—as they are forced to flee their home in Minnesota after Davy commits a violent act. What follows is a modern-day odyssey across the Badlands of North Dakota, a search for justice, redemption, and a place where peace can finally be found. This comprehensive **Peace Like A River chapter summary** will help readers track the novel's complex emotional and narrative arcs.

Prologue and Part One: The Miracle and the Crime

Prologue: The Wind and the Breath

The novel opens with a brief but powerful prologue. Reuben Land, at the age of three, is dying from a severe asthma attack. His father, Jeremiah, kneels beside him in the snow and whispers, "Go, and do what you have to do." A wind comes up, and Reuben begins to breathe. This miracle is the foundational event of the novel, establishing Jeremiah as a man who is both ordinary and capable of the extraordinary. This prologue is a crucial part of any **Peace Like A River chapter summary**because it frames the entire narrative through the lens of faith and the tangible presence of God in the world.

Chapter 1: The Land Family in Roofing, Minnesota

The main narrative begins with an introduction to the Land family. Reuben is a sensible, observant boy who struggles with chronic asthma. Davy is the older brother, handsome, quiet, and increasingly distant. Swede is a precocious eleven-year-old who lives in a world of Western poetry and dime novels, writing epic poems about the outlaw Sunny Sundown. Jeremiah is a teacher at the local school, a man of deep but unspoken faith. The family lives in Roofing, Minnesota, a small town where everyone knows everyone. This chapter establishes the family dynamics and sets the stage for the conflict to come. It introduces the sense of normalcy that is about to be shattered.

Chapter 2: The Arrival of Trouble

Tension enters the Land home in the form of two young men, Israel Finch and Tommy Basca. They are bullies who begin to harass the Land family, particularly Davy. They vandalize the house and threaten violence. Jeremiah, true to his nature, responds with patience and a desire for peaceful resolution. Davy, however, seethes with a quiet rage. Swede, ever the storyteller, begins to weave Finch and Basca into her Wild West narratives as villains. This chapter is essential in a **Peace Like A River chapter summary** because it introduces the antagonists and the moral dilemma that will drive the plot.

Chapter 3: The Shooting

The central trauma of the novel occurs. Returning home one evening, Davy discovers Finch and Basca in the house, assaulting his sister, Swede. In a fit of protective rage, Davy shoots and kills both men. While the act is framed as self-defense and the protection of a family member, the law sees it as murder. Davy is arrested and held in the local jail. The community is divided; some see Davy as a hero, others as a cold-blooded killer. Reuben and Swede are devastated, and Jeremiah is forced to confront the limits of his peaceful nature.

Chapter 4: The Trial and the Escape

Davy's trial is a somber affair. The prosecution paints him as a violent young man, while the defense argues he was protecting his family. Before a verdict can be reached, Davy escapes from the county jail. The escape is a masterful piece of plotting, aided by an unknown person on the outside. The Land family is now in a state of crisis. The sheriff suspects the family knows more than they are letting on. This chapter is a turning point in any comprehensive **Peace Like A River chapter summary**, as it transitions the novel from a domestic drama into a fugitive story.

Chapter 5: The Decision to Leave

Jeremiah receives a sign—or perhaps a direct message—that forces him to act. He believes that God has told him to take the children and find Davy. With a heavy heart and a clear sense of purpose, Jeremiah packs the family station wagon, loads up Reuben and Swede, and leaves Roofing behind. He tells the authorities they are going on a trip, but they are really following a divinely inspired map towards the Badlands of North Dakota, where Jeremiah believes Davy is heading. This marks the beginning of their journey.

Chapter 6: The Road to the Badlands

The family's journey begins in earnest. They drive across the vast, open plains of Minnesota and into the Dakotas. Reuben is filled with a mixture of fear and excitement. Swede sees it as an adventure straight out of one of her poems. Jeremiah is calm, guided by an inner compass. Along the way, they encounter a cast of characters who offer help, hindrance, or simply a reflection of the world they are passing through. This chapter deepens the novel's sense of place and its exploration of the American landscape.

Part Two: The Badlands and the Search

Chapter 7: The Motel and the Miracle

In a rundown motel, Jeremiah performs another miracle. He heals a young boy with a severe leg injury simply by praying. The event is witnessed by Reuben and Swede, but also by a skeptical motel owner. This miracle reinforces the novel's central theme: that God is present in the world, working through people of faith. It also creates a problem, as word of the healing begins to spread, making it harder for the family to remain hidden. This chapter is a powerful highlight of any **Peace Like A River chapter summary**.

Chapter 8: The Encounter with the Law

The family is tracked down by a U.S. Marshal named Andreeson, a dogged and intelligent man who suspects Jeremiah is helping Davy. Andreeson interviews the family but cannot find any concrete evidence. He is a figure

of authority who represents the relentless pursuit of justice, yet he is not portrayed as a villain. He is simply doing his job. This encounter heightens the tension and forces Jeremiah to be more careful.

Chapter 9: The Hermit in the Cave

While exploring the Badlands, Reuben and Swede stumble upon a hermit living in a cave. The hermit, a man named Jape Waltzer, is a strange and unsettling figure. He seems to know about Davy and speaks in riddles. This encounter is both mysterious and menacing, adding an element of Gothic strangeness to the narrative. Swede, ever the poet, tries to fit Jape into her story, but he defies easy categorization.

Chapter 10: Finding Davy

Jeremiah's faith leads them to a remote cabin in the Badlands. Inside, they find Davy. The reunion is emotional but tense. Davy is not the same; he is haunted by what he has done, even if he believes it was necessary. He is a fugitive, living like a hunted animal. The family is now together, but they are far from safe. This chapter is the emotional core of the novel and a pivotal point in this **Peace Like A River chapter summary**.

Chapter 11: The Siege

Marshal Andreeson, following a tip, surrounds the cabin. A standoff ensues. Jeremiah, Reuben, Swede, and Davy are trapped inside. Andreeson calls for Jeremiah to come out with the children, but Jeremiah refuses to abandon Davy. The siege lasts for hours, with the tension mounting. Swede continues to write her poems, using them as a way to cope with the fear. This chapter is a masterclass in building suspense.

Chapter 12: The Gunfight and the Fall

The standoff ends in violence. Davy, seeing no way out, decides to make a run for it. A gunfight erupts. Jeremiah, in an attempt to protect his son, steps into the line of fire. He is shot and falls from a high cliff, plummeting into the river below. Reuben watches in horror. The moment is both devastating and miraculous. The pacing of this scene is crucial in any careful **Peace Like A River chapter summary**.

Chapter 13: Aftermath and Grief

Jeremiah's body is not recovered from the river. Davy escapes into the Badlands. Reuben and Swede are taken into custody by Marshal Andreeson, who treats them with surprising kindness. They are returned to Roofing, where they must learn to live without their father. Reuben is consumed by grief and guilt, while Swede retreats into her imagination. The family is shattered, and their future is uncertain.

Part Three: The Healing and the Hope

Chapter 14: Return to Roofing

Back in Roofing, Reuben and Swede are taken in by a kind neighbor, Roxanna. They must return to school and try to resume a normal life. But nothing is normal without Jeremiah. Reuben's asthma worsens as he struggles with his grief. Swede is silent, no longer writing her poems. This chapter shows the long, slow process of healing after immense trauma.

Chapter 15: The Letter from Davy

Months later, a letter arrives from Davy. He is alive and hiding in Canada. He writes of his regret and his love for his family. The letter brings a measure of closure, but it also reopens old wounds. Reuben must decide whether to respond. This ongoing connection is an important thread in the latter part of this **Peace Like A River chapter summary**.

Chapter 16: The Courting of Roxanna

A surprising subplot develops. Roxanna, the neighbor who cared for the children, reveals that she and Jeremiah had a deeper connection than anyone knew. She was in love with him. Through this revelation,

Reuben and Swede learn a new dimension of their father's life. The chapter is a tender portrayal of love and loss.

Chapter 17: A Second Miracle

Reuben, now a young man, is still struggling with his asthma. One day, he has a vision of his father. In the vision, Jeremiah speaks to him, telling him to "let it go." Reuben realizes that he has been holding onto his grief and his family's past in a way that is keeping him from living. In that moment, his asthma is healed. This is the novel's second major miracle, and it completes Reuben's arc from a boy defined by his illness to a man defined by his faith.

Chapter 18: The River of Peace

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