



CRACKS
in the
FLOOR
of
HEAVEN

Michele Renée DeRouin



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Cracks in the Floor of Heaven
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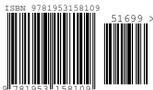
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SAMPLE

DEDICATION

For my children, Alyssa and Dane. I love you to the moon and back.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

I am by nature a very curious person. I analyze, contemplate, and question how things work, sometimes to a fault. The day God spoke to me about writing *Cracks in the Floor of Heaven*, a question came to the forefront of my mind. What if our souls exist in Heaven prior to our conception, and in agreement with God, we are born for His special purpose and at His appointed time?

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1:5

Your eyes saw my unformed substance, in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

Psalms 139:16

...even as He chooses us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before Him...

Ephesians 1:4

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

Cracks in the Floor of Heaven is a work of fiction. I tried my best to be as biblically accurate as possible while still using my God-given creativity and imagination. I believe we have one life to live. I want to use mine to help facilitate healing in people's lives and bring as many souls to Christ as possible. I truly hope this story impacts you in a positive way. God Bless.

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CHAPTER 1 **ANTE-TERRA**

I strolled down the winding path; Buddy kept pace with me, his whiskers tickling the side of my arm as we walked. I reached up to rest my hand on his gigantic head and could feel the vibration of his content purring. I grabbed ahold of his thick mane and climbed onto his back as we made our turn and entered into the dense canopy of the Garden.

Buddy stopped beneath our tree; the same one we have visited for a thousand years. From this specific tree hung fifteen different types of fruit. I picked a ripe lilikoi and dug my thumbs into the outer layer, pried it open, and scooped out the contents with my fingers.

I picked a pear next and tossed it in the air. Buddy caught it with his enormous jaws, then licked his lips and let out a low growl, indicating he wanted another tasty snack.

"Yummy, huh, Buddy?" He wagged his tail and moved to position himself underneath the lowest hanging branch. He glanced back at me as if to say, "Are you climbing that tree *again?*" *Of course, I am*, I thought. *It's about time I show this tree who's boss.* I stood up, carefully balanced myself, then reached up and grabbed the lowest limb to hoist myself up. I picked another ripe, round, tasty piece of fruit and

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dropped it down to Buddy.

I slowly made my way to the highest branch possible and looked toward the City of God. It was one of my favorite things to do. I could see the pearly gates surrounding it, and the structures beyond glistened in the light that poured from within. I scanned the horizon from east to west. Beautiful, wildflower-covered plains in the east extended for thousands of miles until they reached massive canyons to the west. Hundreds of blue topaz-colored lakes shimmered in the light and herds of animals both earthly and heavenly dotted the landscape. It was an area of natural wonders, so expansive; not one soul had explored it entirely.

I closed my eyes and listened to the beautiful songs of praise and the prayers of intercession offered by the saints for their brothers and sisters who, for then, remained on Earth. I softly sang along. Oh, how I admired the saints. These mighty warriors and martyrs had been born on Earth and fought valiantly against the Evil One. Maybe one day, I, too, will be blessed with that same opportunity.

I opened my eyes and saw Michael walking down the path toward the tree where I was perched. I watched him in awe. He was the most magnificent angel in Heaven. When he took flight, it was spectacular. His wingspan was so massive it measured well over thirty-five feet. I instinctively knew he was looking for me and couldn't help but wonder why. Curiosity got the best of me, and I started my descent a little too quickly.

Halfway down, the branch below my right foot shifted out from under me. I held on tightly and moved my right foot to another limb

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to balance myself. Then, *that* branch, along with the one under my left foot, shifted. I lost my grip and began the hundred-foot drop to the Garden floor. Buddy tried to break my fall but missed the mark and I landed on the soft ground, which decided to join in on the fun and retracted like a piece of elastic, then snapped me up into the air. Like a feather, I slowly floated back down. Buddy walked over and licked the fruit juice off my face while I laid there laughing. The tree had bested me once again.

"I know you did that on purpose!" I called up to it. The tree's leaves rustled as if there were a sudden breeze; however, I knew the truth. It was laughing at me. That tree had knocked me out of it more times than I could count. You would have thought by now I would have learned my lesson and climbed up a different tree, but this one was the tallest and had the best views. *Besides, no tree was going to push me around.*

Michael walked up and stood over me. I stared in wonderment at his radiant splendor. "Ante-Terra, did you fall out of that tree again?"

"I don't fall out of trees, Michael. That tree purposefully knocks me out of it." Michael looked up the tree, then back at me.

"Then maybe you should climb a different tree, Anima," he suggested.

"What fun would that be?" I responded.

Although I am sure he understood what I meant, angels don't have feelings or experiences associated with fun. They were created to worship and obey God. Many times, I would try to get Michael to laugh. The only response I ever got was, "You are very interesting, Anima." I finally gave up trying.

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I was called by many names; however, none were like the ones the saints had. Their names were the most beautiful and given to them by their earthly mothers. Angels called me Ante-Terra, which in Latin means "before Earth," or Anima, meaning "Soul." I often daydreamed about being called Karen or Cynthia. One day, I hoped to have a real name, but I would have to be born, and that time had not yet come.

"*He* is waiting for you," Michael said. "There is something important that requires discussion today."

"Thank you, Michael. I am headed there now," I replied, jumping to my feet. Michael turned and leaped into the air. It was a breathtaking sight. *Angels, always straight to the point, no time for small talk.*

I got up and brushed myself off. "Let's go, Buddy." I couldn't help but wonder what was so pressing that *He* would send Michael for me. Usually, we met up at the same time, but that day, *He* was early. I turned toward the center of the Garden and began the walk to our favorite spot.

The Garden was the most magnificent place in the entire Kingdom. Light filtered down through the canopy and brightened blades of grass and leaves of bushes and ferns that covered the Garden floor. Coconut palm trees swayed gently from side to side in the breeze, as if dancing to a soft melody. Every flower made its home here, from the plumerias and gardenias to the jasmine and giant lilies. On my way to see *Him*, I often stopped and took the time to inhale as many scents as possible. But not that day. *He* was waiting for me.

Buddy sensed my urgency and did not dawdle either. Usually, he would chase butterflies, and I would take my time handing out my

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favorite earthly names to the thousands of animals that made the Garden their home.

As much as I enjoyed spending time there, my favorite part of the day was that spent with *Him*. I quickened my pace. The closer I got, the more excited I became. My soul longed for *Him*. I knew *He* could see me coming before I arrived. The light of my soul shone exceptionally bright as I closed the distance between us.

Every soul emits its own unique, bright light that can be seen from miles away. The color of my soul is yellow, like a dandelion, and some have told me it's exceptionally bright, hence *His* nickname for me, "Little Light." Little, because of my small stature. I knew every soul in the Kingdom and their corresponding color. It made it impossible to play the game hide and seek, even though many have tried.

Our meeting place was the most gorgeous part of the Garden. There was a large, granite boulder, perfectly positioned under a tall, sturdy oak tree. The tree's expansive branches extended for hundreds of feet, and a multitude of birds and animals made their homes in it. A bubbling spring poured out from underneath the boulder and formed a beautiful pond. The water made its way downstream and turned into a creek which joined other streams less than a mile away. These connected to one of the many rivers that eventually emptied into the crystal-clear lake on the south side of the winding trail I followed to the Garden.

We always enjoyed sitting on top of that rock, dipping our toes into the small pool of cool water. Each day, fish journeyed from the distant lakes and swam up the rivers, streams and creeks in order to greet us.

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We would giggle together as they kissed the bottoms of our feet.

I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds around me. Birds communicated with each other through whistles, chirps, and clucks. Some sang musical tunes, while others mimicked sounds emanating from the Garden floor. Hummingbirds and bumble bees buzzed from flower to flower, and lemurs called out to one another from high up in the trees. I could hear water bubbling over and around rocks from dozens of streams nearby and the loud crash of water from distant falls.

Then I sensed *Him*. I opened my eyes and saw *Him* standing in an open meadow. I couldn't help myself; I started running.

I nearly knocked Him over as I leaped into His waiting arms. He held me close for several moments and planted kisses on my forehead and cheeks. There was nothing more I desired than to be with Him, learn from Him, and be loved by Him. The overwhelming feeling and total satisfaction of His presence filled my heart and soul to its capacity.

"*Jesus!*" I repeated over and over, returning His affection by kissing the scars on his wrists. He had many names such as Immanuel, Jehovah, Yeshua, El Shaddai, Father, and God. But Jesus was my favorite. It means *Deliverer*.

"Good afternoon, My Little Light," He said with the utmost affection. Hearing His endearing nickname for me filled me with undiluted joy and love.

Jesus stood six feet tall. He was medium-built with bronze-colored skin. His hair was dark brown, and He had a matching mustache and beard. His eyes were the colors of a rainbow, if a rainbow had a

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thousand colors.

Unlike the angels, Jesus loved having fun. So many times, I had tried counting the colors in His eyes. Every time I made significant progress, He somehow switched them around, and I would lose track. He always thought this was hilarious. He liked to tease me and say, "You almost got it that time. Let's try again."

He wore a white robe that glistened and embroidered on it were the words "Faithful" and "True." A purple sash that read "King of Kings" and "Lord of Lords" ran across His chest. He wore a gold crown on His head, full of the most precious stones ever made. It had a name engraved in the base that only He knew. His perfect holiness and transcendent glory flowed from Him, and a rainbow encircled His entire body.

Sometimes we ran around and climbed trees. Other times, we sat for hours talking about anything and everything concerning Heaven, the saints, the angels, or any topic I found interesting. He loved to teach me the names of plants and animals in the Garden, pointing out the marvelous mysteries of His creation. He was the best teacher, always patient and kind. He had a funny sense of humor, and there was absolutely nothing I enjoyed more than His companionship. He was the most beautiful being in all of Heaven and Earth. From Him poured all things good. When I was with Him, everything faded away, and my focus sharpened as I concentrated on His every word, movement, and expression.

"Jesus, you sent an angel for me today."

"Yes," He replied.

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"You knew I would be here, as usual."

"Yes," He said again. "There are important things to discuss today, but, for now, let us spend time together. We will get to those matters soon enough. What questions do you have for Me today?"

Jesus loved my questions. Every day, when walking through the Garden, I made a mental list of what I wanted to ask Him. However, I was in such a hurry that day; I had only one: *What does He want to discuss that's so important?*

"You always have such good questions, My Beloved Soul. You must have a list for today."

I looked at Buddy, who was resting his head on the Lord's knee, purring loudly. I knew Jesus could see I was struggling, but thankfully His patience was endless. Suddenly, I thought of one.

"Do people have lions as their best friends on Earth?" Buddy looked up at Jesus, tilting his giant head, awaiting His answer. Jesus reached down and ruffled Buddy's mane, causing him to purr loudly with satisfaction.

"Lions do not normally befriend humans on Earth. They are wild and not easily tamed." Buddy abruptly stopped nuzzling the hands of Jesus.

This answer shocked me, as well. *Lions and humans were not friends on Earth?* That was the weirdest thing I had ever heard. I couldn't imagine not having Buddy by my side. He was my trustworthy companion. *Who else would help me climb trees and explore the Garden's endless supply of fruits, nuts and vegetables?* I started thinking about that mischievous tree that kept kicking me off its branches.

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"Did that tree knock you out of it again today?" Jesus asked with a twinkle in his eye. He already knew the answer.

I nodded, yes. "Michael told me to climb a different tree next time."

"What fun would that be?" He asked. "I think you need to hold on a little bit tighter next time." We both started giggling. Suddenly, I thought of another question.

"What kinds of animals *do* people befriend?" I asked.

"Dogs, small cats, birds, and turtles, to name a few."

"*Turtles!*" I exclaimed. I tried to think of a single fun thing I have ever seen a turtle do. Nothing came to mind.

"Any other questions, My Cherished One?" He asked. I loved His nicknames for me.

"Why can't angels have fun?" I blurted out. Jesus tossed His head back and laughed again. His laugh was contagious, and I joined in.

"Do you think I should teach them how to have fun?"

"*Yes!*" I said and ran my fingers through Buddy's soft, thick mane. Jesus grabbed me up in his arms again and held me tight.

"Alright, My Little Light, let's now talk about why I sent for you." A serious expression replaced his smile as He sat me back down next to Him. "This is an important matter, Daughter."

"Yes, Father," I responded and looked deep into His eyes. Nothing was more important to me than pleasing Jesus.

"You know of the saints, Daughter." It was more of a statement than a question. Jesus and I had spent hundreds of years discussing the saints, and He knew of my admiration for them.

"Yes, Jesus. The saints are souls like me, born on Earth and sent to

battle Satan."

"You are so smart and have an excellent memory." He tousled my hair lovingly. "There is still much work to be done on Earth, and I have an important mission, specifically designed for you. Are you ready to be born, Little Light?"

I could not believe my ears. I knew the Lord was serious by the look on His face. I had been waiting for Him to ask me that question for a very long time.

"YES, YES, I will go! I am ready! I am willing!" I exclaimed excitedly. Jesus paused for a moment and looked deep into my eyes.

"Daughter, I must tell you, although Earth has an abundance of joy and love, there is also pain and suffering." I looked down at the scars on His wrists and feet. I had never felt pain or suffering. I had heard the stories of the martyrs and the saints, and even though I understood the meaning of those words, I had never *experienced* them. A hundred thoughts swirled around in my head.

"May I ask you a few things, Jesus?"

His smile returned. "Of course, you can. You are brilliant and ask great questions."

"Will I experience pain and suffering?"

"Yes, Child," Jesus replied.

"Will you be with me, Jehovah?"

Jesus smiled and answered, "Yes, I will be with you. I will never, ever leave you."

My third question came out more slowly and a little softer. "Will I get to return to you?"

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This time, Jesus waited a moment before answering, choosing His words carefully. "I *want* you to return," He replied. "But that decision will be yours. Only you will be able to make that choice."

That was such a strange answer. *Of course, I want to return!* I looked around the Garden and down at Buddy, then back up at Jesus. I stared at Him and worked hard to memorize every detail of His face. I traced the lines on His forehead and the shape of His eyes and mouth. He stared right back at me. It was as if He was doing the very same thing.

I was ready to ask my fourth question. "Will I have weapons to fight against the Evil One?"

"Yes, you will have many weapons at your disposal," He assured me, then continued, "And I will no longer refer to you as 'Little Light' for you shall be 'a Mighty Light,' and together we will work to drive out the darkness."

Excitement and joy caused my soul to shine even brighter as I asked my final question.

"Will I get to have a *real* name?" I contemplated the saints and their beautiful names.

The Lord laughed and scooped me up into His loving arms again. "Yes, you will have a name!" Finally, I will have something spectacular for the angels to call me. No longer will I be referred to as Ante-Terra or Anima.

Well, then, that settled it. If Jesus wanted me to go to Earth, I would go. I would do anything for Him. Exhilaration and anticipation started bubbling up inside me. I wanted nothing more than to please the Lord. I collapsed in His arms, feeling a sense of relief from the heaviness of

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the conversation. I laid my head on his shoulder. He stroked my hair softly and sang a song about His love for me. My eyelids became very heavy. I tried to resist the urge to close them but did not win that battle, and for the first time in my entire existence, I fell into a deep, deep sleep.

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 2

A BIRTHDAY WISH

"Wake-up, Alina! Time to rise and shine, birthday girl!"

I opened one eye and scowled at my mother, who stood in the bedroom doorway. "Mom, it's the first day of summer, and you're waking me up?" I moaned, rolled over, and covered my head with the pillow.

"It's your twelfth birthday, and I have a surprise for you." She grabbed the pillow off my head, sang "Happy Birthday" in a French accent, and placed a giant kiss on my forehead. My little brother, Gavin, joined in the morning harassment by jumping up and down on my bed while singing "Happy Birthday," trying to copy Mom's French rendition. I grabbed his hand and pulled him down next to me to cuddle, gripping him firmly. "Good morning, Little Bear," I said to him as he attempted to wiggle free. I held him tighter. Gavin was two years younger than me and still thought Mom was hilarious. I was at the stage where everything Mom did was just plain embarrassing.

"We're not *French*, Mom," I said, protesting her accent. Gavin finally broke my grip and jumped off the bed.

"Your grandmother was French," she retorted, ignoring my morning grumpiness. "You were born in 1977, on a hot summer day. I almost didn't make it to the hospital in time." I rolled my eyes. I had

to suffer through this story every single birthday.

"I held you in my arms all night long. You didn't even cry; you stared up at me with those beautiful, green eyes of yours. In those days, babies got mixed up at the hospital all the time, so I refused to let them take you to the nursery." Then she whispered just loudly enough so Gavin could hear, "I'm not sure your brother is even mine."

Mom thought she was funny and laughed at her own jokes all the time. My brother stuck his tongue out as she left to finish breakfast, singing "Happy Birthday" again on her way out.

"You always say that!" he yelled at Mom as she headed down the hallway. Gavin looked at me, "Are you having a birthday party this year, Nia?"

Gavin couldn't pronounce Alina when he was little, so he shortened it to Nia. I didn't mind so much. I despised my real name. Why couldn't Mom have picked a regular name like Kim or Sarah? I had the weirdest one in my school: Alina Gabrielle Sheridan. Several years ago, I asked Mom why she gave me such an unusual name.

"An angel appeared to me in a dream one night when I was about six months pregnant. He told me that I was to name you, Alina Gabrielle." I had a hard time believing her. *Why couldn't that angel have told her to name me Kate or Jessica?*

Gavin distracted my train of thought by asking about the party again. "No, Gavin, I don't want a birthday party." This statement was a bald-faced lie. There was nothing I wanted more than to have a birthday party. The problem with parties is you must have kids that want to come to them. I didn't have anyone to invite. The one friend

I used to have moved to Arkansas in the middle of sixth grade the year before, and I had spent the last four months of school eating lunch all by myself. Summer was probably going to be dull, but it was better than being bullied at school.

"Well, maybe you can invite Amy to the party," he said casually.

"Who is Amy?" I asked as I got up and started making my bed.

"The girl who just moved in next door. I think she's in your grade. She has a brother my age named Christopher. We already met."

Of course, they had. Gavin did not have problems making friends. He was smart, outgoing, funny, and athletic; everything I was not.

The smell of breakfast was heavy in the air. My stomach growled.

"I'm going to eat all the bacon!" Gavin teased and ran out of the room.

"Don't you dare!" I yelled after him.

All morning long, I wondered about our new neighbors. Amy and Christopher, yet another example of perfectly common names. *Why couldn't Mom have picked out a name from a baby book like everyone else?*

Mom was anything *but* ordinary. For example, every room in our house had a different theme. I could have appreciated a room with a floral motif. It would've been nice to see multi-colored vases perfectly set on wooden furniture. Or how about a beach theme? I would have loved to have seen decorative baskets with shells of different types and sizes centered nicely on the end tables and a painting of the ocean hanging on the wall. But, no, Mom wanted nothing to do with anything normal, or traditional.

For example, our living room had the biggest Santa Claus collection

on the planet. I hated having people over. I imagined them asking themselves, "*Why don't these people ever put away their Christmas decorations?*" It was as if Mom was going for the Guinness World Record or something. I can't tell you how many times she'd hauled us around to garage sales looking for Santa Clauses, trying to convince us we had room for *one more*. Even though mom was eccentric, she could be a lot of fun.

I don't think she had any idea how drop-dead gorgeous she was. Her long, thick, blonde hair went down to her waist. She was tall and slender with a perfect figure, even though she never exercised. Her eye color changed from blue to bluish green, depending on her mood. She had a perfect smile and a fair complexion with a few well-placed freckles.

On the other hand, I, looked nothing like my mom. I was short, with green eyes and crooked teeth. I had thin, straight, light brown hair, and wore thick-lensed glasses that were a little too big for my small face. I was skinny as a rail, even though I ate like a horse. My nickname at school was 'Toothpick,' and I hated it. I had bronze-colored skin that deepened in the late summer months. I was shy, clumsy, a little awkward, and I struggled with making even the smallest of chit-chat. I was anything but witty. There wasn't an athletic bone in my body, so team sports terrified me. I had concluded I must look like my father, whom I had never seen.

It had been just the three of us for as long as I could remember. Our mom liked to call us 'The Three Musketeers.' Gavin and I didn't know who our father was. Mom never talked about him, and there

were no photographs. The only remark she ever made was that he had refused to marry her after Gavin was born, so she left him. That was it. Gavin and I pressed for answers, but she would always change the subject. The last time I brought it up, she became sullen and depressed for days afterward. I hated seeing her like that, so my brother and I agreed to never ask about him again.

My mom had a younger brother, too. Of course, we knew nothing about him either. Our grandparents died in a car accident before we were born. Mom never voluntarily spoke about any of them. It was another reason I felt like an outcast. Everyone at school had aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Sometimes I would fantasize that we had a big, extended family who loved us very much. I imagined Christmas and Easter with a house filled with relatives, talking and laughing, but then reality always slapped me in the face and reminded me, "*You are different.*"

I headed toward the kitchen and accidentally activated one of the Santa decorations that spilled out of the living room and into the hallway. "Ho, Ho, Ho . . . Merry Christmas," it announced in an automated tone.

"Mom, can't we keep the Santa Claus collection isolated in the living room?" I asked with frustration. She ignored my bad attitude and set breakfast on the table.

The dining room had not escaped from Mom's peculiar decorating style either. It was covered wall-to-wall in angels. Now to be fair, I loved angels. However, I pictured them as beautiful, majestic, human-like creatures with giant, white wings, not chubby babies, floating on

clouds, holding harps. And for Mom to decorate an entire room in them was bizarre.

While eating breakfast, Mom asked, "So, Alina, what do you want to do for your birthday?"

What does it matter? I thought. I was feeling especially melancholy that day. What I wanted more than anything, but would never admit, was a birthday party with lots of friends in attendance. Mom kept pressing, so, shrugging my shoulders, I said, "How about we go shopping for a new shirt?"

Gavin frowned at me and with a mouth full of bacon and sarcastically and emphatically said, "Boring!"

It was then I noticed a strange scratching and whining noise coming from the garage.

"You're right, Gavin, that is boring," Mom said, smiling. She stood up and walked over to the garage door. Mom opened it and started singing "Happy Birthday" again. The most adorable puppy I'd ever seen came bounding into the house. He was golden brown with bright, blue eyes, and no bigger than a football. With tears in my eyes, I bent over and picked him up. He licked my face, and his entire body wiggled wildly. Gavin screamed and ran over to share in the birthday surprise.

"You bought me a puppy for my birthday?" I asked. My brother and I had begged Mom to get us a dog for years, but she always refused. She said we weren't old enough yet and that they were a lot of work.

Gavin jumped up and down with excitement. "What are you going to name him, Nia? Can I help? Will you share him with me? Can I hold him?" I was still in shock and disbelief.

"Gavin, settle down and give your sister some time with him."
Gavin pouted a little.

"I'll share with you, Little Bear," I said and handed him the puppy. I stood up and gave my mom a big hug. "Thank you. He's perfect."

Mom beamed at me. "You are welcome, Honey."

A dog of my very own, I couldn't believe it.

Gavin was already throwing out ideas for names, "How about naming him, Charlie or Rex? My friend Brian named his dog Aslan, like in the book *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*."

There was no way on Earth my beautiful puppy would have a weird name; however, I didn't want to hurt my brother's feelings, so instead, I said, "Let's pick something else, Gavin." I thought for a moment and then came up with a perfect one. It was simple and accurately represented what he was, a new friend. "Let's call him Buddy," I said with a finality that even my brother couldn't challenge.

"Buddy! Come here, Buddy!" I called. Gavin looked slightly disappointed but didn't argue.

"I love it! That's a wonderful name!" Mom said with a big smile on her face. She went about cleaning up after breakfast, leaving us to enjoy our new dog. Gavin and I ran around the house with Buddy, taking turns playing with him.

While washing the dishes, Mom lectured me about feeding Buddy and keeping the yard clean. "He's your responsibility, Alina."

I barely paid attention but heard enough to answer, "Yes, Mom." Gavin offered to help too.

We laid on the floor with Buddy, calling his name and wrestling

with him. Buddy took turns, licking, and nipping us.

The doorbell rang, and Gavin jumped up. "That's Christopher. I can't wait to show him, Buddy." He ran to the door and threw it open. I looked up to see his new friend standing in the doorway, and he was not alone. A girl, my age stood behind him. Christopher's sister was my height, with dark hair and brown eyes. She was very, very pretty. My heart sank a little. Pretty girls never liked ugly ones like me.

"Hi Christopher, check out the new puppy my mom got for my sister's birthday," my brother said excitedly, then added, "Alina said she would share him with me."

"Hey, your sister came, too!" Gavin exclaimed as he opened the door wide enough for them both to enter. I was suddenly so self-conscious that my mouth went completely dry.

"Come in! Welcome!" my mom said in her French accent. *Please don't embarrass me*, I thought and shot her a look that said exactly that. I was suddenly and acutely aware of the Santa Claus and cherub collections. *Why does my mom have to be so weird?*

Christopher immediately noticed and said, "Hey, you still got your Christmas stuff up! That's so cool!" I could feel my face turn beet red. His sister walked straight up to me without hesitation, said with a smile, "Hi, I'm Amy. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Alina. Nice to meet you too," I replied politely. Buddy ran circles around our legs.

"I love your name. It's so unique." She bent down. "Look at him. He is so cute! Can I hold him?" she asked, her voice full of excitement. I was shocked at how nice she was being. It was probably because my

mom was in the room.

"Yeah, of course," I said, barely audible, my shyness in full bloom.

Mom picked up on it and said, "Alina speak up; a mouse couldn't even hear you." I shot her another dirty look, which she ignored.

I picked up Buddy and handed him to Amy. She stroked Buddy's coat and smiled at me. "You are so lucky!" She gently gave Buddy back to me. "Puppies always have such sweet breath," she said. I listened as she talked about her dog and cat. One was named Foxy and the other, Jasper.

Amy's brother looked at Gavin and said, "Then they turn into adult dogs, and their breath smells like poop." At the word "poop," both Christopher and Gavin laughed hysterically. Amy and I rolled our eyes.

"Brothers are gross," she whispered, dramatically.

Who is this girl? She *seemed* to like me. Usually, girls my age would notice my appearance and awkwardness and look down their nose at me. They would scrutinize my non-designer clothes and whisper secrets about me. They would say things like, "*Alina? What kind of name is that?*"

I was sure Amy had never experienced bullying in her whole life. She was way too pretty. Her teeth were straight, and she had the latest haircut. Her clothes and jewelry matched perfectly and were the most recent style. She had a bubbly, contagious giggle that made you want to laugh along with her.

"Happy Birthday, Alina! Or do you like being called Nia?" she asked.

"Either one is fine," I replied politely.

"I love them both! They are nothing like my boring, old name." She giggled again. The melody of her laugh pulled me in, causing me to giggle too. I found it ironic how neither of us liked our name.

"I'll trade you," I said, trying some humor on for size.

"It's a deal! What are you doing for your birthday?" she asked.

"She is going shopping for a new shirt," Gavin yelled from the other room. Gavin and my mom seemed to be having a contest to see who could embarrass me the most. They were both winning. *Amy will figure out how dull I am, for sure.*

"Sounds fun! Do you mind if I come along?" she asked. I could feel my jaw drop. *Did she just ask to hang out with me?* How I wished I could be as outgoing as Gavin.

"Of course, you can!" my mom and I answered at the same time. *Don't sound too desperate,* I thought.

"Great, I'll go ask my mom. I'm sure she will say yes. She is still unpacking. My dad is the new pastor at the church down the street. Oh, that reminds me, youth summer camp is in two weeks. You *must* go! It's a blast! I'll be right back and tell you all about it, okay?" And with that, Amy ran out the doorway. I was relieved she missed the shocked look on my face. I stood there, staring where she had just been, bewildered by what had taken place. *A funny, cool, pretty girl wants to go shopping with me for my birthday and invited me to summer camp!*

"Mom, can I go over to Christopher's house while you guys go shopping?" Gavin begged.

"Yes, but, be on your best behavior and don't get in the way of his mother unpacking. Moving is very stressful," Mom lectured. She

planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Gross!" he stated and wiped his face as they ran out the front door.

After a few minutes, I started doubting Amy would return and made a mental list of all the excuses she would use. The doorbell rang, and I held my breath, waiting for the letdown as I opened it.

"I'm ready to go! Mom said she would love for you and Gavin to go to camp with us!" Simultaneously we both turned to face my mom.

"Can I?" I was desperate, and I would do anything to get to go. I'd clean the house every day and wash her car once a week. I didn't say this out loud, but I was hoping Mom would pick up what I was putting out there. My mom looked at me, then over at Amy, then back at me again. It felt like twenty minutes had gone by before she answered.

"I guess I can take care of Buddy while you're both gone," she finally said, a little disappointed.

"Thank you, Mom!" I exclaimed, trying hard not to sound too overjoyed.

"Now go get ready for the day," she ordered. I hadn't noticed until now, but I was still in my pajamas.

"Yippee!" Amy cheered and hugged me tightly. "You are going to love it! There are games and crafts. You can hike and swim in the lake or even paddle around in a kayak. We have bonfires every night and make S' mores."

As I brushed my teeth, Amy continued talking about all the fun activities that take place at summer camp. However, what Amy didn't know, and what she couldn't have known, was that as exciting as camp sounded, what I cared about the most was having a friend. It was the

best birthday present I could have asked for. I felt like the luckiest girl on the planet, and no camp or bonfire could ever compare to that.

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 3

CAMP PINE ROCK

"Mom!! Where is my bathing suit?" I yelled from the bedroom, frantically trying to pack for camp. The church provided a list of needed items that included: sunblock, a hat, a notepad, a pen, five pairs of shorts, five shirts, and so on. When I got down the list to the Bible, I panicked.

"Mom, I need a Bible!" I had never been to church before, let alone owned a Bible.

Mom popped her head into my room and said, "Calm down, Alina! Ask Amy. Her father probably has a thousand Bibles."

How embarrassing. I didn't want to ask to borrow a Bible, but it was on the list and probably very important. I shoved the remaining items into a duffle bag and headed for the door. Amy must have read my mind because she met me half-way between our houses with something in her hand.

"I thought you might need this," she said with a smile and handed me a beautiful pearl-colored book. It had gold engraving on the cover that read, *Holy Bible*. When I had shared with her that my mom had never taken us to church before, unlike most girls our age, there was no judgment, just pure excitement to share this new experience with me.

"You can keep it," said Amy. I got a new Bible for Christmas, and this is my old one."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Of course, I am!" she exclaimed. "I even wrote your name on the inside." I opened it and found her inscription. In beautiful penmanship, Amy had not just written my name but, "To my friend, Alina Sheridan. May God bless you in all that you do."

The pages were thin and delicate. I was afraid to handle them. I read the first line: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." It was lovely, and the most precious gift anyone had ever given me. I hugged her tightly and whispered, "Thank you."

"Did I spell your name, right?"

I nodded, holding back tears. Amy's thoughtfulness and kindness were overwhelming. We were scheduled to leave in a few minutes, so I wanted to spend that time saying goodbye to Buddy and Mom. I ran back to the house, carefully holding Amy's thoughtful gift.

"Now listen here." Buddy tilted his head as I spoke. "I will be back before you know it. Mom is going to take good care of you while I'm gone." He glanced over at Mom, then back at me, and tilted his head as if to say, "Don't leave me with this crazy woman." He licked my face, and I hugged him tightly. Gavin had already said his goodbyes and was headed next door.

I gave Mom a quick hug and thanked her again for letting us go.

"Be good. I love you," Mom said and kissed my forehead. She took Buddy from my arms and held him protectively. I was a little concerned, leaving them both for a week. She must have read my mind.

"Don't worry; we will be fine." I had never been away from home for more than one night. Mom looked a little sad saying goodbye but tried her best to put on a brave face. Gavin had packed the night before and was already in the car with Christopher waiting to leave. I picked up my duffle bag and walked out the door.

Amy's parents drove us to church, where we met up with the rest of the kids from her youth group. A big, yellow bus was waiting in the parking lot, and kids were piling in. Excitement filled the air, and even though I was thrilled, I was also very nervous. Gavin didn't seem anxious at all. He was already talking and laughing with a bunch of boys his age.

Amy stayed right by my side, guiding and supporting me. We found a spot near the back of the bus, and she introduced me to several other girls seated nearby.

The bus ride was crazy. After leaving the city limits, we started the three-hour trip to camp. Flat desert scenery slowly turned into rolling hills as cacti gave way to shrubs and small trees. We wound our way through curvy mountain roads, and I witnessed the emergence of the legendary Ponderosa Pine tree. Some of these trees grow as tall as one hundred and eighty feet and grow in abundance at this elevation, or so I've been told.

The atmosphere on the bus was electric. As we got closer to our destination, everyone was talking about past experiences at camp like, "Remember that time we rode the zipline over the water?" and "Remember when Brian fell out of the kayak and into the lake?" I watched their expressions and listened to their stories as Amy added

her personal experiences.

We pulled into the parking lot, along with at least fifteen other yellow buses. Adults tried to keep some sense of order. The first thing I noticed when I walked off was the incredible smell of pine. Birds were singing, and I caught my first glimpse of a squirrel. It was chirping angrily and chasing another squirrel up a tree.

We grabbed our belongings while the counselors handed out instructions, the schedule for the week's activities, and our assigned cabins. Amy never left my side. She was attentive and an excellent tour guide.

"This is the snack bar and store where you can buy candy or toiletries you may have forgotten," she said as she pointed to the various out-buildings. "Here is the pathway to the chapel where we gather twice a day. The boys' cabins are that way; we aren't allowed over there. The cafeteria is on the other side of the chapel, and here is the lake." It was so incredibly beautiful. The turquoise water shimmered, and I spotted half a dozen multi-colored ducks hanging out in the middle. Kayaks lined the shore, and, sure enough, a zip line ran across to the other side.

"Hey, Amy!" a tall, blonde called out and ran over to us. She hugged Amy close. "I missed you so much!"

On the bus, Amy had explained to me that she had been to Camp Pine Rock many times when her father pastored another church in Tucson before they moved to Phoenix, so I expected she would know other people. What I didn't expect was how jealous and nervous it made me feel. *What if she ditched me for some of her old friends? What if she*

realized how boring and insecure I am and left me all alone?

"Hi, Laura!" Amy embraced her friend. "This is Alina. She is my best friend and lives next door to me." *Did Amy just refer to me as her best friend?* I tried to hide my shock and jubilation. I waited for Laura to give me a dirty look or stare at me in disbelief, but she surprised me.

"Oh my gosh! You have a beautiful name!" She gave me a quick hug. "So nice to meet you. I live in Tucson. I've been coming to Camp Pine Rock for years. We are going to have so much fun together!" she exclaimed. I wasn't too sure about this new threesome. I confessed to myself, as lovely as Laura was, I didn't want to share Amy's affection or attention.

It was as if Amy knew what I was thinking because she leaned over right when Laura started waving at someone else and whispered in my ear, "Don't worry, Alina. Laura is obsessed with boys. She won't be with us very much." I let my breath out in a rush. I didn't realize I had been holding it in.

Trying to sound cool as a cucumber, I said, "No big deal, she seems nice."

Laura saw another friend she recognized and said, "I'll catch up with you guys later." I was relieved as we set off to find our cabin and put our stuff away. A big announcement came from overhead that chapel was starting in thirty minutes. Amy told me to grab my Bible, notebook, and a pen.

As we walked down the path, Amy continued to introduce me to different kids. Friends linked arms and sang catchy tunes as we all made our way to the chapel. Thousands of ladybugs completely

covered a fallen log on the right side of the trail. Amy and I, along with several other kids, stopped to look at it. I was mesmerized. Not enjoying the attention, all the ladybugs took flight at once. A couple of girls screamed as they started getting caught in our hair and landing on our shirts, arms, and faces. I couldn't help but laugh. Camp Pine Rock was more beautiful than I had ever imagined. It was like a dream world. No wonder Amy went back year after year.

The chapel was a large log cabin with tall windows that wrapped around the entire building, and a giant wooden cross that hung above the stage. The windows were made of stained glass and pictured a man and a dozen or more sheep grazing on green rolling hills. I did not recognize the man, but he had dark hair, a mustache, and a beard. It looked as though he was standing guard over the sheep. The colors of the artwork were bright and beautiful. The light shining through them made fascinating patterns on the inside of the building. I was so drawn to its beauty that I almost tripped. Amy caught my arm just in time.

I saw Gavin and Christopher sitting in the front row. Amy and I picked a middle one and sat down. Music started playing as the last few kids filed in and found their seats. I didn't know what to expect, so when everyone stood up started singing and clapping, I tried to look like I knew what I was doing. I had difficulty following the songs. Amy closed her eyes while singing; she knew every word. I attempted to concentrate on learning the words and melody, but I couldn't stop staring at the stained-glass windows. I didn't understand why it seemed so familiar and comforting.

As I scanned the chapel, I saw kids smiling and singing, clapping,

and swaying. A few even had their hands raised in the air as if wanting to ask a question. I suddenly got goosebumps for no reason, and a feeling I was not familiar with overcame me. I peeked at Amy. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were in the air.

After several songs, the music died down and a man they called Pastor Steve made several announcements relating to the schedule for the week. He then told us to open our Bibles, turn to 1st John 1:9 and read with him aloud. Amy helped me find the page and pointed to the chapter and paragraph.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

I listened as Pastor Steve talked about a man named Jesus, whose Father had sent him to die for our sins. I wondered what kind of father would do that. I'd never met my father; however, I didn't imagine he would have ever done that to Gavin or me.

Then, the pastor went on to discuss how full of sin we all are, that not *one* human is perfect, and we all need to ask for forgiveness. He talked about the love that God has for us and how that love continually draws us near to Him. The pastor said that our sin separates us from God. That is why Jesus had to come to Earth, be born, and then die on a wooden cross. I stared in wonderment at the one that hung above the stage.

Next, the pastor asked us to turn to John 3:16 and, again, we read aloud with him. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish but have everlasting life."*

All this new information had my head spinning. At the end of the

service, Pastor Steve asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus into their hearts and have Him wash them clean from their sins. Hands throughout the chapel went up. Pastor Steve called for them to join him at the altar for prayer.

I did not raise my hand. First, I did not completely understand what was going on. Second, I was too scared to go forward and have every person in the chapel stare at me. I kept my butt glued to the seat, one eye open, and one eye closed. As everyone prayed, I noticed Gavin standing up front. Other adults had joined Pastor Steve. They had their hands laid upon the kids' shoulders, eyes closed, and they were talking out loud. I assumed they were praying.

When the service ended, I felt out of sorts. So many things happened in the chapel that I didn't understand. *Who was the man with the sheep? Why are we so full of sin?* My mind was swirling with questions, but Amy interrupted them.

"Let's go kayaking on the lake," she suggested.

"Just us?" I asked shyly.

"Yes, just us!" she exclaimed and grabbed my hand. Amy had a way of making me feel like the most important person on the Earth.

We headed to the lake and climbed aboard a bright yellow kayak. Amy threw a life jacket at me and grabbed the oars. We took turns paddling around, splashing other campers who paddled by us, and laughing and screaming as others returned the harassment. After a while, we found a sheltered little cove and paddled over to it.

We were by ourselves for the first time since arriving at camp. Something I heard in the chapel service had been bothering me, so I

took this opportunity to ask Amy a few questions. Since her dad was a pastor, I figured she could give me some clear answers.

"I have a question about what Pastor Steve said at chapel today," I said, looking around once again to make sure we were by ourselves.

"I figured you would. Ask me anything," Amy said confidently. "I'll do my best to answer."

"Why would God let His only son die? My mom would never willingly let Gavin or me die. I don't understand that part. That sounds so cruel. Didn't He *love* His son?"

Amy answered, "Yes, He loved His son very much, and He didn't *let* Him die, Jesus *wanted* to die. He knew it was the only way to save us. The story doesn't end with His death though, Alina. Three days after Jesus died on the cross, He came back alive. And, because God knows everything, He knew His son's death was not going to permanently end His life."

"So, He died but didn't stay dead?" This concept puzzled me.

"Exactly!" she confirmed.

"What was He saving us from?" I asked.

"From sin and, ultimately, from missing out on spending eternity in Heaven with Him."

"What is sin?"

Amy looked deep into my eyes and said with conviction, "Sin is everything that separates us from God."

"Like what? I need specific examples," I pressed.

"Well, being mean, cruel, and hateful. Telling lies, cheating, unforgiveness, and stealing, to only name a few. God is like this perfect

being, and He can't live in us until He washes us clean from sin. We are a dirty towel and Jesus is the soap. He comes in and cleans us. Then God can dwell in us because we are pure and spotless."

"Why did He have to die though? Sounds pretty extreme to me," I said, trying my best to understand.

"Sin is a huge deal to God," she explained. "He is perfect. If we want to be with Him and go to Heaven when we die, then we got to get cleaned up."

"Well, what is in Heaven, and how do you get there?"

"Heaven is the perfect place. It's kind of like summer camp but *way* better." I looked around at the lake. Giant mountains surrounded the camp. I could hear the buzz of insects and the chirping of birds. Camp Pine Rock was the most fantastic place I had ever been.

Amy continued, "Heaven is where you live forever, and you never feel pain or suffer." She paused for a moment. Something flashed across her face. She looked like she was going to cry for a minute. I wanted to ask her if something was wrong, but she composed herself and continued.

"Jesus is there. We will get to meet Him face-to-face and hang out with Him all the time. But only if you ask Him into your heart." Amy had the perfect way of explaining things, but with each answer came more questions.

"And if you don't get cleaned by Jesus, where do you go when you die?" This question caused a frown to pull at the corners of Amy's mouth. I was afraid I had upset her.

"If you don't believe in Jesus and ask Him to forgive your sins, you

go to a place called Hell." She whispered the last part as if the mere mention of the word "Hell" was taboo, and anyone hearing it would be shocked and frightened.

"Well, what is Hell like?" I whispered. I had heard that word before but only as a curse word. Mom would get annoyed when trying to fix something and occasionally would yell, "Ah, hell!"

"Hell is a bad place. Dad says it's the opposite of Heaven in every way. It's a place of pain, suffering, hopelessness, and darkness. In Hell, we are completely separated from God and all Godly qualities such as love, friendship, hope, happiness, and peace. The Bible says it's a place of punishment that you can never escape."

Hell sounded terrible. Once when I was six years old, I burnt my hand on the fireplace. It was a third-degree burn, so they had to perform a skin graft. It hurt for a long time and I had to wear a bandage for months. That was the worst pain I had ever experienced. I couldn't imagine it lasting for all of eternity.

Just then, an announcement was broadcast saying it was time to get ready for dinner. It had been a long day, and I was exhausted. My brain was overloaded from all the new information. I could have easily skipped dinner and gone straight to bed; however, I wasn't about to let Amy out of my sight. She might come to her senses and decide I wasn't worth the time and effort.

"We better get back," Amy said. "We can talk more about this later."

"I'm sorry I have so many questions," I said, feeling very vulnerable and worn-out.

"You have great questions, Alina," she exclaimed. "I'm happy to

help answer them!" I felt relieved but still drained. Amy had a way with words. She was more mature than most kids our age. We paddled back, jumped out, and rushed to the cafeteria.

I could barely get through the meal. My eyelids were heavy as bricks. I remembered seeing this funny movie once where a small child fell asleep, face-down in his food. I could relate, and that night, I swear, it almost happened to me twice.

I think Amy could tell I was struggling, so after dinner, we went straight to our cabin. We were going to miss the bonfire, but instead of acting disappointed, Amy yawned and expressed how tired she felt. I knew she was saying it just to be nice. Amy helped me unroll my sleeping bag and tucked me in. I didn't even brush my teeth. I literally crawled into bed, closed my eyes, and immediately drifted off to sleep. That night I had the most vivid dream of my life.

I found myself in a magnificent garden. I had to blink several times to adjust my eyes to the scene before me. Nature had invaded this place with a determination that would rival any rainforest, garden, or jungle.

The ground was soft against my bare feet. It had a bouncy feeling to it, like a mattress. I bent my knees and prepared to test it out with a jump. Before I got the chance, as if it were alive, the ground suddenly retracted then with rapid momentum shot up and sent me flying high into the air. I was too shocked to scream and flapped my arms wildly, trying to stay upright. For a second, I thought the landing was going to hurt, but instead, the Earth sank in and cradled me. It felt like the ground was giving me a warm and welcoming hug. I sat up and giggled, I would have to try that again.

Flowers with colors I never knew existed blanketed the ground around me and the grass was a thousand shades of green. There was not one single dead or brown blade of grass or leaf. Everything was alive and thriving. Hesitating to get to my feet, I stared straight up at the canopy of a giant tree. A dozen koala bears stared down at me, babies clinging tightly to their momma's chest. Pink and purple-colored butterflies flew around me in countless numbers.

The sky was multiple colors of blue, and dozens of rainbows stretched across it in different directions. I noticed the crispness of the air and drew in a giant breath then let it out. An infinite number of fragrances invaded my sense of smell all at once.

I noticed a gecko climbing up the stem of a fern, trying its best to blend in. It had one eye pointed towards me and the other eye pointed behind him. I followed its line of sight and caught a glimpse of something circling in the shadows. Even though I could barely see it, I knew it was a massive animal of some sort.

Then I noticed I felt different. I no longer felt things like shame, sadness, or loneliness. Instead, excitement, happiness, and love coursed through my veins. There were new emotions too. Ones I did not have words for.

I stood to my feet and watched again as something moved in the shadows. I had a sense I was supposed to meet someone, but I didn't know who. Whoever it was, I *needed* to see them. I *loved* them in a way I had never loved anyone in my life.

I was just about to start exploring when I heard loud, rolling thunder. There was not a single cloud in the sky. *That's weird.* Suddenly

the ground shook with such great force; I fell to my knees and watched as the Earth cracked open around me. And within a split second, I felt myself falling right through one of the openings.

I woke up with a gasp and sat straight up. It was morning, and everyone was already getting ready for the day. Besides having a dull headache, I was beyond thrilled. I laid there and recalled every detail of the dream and admitted to myself I was a little disappointed to be awake. The Garden was the most stunning place I'd ever seen. But, even with all its beauty, what I remembered the most was how I felt. I never wanted to forget that dream.

Even though my head hurt a little, overall, I felt much better. I was rested and ready for the day's activities. I jumped up, grabbed my toiletries, and headed off to the shower. Amy had just finished getting ready and was excited to see I was up. I considered telling her about my dream but hesitated for some reason.

Amy and I ate our breakfast, and I listened as the other campers recalled the previous day's adventures. I was looking forward to our time in chapel because I wanted to hear more about this man named Jesus. I didn't know anything about Heaven, but I hoped it was something like my dream from last night.

The chapel service started at 9 a.m. sharp. I was beginning to learn the words and melody of the worship songs and was feeling a little more comfortable in my surroundings. Pastor Steve told us to turn to Jeremiah 29:11 and read with him aloud. That morning, Amy had shown me how to find the books on the index page. It took me longer than everyone else, but I finally found the chapter and verse:

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

Pastor Steve continued to talk about God's good plan for our lives. He told us how, when we follow Jesus, He protects us and gives us hope for our future. Not just our future here on Earth but in Heaven as well. I thought about the message from the night before. Everyone sins. God wanted to wash me clean from my sin. Now Pastor Steve was telling me that God had a good plan for my future. He had us then turn to Proverbs 3:5-6:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths."

I wanted to learn how to trust God. Something tugged at my heart. It got stronger each time I came into this special, wooden building. When Pastor Steve asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus as their Savior and spend eternity in Heaven with Him, I knew I wanted it. I still didn't fully understand what it all meant, but when the invitation was presented to come up front, I knew I wanted to go. I felt afraid and self-conscious but, I couldn't remember anyone snickering at the kids who went forward the day before.

As if Amy could sense my struggle, she whispered, "I'll go up there with you if you want." I nodded, yes. Amy took hold of my hand, and together, along with several other kids, we walked up front.

I squeezed my eyes shut and felt Pastor Steve lay his hands on my shoulders. He asked us to say a prayer with him. I didn't know how to pray, so I just repeated after him and said, "Dear Heavenly Father,

thank you for your love. Thank you for your son, Jesus, who died on the cross so that I can be saved from sin. I believe in You, Lord Jesus. I believe that You died on the cross, then three days later rose from the grave. Forgive me for my sins and wash me clean and come into my heart." I could feel my own heart beating a million miles a minute. "Help me to become the person you want me to be. Fill me with the Holy Spirit and show me how to love others as you love me. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen."

When we finished, I opened my eyes. I wasn't sure what to expect. I didn't feel any different. *What if it didn't work?* I turned to Amy, who had tears in her eyes. *Why was she crying?*

I whispered, "I don't think it worked. I feel like the same person." I had to admit I expected to feel different, and I was a little disappointed.

"But you *are* different!" she exclaimed. "On the inside, you are clean!"

I realized there was still so much I needed to learn. For now, I would trust Amy and Pastor Steve.

"I'm so happy for you, Alina. You are very brave," Amy said as she threw her arms around me. Just then, I felt someone else hugging me from behind. I turned around to see Gavin.

"Nia, I think we're Christians now! How cool is that?" We hugged each other. I couldn't explain it, but the emotions I suddenly felt were like the ones I had experienced in my dream. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"We have to help Mom next, Nia," Gavin said in a somber tone. I

thought about Mom and instantly missed her. I couldn't wait to tell her about Jesus. It had been the best day of my life. I had a feeling everything was going to change for the better. *How could it not?*

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 4

SECRETS AND LIES

It was challenging saying goodbye to Camp Pine Rock, Pastor Steve, and all the friends I made during the five days we spent there. On the ride home, we sang worship songs, recounted funny stories, and discussed all the things we would miss about camp. Spirits were high as ever, with only three more weeks until school was to begin.

I couldn't believe I was going to be in junior high. At least Amy would be going to the same school. I thought of all the future adventures and smiled as I imagined us riding our bikes to school, eating lunch, and completing homework on my bedroom floor together. The days of doing these things alone were over.

When we got to the church parking lot, I expected my mom and Buddy to be there, but Amy's dad said he was giving us a ride home. I couldn't wait to see them. We pulled up to Amy and Christopher's house and gathered all our belongings, thanked their parents, hugged our friends, and walked the short distance between our homes. Mom must have heard the car pull up and opened the front door to greet us.

"Oh, my babies are home!" she exclaimed. Buddy barked, ran out the doorway, and jumped on my leg, almost knocking me to the ground. I picked him up and couldn't help but notice how much heavier he was.

"Oh my gosh, Buddy, you grew a ton while I was gone," I said, happy to be reunited with my puppy. He licked my face and chewed on my fingers and hands. I set him down, so I could carry my stuff into the house. That was when I noticed Gavin still standing next to me with a look of shock on his face. I followed his gaze and saw a man standing next to my mom in the doorway. He had one arm wrapped around her waist, his hand protectively resting on her hip. In the other hand, he held what looked like a beer can. Mom smiled widely, but I could tell she was a little nervous.

"Kids, I want you to meet Frank. Frank is my, um, friend. He is going to be staying with us for a while." Gavin and I quickly exchanged glances, both of us trying to adjust to the bombshell. We had never seen our mom with a man before. She said he was just her friend, but we both knew better. *How long has she known this guy?* A knot started to develop in my stomach. I didn't have a good feeling.

"Now, don't be rude!" she lectured, sounding a little miffed at our reaction. "Say hello."

"Hello," Gavin and I said simultaneously.

"Hi, kids! Welcome home. I heard you went to Jesus camp!" He said with a laugh and a snort. His tone made it sound like he was making fun of us.

Our mother jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow and said, "Now I told you, Frank, it is called Camp Pine Rock." She turned back to us with a smile. "Did you guys have fun?" she inquired. Both of us nodded. I had been excited to tell Mom everything, but now, all I wanted to do was go to my room.

Frank only briefly looked at Gavin, but when his eyes landed on me, I got goosebumps, and the knot in my stomach doubled in size. His gaze was penetrating and off-putting. I did not like this guy or the way he looked at me. Pastor Steve told us we were supposed to love everyone just like Jesus did. Maybe he wasn't talking about Frank.

I tried to shake off the uneasy feeling and followed everyone into the house. *Mom has a boyfriend!* I screamed in my head. *And he's living with us!*

I went straight to my room and started to unpack, attempting to gather my thoughts and calm down. Mom made a big "welcome home" dinner. It was the most awkward meal of my life. I could tell she was getting frustrated because my brother and I barely said a word while we ate. Frank was on his sixth beer and was starting to slur his words. The more alcohol he drank, the flirtier he became with my mother. She would giggle and tell him to stop in a tone that made it sound like she was enjoying it. When she got up to clean the kitchen, Frank started staring at me in a way that made me feel very uncomfortable. I got up and offered to help Mom with the dishes.

After dinner, I took a nice, long, hot shower. It felt wonderful. While washing my hair, I sang a song I learned from camp, and it made me feel a little better. Everyone there had been so friendly. Not one time did I feel left out or bullied. No one told me I wasn't invited or asked me what I was doing sitting at their table. For the first time, no one teased me because of my looks. It gave me hope that there were kids in the world who would accept you for who you were. It helped to have Amy by my side. She was outgoing, kind, witty, and confident.

I could see why everyone liked her so much. It made me feel proud to have her as my best friend.

"Thank you for Amy," I said to God. "Best friends forever."

I wrapped a towel around me, quickly inspected the hall to make sure no one was looking and ran to my room to put on my pajamas. Buddy was waiting for me, curled up in a ball by my pillow. The drapes were wide open, as usual. The sun was setting, but you could still see the big oak tree in the backyard. I didn't think anything about the open drapes as I dropped my towel and started to get dressed. It wasn't until I had put my last piece of clothing on that I noticed Frank. He was staring at me through the window from the backyard. It took a moment for me to realize what was happening. He had been watching me dress.

I waited for him to turn away, embarrassed that I caught him staring, but instead, he smiled at me and took a drink from his beer can. My brain scrambled to process the events. He had been watching me change the whole time and wasn't apologetic or embarrassed.

Occasionally, you would hear a story about something like that happening, but I never, ever thought I would find myself in that type of situation. I was only twelve years old. *Why would my mom's boyfriend be staring at me through my bedroom window?*

I heard my mom yell Frank's name from somewhere inside the house. He took another sip of his beer and slowly walked away.

That night, I cried myself to sleep. I felt different on the inside, dirty for some reason. I tried to think about camp, but my mind kept replaying the events and the creepy look on Frank's face. God wanted

us to love everyone, but I could never love my mom's new boyfriend. For the first time, hate tugged at the corners of my heart. Not only did I hate Frank, but I secretly hoped God hated him too. *How could God love someone like that?*

The next morning at breakfast, it was just Mom, Gavin, and me. Gavin was telling Mom about Camp Pine Rock. I didn't know where Frank was, but I wished he would never come back. I thought about alerting Mom, but doubt filled my mind. *What if she didn't believe me?*

I played out the conversation in my head. *What if she thought I encouraged it? Maybe I had imagined it?* I thought back through the events. I had not imagined it; I knew that for sure. Fear and anxiety plagued my mind. I decided to keep it a secret and hope that it would never happen again.

"You are quiet this morning," said Mom. "Everything alright?"

I nodded yes and got up to clear my plate as Gavin continued to fill Mom in on all his adventures. Buddy followed me to the sink, begging for scraps. I went into my room and pulled the drapes closed. They would never be open again.

I spent the rest of the day with Amy. I tried to pretend everything was okay, but I could tell she knew something was up.

"What's wrong, Alina?" she asked after lunch. We were lying on the floor in her bedroom, looking at magazines.

"Nothing really, I'm just tired," I lied. "I have a question, though." I tried to sound as casual as possible. "We learned at camp that God loves everyone." I paused for a moment. It felt like there was a giant frog stuck in my throat. "Does God love bad people too?"

"My dad told me once that God doesn't see people the way we see people. He said God sees who we can be and who He wants us to be." Amy always knew precisely how to explain things. "Dad also told me once that God never stops chasing after us."

"He even chases bad people? Do they know God is chasing them?" I asked.

"I think God uses us a lot of times to let people know He is chasing them," she answered. I wondered if I was supposed to tell Frank that God was chasing him. Maybe God would chase Frank right out the front door. I was about to tell Amy what happened when her brother burst into the room and told me my mom called and wanted me home.

"I told you to knock!" Amy yelled at her brother.

"Sorry," he replied insincerely.

We stood up, and Amy hugged me. "I'll see you tomorrow, Alina."

When I got to our property, I saw Gavin sitting by himself, tossing rocks across the yard. It looked like he had been crying. I noticed Frank's old, beat-up truck in the driveway. I walked over and knelt in front of Gavin. He had a red mark on the left side of his cheek.

"Gavin, what's wrong? What happened?" I asked gently.

"He slapped me, Nia," he whispered, looking around to make sure there wasn't anyone listening. A tear slipped down his cheek. "I was arguing a little with Mom because I wanted to hang out with Christopher but Mom told me I had to do my chores first. All I did was ask if I could do them later. Mom said no, so when I went to finish them, Frank followed me to my room and grabbed me by the back of my hair and pulled it hard. When I cried out, he slapped me across the

face and told me never to argue with Mom again." I could barely understand the last part because he had started sobbing uncontrollably.

I scooped him up into my arms and asked, "Did you tell Mom?"

"No! And please don't tell her, Nia! He warned me not to!" Gavin looked at me, confused. "Why would Mom bring someone like him around? Promise me you won't say anything!" I could see the panic on his face and reassured him I would not repeat what he had told me. He leaned on my chest, and I let him finish crying.

I felt like crying, too. Now we both had a secret. My heart hurt for my little brother and I was so angry with my mom. I didn't understand what she could possibly be thinking. Although I thought about telling Gavin what Frank had done to me, I decided he was too young and kept that secret to myself.

"Alina, where are you?" Mom yelled out the window.

"Don't tell her anything," Gavin begged again.

"Don't worry, Little Bear. I'll see what Mom wants and tell her you are riding your bike or something." I wasn't fond of lying, but I didn't think Jesus would be too mad if I told Mom a tiny, white lie. All I wanted to do was protect my brother.

When I walked into the house, Mom was in total panic mode. "Where are my favorite earrings? Frank and I are going out for dinner tonight, and I want to wear them. I need you to watch your brother. Where is he?"

"I don't have your earrings, Mom, and Gavin is riding his bike." That was two lies. *More questions for Amy*, I thought. Mom stomped off, determined to find her missing jewelry.

I went to bed that night feeling sad and hopeless. Buddy seemed to sense my mood and laid his head on my chest. I buried my face in his soft fur and tried to pray, but I didn't know what to say to God. All I had were questions and a broad sense of guilt from lying and keeping secrets from Mom.

It was one week before the first day of seventh grade when Amy suddenly fell very ill. At first, I thought she just had the flu. For five days, her mother would answer the phone and politely tell me she was too sick to take my calls. I started to panic the Sunday before school was to begin when I still had not heard from her. My worry was so great for my best friend that I decided to check on her myself. I snuck over the backyard fence and tiptoed to her bedroom window. What I saw shocked me to the core.

Not only was Amy in bed, she looked horrible. Worse than any sick person I had ever seen. Her skin was as white as a sheet, and even though her eyes were closed, I could tell she had dark circles beneath them. A bag of fluid hung from a pole, and a tube ran down from it. I could see where it was attached to her arm. A medical-looking machine with flashing lights was positioned next to her, as well. She opened her eyes, cried out in pain then, bent sideways, and puked into a bowl at the side of her bed. Her mom and dad ran in and immediately started tending to her. To avoid being discovered, I ducked down.

What the heck is going on in there? I wondered. *That looks nothing like the flu.* I recalled Gavin having it the previous year and he hadn't had to have machines or tubes hooked up to him. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach that something wasn't right. *More secrets,* I supposed as I

quietly snuck back home.

I sat on my bed and cried. Buddy jumped up, laid his head my leg, and whined a little. Poor Amy, she looked so sick. Something deep down warned me that whatever was going on was super serious. A feeling of dread came over me. It was so intense that I bowed my head and said a prayer. It was the first time I had ever attempted to pray for someone else. I didn't know what I was doing, but I gave it my best effort.

"Dear Jesus, Amy looks very sick. Will you please help her get better? Amen." I didn't know what else to say, so I softly sang another song I had learned at camp.

Gavin came in utterly unaware of what was going on and said, "Nia, Mom wants us to pick our clothes out for school tomorrow and pack a lunch." I welcomed the distraction and tried to put a smile on my face to hide the pain.

Gavin had changed a little since the incident with Frank, and it made me angry. At first, I thought it was an isolated event. However, even though Gavin did not disclose any further altercations, I began to sense more had occurred. He continued to withdraw, and I often would see him attempting to hide another bruise.

There had been more incidents with me, as well. I did my best to avoid Frank as much as possible and block out the abuse that Gavin and I were experiencing. I wanted to tell someone, but I was afraid. Plus, I had promised my brother I wouldn't. I didn't trust that anyone could do anything about it, anyway. Both my brother and I learned to keep our heads down and our mouths shut. Telling lies and keeping

secrets like that was depressing and filled me with shame.

As morning came, I still held out hope that Amy would be well enough to attend school. I imagined hearing a knock at the door and opening it to see her bright smile. I imagined riding bikes to school together, discussing our classes and what we packed for lunch.

When it was time to leave, Mom kissed us goodbye, wished us good luck on our first day, and sent us on our way. I glanced over at Amy's house, hoping she would come running out with apologies for being late, but it didn't happen.

In complete silence, Gavin and I started riding to our schools, which were only a block apart from each other. The last stretch was uphill, and Gavin was well ahead of me. I stopped for a moment to rest and drink some water.

As I turned the final corner, my front tire hit a gap in the pavement. My bike came to an unexpected stop, I flew over the handlebars, and landed in the middle of a giant puddle. It knocked the wind out of me, but I didn't hit my head. When I finally caught my breath, I looked down to see my new clothes covered in muddy water. My knees and elbows were scratched up, but luckily, I hadn't broken any bones.

I tried to hold back the tears, but they came uninvited anyway. Gavin was too far ahead of me to notice the wreck. Plus, he was almost to his school and past the turn to mine. I picked up my bike and walked up to the nearest house and knocked on the door to call Mom. She would bring me a change of clothes.

Great, I'm going to be late for the first day of school! I thought as an older woman answered the door. She had grey, short, curly hair and stared

down at me through a pair of thick, gold-rimmed glasses. She looked like she could be anyone's sweet old grandmother.

"Honey, are you alright?" she asked with great concern.

From the look on her face and sound of her voice, I guessed I must have looked a total mess.

"Yes, Ma'am. I wrecked on my bike. May I use your phone?" I was sure she could tell I had been crying.

To my dismay, Frank answered the phone. "Is my mom there? I fell off my bike and need to talk to her."

"Nope. She went to the store," he replied flatly.

"Can you come to get me? I need to change my clothes and clean-up." The last thing I wanted to do was ask Frank to pick me up, but I had no choice.

He was silent for a minute, then asked, "Is anything broken?"

I surveyed my injuries again. "No, I don't think so."

He paused. "Well, then, you'll be fine." And with that, he hung up. I stood there in shock and listened to a dial tone for a while before hanging up the receiver. *What am I supposed to do now?* I wondered. *Go to school with mud all over my clothes?*

I could feel the woman studying me as I stared at the telephone in disbelief. I was sure she had overheard the conversation.

"Come in here, Honey. Let's get you cleaned up."

I numbly followed her to the bathroom as she pulled out a first aid kit and tended to my wounds. Neither of us said anything. I winced as she cleaned the scrapes and did everything in my power to keep from crying again.

The first bell was to ring in fewer than ten minutes. I would be late and dirty on my first day of junior high. I almost couldn't bear the thought of it. If Amy had been there, she would have known what to say to help me feel better. But she wasn't.

"Let's find you a clean shirt," the old woman said. She walked out and quickly came back with a blouse. It was a little too big for me and covered in obnoxiously large, bright flowers. I would never have worn a shirt like that before, but it was better than the dirty one I had on.

"Now, we can't do much about your shorts, Honey, but let me see if I can scrub some of that mud out."

The wrinkles on her face were deep, but there was a kindness about her that made me feel safe and secure for the first time in weeks. Despite my best efforts, I started crying again. She wrapped her arms around me until I stopped.

"There, there, Sweetheart, everything is going to be okay."

She offered to take me to school so I wouldn't be late. "You can leave your bike here. I'll clean it up for you and drop it off at the office once my husband comes home with the truck." Her warmth was so genuine that I almost started crying again.

"Thank you, Ma'am," I said softly.

"You can call me Doris. Now let's hurry. You don't want to be late for your first day of school."

I made it to class with only one minute to spare. I picked a desk in the back of the classroom. My only hope was to go unnoticed for the rest of the day.

At lunch, I sat by myself as usual. I thought of Amy and how much

fun we would be having right about now. Girls and boys whispered around me, looking over at me from time to time. I even overheard a girl say, "Look at her shirt! Looks like my grandmother's!" followed by giggling. I noticed a few kids from summer camp but was too embarrassed to approach them. Without Amy, my confidence had dropped like a rock.

I finished my meal and walked to the library with my head down, ready to spend the rest of lunch recess alone, hiding behind a book.

Doris brought my bike to school, just like she promised. It was perfectly clean and shiny. She had also washed and dried my shirt and placed it in a bag that hung from my handlebars. I made a mental note to return her blouse the following day.

As we rode home, I told Gavin what had happened. He felt terrible for not noticing the accident and apologized several times.

I was anxious to get back and check on Amy, but when I rode into my driveway, I noticed there weren't any cars parked next door. When I walked into the house, my mom had a somber look on her face. She hardly ever stopped smiling, so it immediately made me nervous.

"Sit down, Alina. We need to talk," she said.

I sat down at the kitchen table. "Amy is in the hospital; she is very ill. I spoke with her mother this morning, and it turns out she has Leukemia. It's a type of cancer. They thought she was improving, but this morning she took a turn for the worse."

The world around me spun and tilted. It felt like I was on one of those spinning rides at the fair. I felt nauseous.

Amy has Leukemia? I was confused. Why didn't she tell me she was sick?

She had seemed fine until a week earlier. A deep sense of sorrow overcame me. It penetrated the depths of my soul and made itself a home there.

"Can we go see her?" I asked, barely able to get the words out.

"Yes, Amy's mother said we could visit her at the hospital today. Alina, you need to prepare yourself. She doesn't look good, Baby." Mom didn't know that I had peeked in Amy's window two days ago.

"I'll change and be ready in five minutes," I said.

"Hey, where did you get that shirt?" she asked, as I ran down the hall.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you later." I looked over at Frank, who was snoring loudly on the couch. Anger rose up inside of me. *How can he sleep at a time like this?* I wondered, wanting to go over there and punch him in the face. Instead, I told myself to calm down and quickly changed my shirt.

We hustled to the hospital and found out what room Amy was in. When we got to level three, the nurses provided protective gear and told us to wear it at all times. I quickly glanced into several rooms as we made our way to Amy's. I wondered why there were so many children on this floor. I didn't realize until later that we were in a children's hospital. I had never been in a hospital before. I didn't like it; a weird smell hung in the air.

Amy looked worse than she had only a couple of days ago. Her lips were chapped, her hair was greasy, her face was yellow, and she had dark blue circles under her eyes. She was hooked up to three different machines that beeped and flashed continually.

Amy's parents both sat stone-faced next to her bed but stood up to greet us upon our entry. I noticed her brother Christopher sitting quietly in the corner. Gavin walked over to him, but I hesitated at the door. Everyone was wearing masks and gloves.

"Come on in, Alina. She has been waiting for you," her mother said and reminded me again to keep my mask on. Then, my mom, Gavin, Christopher, and her parents quietly left the room so I could have some alone time with Amy. I reverently approached her bedside and whispered her name, choking back tears. She opened her eyes.

"Alina, you're here," she croaked, her voice just a whisper. She gave me a weak smile and sounded relieved.

"Hi, Amy." I tried to return the smile but I was so overwhelmed with grief, I could no longer hold back the tears and started crying hysterically. It took a few minutes for me to be able to speak. "I'm so sorry you're ill," I cried. Tears ran down my sweet friend's face. "You didn't tell me you had Leukemia, Amy," I said. "I would have done something to help you."

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you. When we moved here, I wanted to have as normal a life as possible. We weren't sure how much time I had left." She took a break for a minute. It was as if each word took great effort to speak. "I didn't want to be known as the sick girl. I was so tired of having people feel sorry for me. You are my best friend, Alina. I love you, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you. You have been my favorite thing about moving here. Being my friend was the best thing you could have done for me." She closed her eyes for a minute. I thought maybe she had fallen asleep, but after a few moments, she opened them again.

"You're going to get better, right, Amy?" I pleaded. I knew the answer to the question but refused to face reality. *She had to get better.* She smiled again but declined to answer my question. Instead, she took my hand in hers. I couldn't stop crying. "I love you, Amy," I told her, returning her affection. I willed her to get better.

"Now that you are a Christian," she said weakly, "we will get to be together again one of these days." Another tear rolled down her cheek, and I gently wiped it away.

"I just can't do it without you," I said, sobbing again. "You have been the best friend I have ever had. I don't know how to go on without you."

Amy patted my hand. "I had a dream last night. Jesus told me you would go on and accomplish great things, Alina. You will be a light in dark places."

Just then, my mom, Gavin, and Amy's family returned with a nurse in tow. I tried my best to stop crying and wiped my face.

"We need to let her rest now, Honey," the nurse said as empathetically as possible. Amy looked as though she was exhausted and had a hard time keeping her eyes open.

"I'll be back tomorrow," I reassured her. She nodded, mouthed goodbye, and closed her eyes.

I went home and prayed as I had never prayed before. I begged God to heal Amy. I prayed and cried until I finally passed out from emotional exhaustion. Buddy didn't leave my side. He licked the tears from my cheeks and laid his head on my chest. While I slept that night, Amy left this world. When I woke up the next morning, I instinctively

knew she was gone.

I couldn't get out of bed for a week. Buddy only left my side to use the bathroom and devour his dogfood. I couldn't eat or sleep. Mom finally threatened to take me to the doctor if I didn't get back into my routine. I reluctantly obeyed.

I attended Amy's funeral on a bright and sunny Sunday afternoon. It might as well have been a dark, dreary day. I was mad at the sun for shining on such a sad occasion. I felt hollow inside and numb to the world around me. Mom and Gavin did their best to try and cheer me up. I ignored their efforts. Nothing would ever be the same again.

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

What if our lives actually started in heaven?

Perhaps we were each given a mission and, despite knowing there would be pain and suffering, we have already chosen to accept it anyway. What if our God-given gifts had the potential to change the world? *Cracks in the Floor of Heaven* explores these possibilities and is based on the premise that God knew us before the foundations of the earth. It details the beauty of the afterlife while confirming that we were all born with a divine purpose and given extraordinary gifts to face life's challenges.

Alina is a socially awkward, timid girl who has no memory of her pre-birth life in heaven. At the age of twelve, she begins to have vivid dreams about her existence before earth. With each dream, Alina learns a variety of valuable lessons that help her overcome tremendous heartache and gain the tools necessary to fight the evil one who is determined to ensure that her mission is unsuccessful.



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