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# Author's Note

Dear Reader,

In this story, I invite you not only into Amara's heart and life, but also into your own heart and story. Each of our stories includes beauty, joy, and love mixed with sadness and pockets of heart-pain. My prayer is that by walking into Amara's life you will find comfort in knowing you are not alone, that the doors we sometimes keep shut because we think no one will understand can be opened.

Amara's story is fictional—names, characters, places, and events are products of my imagination—though some of her experiences are informed by events in my past. Like Amara, I have learned that all things are possible with God. Even when we feel hopeless, we can call on Him. We don't have to stay victims, stuck in trauma and loss—we can find healing and the courage to stay and become victors.

I am a black Jamaican Mennonite married to my Lancaster County-born husband. As a multicultural family, we navigate the joys and challenges this brings alongside our broader family, church folks, and friends. Everyone is on a journey, and we are here to help and encourage each other.

I hope this story of Amara's journey will draw you to know God more deeply. We are not alone. Jesus is the Friend who stays—the Burden Bearer, the Light when all other lights have winked out. When faced with pain, it often looks easiest to shut out, shut down, and walk away. But what would happen if we chose to stay?

Shalom,  
Anne

Amara gripped her phone more tightly. *What* was her sister saying? She tried to speak, but the sounds that came out were not in any language she knew.

Charlotte didn't seem to notice. She plunged on. "I thought you and I would always be close, Amara." Charlotte sighed. "But it's changed since you moved, and our relationship feels strained. I always felt like there was a huge side of you hidden from all of us—Dad, Mom, and me—and I respect that. But now it seems like you are slipping away altogether."

Amara winced and set her coffee mug down harder than she'd intended. It made an ominous cracking sound. She gingerly picked it up and surveyed it from all sides. All seemed well with the mug. Her heart, she knew, had cracked.

Amara tried again to speak, but what could she say? Everything felt safer and more comfortable when her past stayed in the past.

"I know you're a busy mom and all, but it wouldn't be too difficult to call me occasionally, would it? With you and the boys married it gets kind of lonely here at Dad's, especially in

the evenings.” Charlotte paused, and it sounded like she was taking a sip of something. Amara guessed it was tea. Charlotte loved her teas.

“Between working at the farmers market in summer and my never-ending cleaning job—” Charlotte paused. “It’s hard for me to find the time to make the trip from Pennsylvania to Virginia.”

*And, Amara didn’t say, we both know long-distance driving isn’t your forte.*

Charlotte’s words kept coming in a steady stream, tumbling rapidly over each other. Charlotte was Charlotte—her words, like her feelings, dipped and soared like a kite, untethered and unpredictable. She couldn’t be pinned to any one mood. There was a certain naivete about her that Amara found both endearing and frustrating. Her words often amused, but at the same time sliced with deadly precision, cutting and muddling Amara with guilt and confusion. Amara’s heart lurched at Charlotte’s next words.

“I get that everything wasn’t perfect here at home when we were growing up. I get that, Amara, I really do. I know Dad and Mom had more restrictions for you than they did for me, but I know they loved you but were afraid they would get it wrong. I never told you this, but sometimes part of me feels like it was . . . my fault, you know. If I wouldn’t have begged for a sister so much—if I would have stuck up for you more often . . .”

“Oh Charlotte, you aren’t to blame!” Amara was horrified. “Please. I don’t blame you, you know that, right? And Dad and Mom did the best they could. I know they loved me, and I certainly didn’t make it easy for them.” Now that she was a parent, her perspective had shifted from moody resentment to resigned gratitude toward Harold and Anna, her last foster parents who

she knew, deep down, were good people. “I was fifteen when I came to live with them, and I give them huge props for taking me in the first place! Listen, I don’t hold anything against you or Dads, okay?”

Amara remembered the day she’d been removed from the foster home she had been in and placed into Harold and Anna’s. They were now “Dad and Mom” to her in spite of their imperfections, and their bubbly daughter, Charlotte, had become her new sister.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Charlotte replied, “If you’re sure.” Her next words, all jovial and bubbly, warmed the edges of the deep chill Amara was feeling. “Well, I’m glad we could be sisters for each other. It was bleak with just brothers.”

Amara nodded mutely, knowing Charlotte didn’t expect her to say anything.

“I am way too old for being a sobbing sentimental mess, but I *miss you!* Did I do something wrong? Was it the time I called you over to turn off my bedroom light so I wouldn’t have to get out of bed? Or the time I sneak-read your journal to see if you were mad at me for ruining your favorite sweater? Remember that lavender sweater you wore in ninth grade?”

Amara tried in vain to protest.

“I know! It was the time Mom gave you a spiral tablet for a journal and a real hardbound one to me.” Charlotte paused to catch her breath before more words rushed out. “Just so you know, I liked the spiral one better. It had such a classy feel, while mine was too childish, I thought.”

“No, Charlotte! There’s nothing. I’d forgotten about all of that.” Amara hesitated. “I have a lot of memories and baggage

from my past, from long before I came to live with you and Dads. My silence is nothing to do with you, it's just—it's just that I find it easier to retreat when I can't cope. I'm sorry, Charlotte. It's nothing to do with you. It's me, and I want to change."

Charlotte was silent. Amara wondered if her sister would ask her more, try to draw out the knot of pain inside her, or would she step back in awkward discomfort and change the subject to the safe and the bubbly? Was her sister okay? She had never heard Charlotte, the ever-constant optimist, sound so lost and unsure of herself. Had she and Garrett made the wrong decision to move away from all the memories? Memories Charlotte and her dear well-meaning foster parents knew nothing about?

"Charlotte—" her own voice sounded watery and far away.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you Olivia is planning to work at the farmers market this summer," Charlotte exclaimed abruptly. "We've gone to Harrisburg to the riverfront twice now. Two ancient singles trying not to get lost—and succeeding! You know how 'well' I do at driving, much less in cities. Did you know there is the loveliest bookshop there? Olivia likes collecting classics and yes, you guessed it, that's my latest hobby. My goal is to try to read one a year." Charlotte's laughter was infectious, and usually Amara would have joined her. She couldn't right now.

Her heart gave a sickening thump, and her brain began a wild sprint. Did Charlotte know about her and Olivia's relationship or the lack thereof? Had Olivia confided in Charlotte? She couldn't tell. The words had been innocent enough, but dread settled heavily in her stomach. Why did it matter if her sister was exploring musty, quaint bookshops with her once-close friend?

*Olivia.* Fresh pain ripped her chest at the memory of the last time they had talked.

After saying goodbye to Charlotte, Amara stepped into the playroom. The children were playing a joyous game of something that required the entire contents of the toy box to be emptied out. She let that reality shroud her in comfort. Sophie had her toy picnic basket piled high with toy food, several pieces of dolly clothes, and—wait a minute, were those real potatoes from the kitchen? Rey was driving his tractor and wagon to a colorful field, a doll blanket strewn with his leftover snack of goldfish and baby carrots. Somehow in the chaos in front of her, any peace she found felt restless and short-lived. Memories of long ago surged out of hiding, and Olivia's words echoed in her mind.

"I have poured a lot into you, Amara," Olivia had said. "If I had to describe our relationship, I would say it was a bit—volatile, wouldn't you? I feel like it's been a roller coaster: twists, highs and lows, all over the place, really. That's not healthy. Sometimes I got downright exhausted having to change my way of relating to fit yours."

That was two years ago, and the grief still caused her pain. Amara swallowed hard, remembering the lack of emotion in Olivia's dry eyes as she'd squeezed her hand. "I am sending an email with some more thoughts I have on the matter." Olivia had smiled, and Amara felt like her heart had shattered once again into too many pieces to count.

She didn't want to cry again. "Let the past stay in the past," they say. The only problem was, the past was right in front of her again, staring her in the face.



All the things she had buried as a young teenager moving in with Mom and Dad—a whole world her foster parents knew little about, and her sister and friends only snippets she had hinted at. There was a time she wished her new parents would have asked her more questions. Why didn't people just ask? But would she have told them if they had?

Her eyes misted, blurring the happy colors and childish chaos in front of her. She was too old to let Charlotte's monologue dismantle her day, and far too old to feel insecure about Olivia and Charlotte becoming friends. *Get it together, Amara! This is not the end of the world.* But in a way it was—at least it was the end of the world she had tried to neatly tie up and pack away. Now the string was coming loose. She began to shake. Charlotte had no idea that her words had stirred up feelings of deep rejection Amara had hoped were fully healed.

Amara stepped back into the kitchen just as her phone pinged. "Tell Sophie and Rey hugs and kisses from their Auntie Charlotte!"

"Hugs and kisses from Auntie Charlotte!" she called out robotically. "Mama's heading downstairs to sort the laundry," she added, hoping her children couldn't hear the tears in her voice.

### twenty-one years earlier

"Amara!"

Twelve-year-old Amara jumps at the loud voice drilling through the evening chatter and noise. When her name is thundered out again, her heart drops; the dish suds ooze off her hands, poised in midair. Amara's stomach does what it does best and twists pretzel-like before icing into a ball of granite.

“Come here!” Her foster father, Clarence, towers in the doorway before turning to his study. She had noticed the hushed voices throughout the day, seen her foster siblings eyeing her silently, as if they wanted to warn her but didn’t dare. This is what it was about.

The air thickens and the silent dread, always lurking nearby, curls nasty tendrils up around her. Something inside Amara says *RUN!* Danger feels like it is practically breathing down her back. Right now, she is standing frozen like a January icicle. She reminds herself to breathe. Her hands begin trembling.

*What did I say? What did I do?* Her mind dashes through the last few days. Last night she ate an oatmeal raisin cookie without permission—but she has already been punished for that. Now she will go without sweets for the next week.

*Think, Amara, think! Think hard.* She remembers the Bible verses painstakingly copied and stuffed into her pocket. They are papered promises, a reminder that Jesus is nearby. Her sudsy hands feel clammy-cold. Her thudding heart almost drowns out the nearly inaudible whisper coming from the Lego-strewn living room floor.

“Don’t say anything, Amara. Please.”

“What?” *Who said that?* Amara scans the other children. Clara, the quiet ten-year-old girl who had arrived several months ago, flicks a barely perceptible glance in Amara’s direction. Clara’s wild hair has come loose from her braids, flying and careless every which way. She is wearing a navy blue polka-dot dress two sizes too big and squeezing her stuffed chicken Sally tightly. Dear, sweet Clara, who rarely talks, is now offering eighty-year-old advice.

“We knew you were going to get in trouble. And they said we can’t talk to you,” Kay’s whisper scrapes loudly through the too-silent room. Kay and her older sister Clara couldn’t be more opposite. Kay is uninhibited, the golden child, who for some reason is rarely ever punished despite her numerous faults. Where there is noise and chaos, Kay is in the center of it. *How does she do it?* Amara wonders, not for the first time.

“Kay, *bush!*” Rick peers over his fourth-grade math book to quietly scream this, his glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose. Kay shrugs and rolls her eyes, loudly whispering again. Rick drops his head onto the kitchen table and groans as she plows on. Sarah and Sydney, the twins, the same age as Kay, stare at her open-mouthed, their half-built skyscraper sitting forgotten.

“Did you see the papers Daddy Clarence gave us?” Kay motions expressively to the other children. “We had to answer ten questions like it was *schoolwork*, or something. Except this time, they were questions about *you!*” The twins simultaneously fall over in a mock faint right onto their abandoned skyscraper. Kay shrugs again at their attempt of shocking her into silence.

Amara’s heart breaks for these children who are her siblings. *We are a motley crew of all shades and hues, hair textures, and varied beginnings*, she thinks. *I must keep it together for them, protect them.* Right now, she is trying valiantly to protect them from her own fears. *What will my punishment be this time? Missing supper for a week? Having to stay in my room for a day?*

There isn’t a sign on the door to the study. But Amara always imagines if there would be, it might read “The Lion’s Lair.” Or “Viper’s Den.” She slowly turns the knob. Dark paneled walls pull the shadows close, smothering the light trying to seep past

the slatted venetian blinds. Underneath Amara's feet, the crimson carpet is a curdled pattern resembling giant lumps of cottage cheese. It swallows the sound of her shuffling feet, muffling even the silence. Papers, yellowed and curled, are taped onto the wall. "Obey them that have the rule over you." "Children, obey your parents in the Lord."

By now, Amara's brain is primed and ready for danger. She is the prey. They—are her foster parents.

Clarence shuffles through several papers and clears his throat. He motions for her to take a seat on the folding chair in front of him and his wife Irene. His eyes land on her shaking hands, and he smiles. "Good, you are scared—as you should be," he says. "What are we to do with you, Amara? Of all the foster children we've had in our home, you are by far the most difficult."

He looks over at Irene, who nods in agreement, before continuing. "We wrote down quite a few incidences from the past three weeks that are unacceptable. A lot of it has to do with the blatant disrespect you have been showing Irene. Your tone of voice says a lot about what is in your heart." He looks up from the hideous yellow legal pad. "And adding snarky remarks to minimize the rules and direction we give you is out of line and unacceptable!"

Amara holds her breath, as the silence stretches painfully. She is about to exhale slowly in relief. Maybe she'd been wrong about tonight. Her heart lurches when Clarence clears his throat and takes a long drink of his Diet Coke. Oh no. Amara realizes that she has only heard the prelude to the prelude. *Get ready, get set! No! God, I can't go through this again. Please help me!*

Clarence begins reading the record of her offenses, his voice growing louder. A purple vein throbs on his neck. Amara's brain