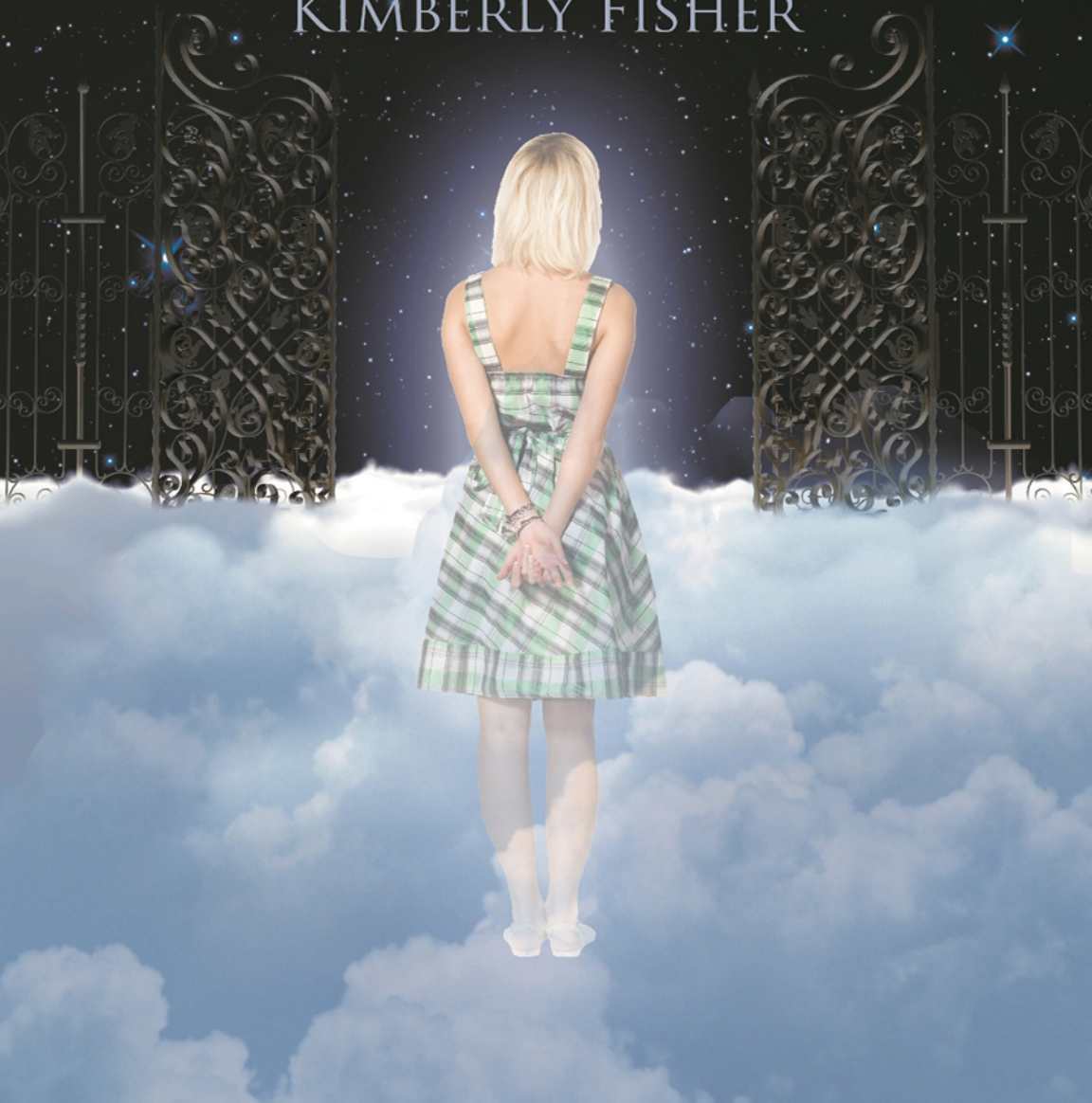


A Lesson in Empathy

KIMBERLY FISHER



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*For Prints, who deserved a better life,
and Craig, my biggest fan and greatest critic.*

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PREFACE

My rabbit died. I found him lying there in the cold when I went out to feed him. Perhaps I didn't keep his cage warm enough, or maybe I didn't feed him enough to put extra fat on his body for winter. Whatever it was, my rabbit was dead. Underneath my sadness, I felt an overwhelming feeling of relief; knowing that made me sick.

It was true that the rabbit was a gift from an ex-boyfriend making a last-ditch effort to save our relationship. The rabbit was unasked for and unwanted, and I was stuck with him. I disliked that rabbit with all that I had, but I didn't wish him dead. He was handsome enough, but I didn't have money to spend on a cage, so many of my electrical wires were chewed up during the first months. The rabbit was not very nice, so I couldn't pet or cuddle with him. By the time he had a cage, I had to keep him on the back porch. His temper caused him to make messes in any way he could, and I felt he was too old to be trained.

What his death brought about, however, was a feeling of self-

loathing. I hated my dislike for the rabbit. I felt I neglected him in a shallow hope that perhaps he would pass away. It didn't matter that he was a jerk to me, that he hated his cage, and that he couldn't be trained. None of that was his fault. He deserved better.

So, I sat down and began writing, starting with the dedication. I thought of other bad things I had done in my life to people and animals. I thought of the hurt I had caused others. A few of them went into my writing, although I embellished them for dramatic effect.

The end result is the following story. I wrote it with the hope that perhaps it will inspire others to give their actions more thought. However, I also wrote it for myself; so I will never forget a pepper-gray rabbit who died alone, locked in a cage on a cold winter's day with no one to love him.

CHAPTER 1

It all started when I died. Although I'm not sure how I died or even exactly when, I doubt it is relevant to the story I am about to convey; because it all started when I died.

However you think it happens when you die, you are probably right. I gather from my surroundings that God pretty much decides your fate by how you perceive it. If you think you are going to rot in the ground and that is the end, I imagine that is how you will spend your eternity. The atheist's hell. I'm not going to pretend I know for certain, though, because—let's face it—I'm dead, and I don't even know how it came about.

So, I was standing there, dead, ready to be judged when the most amazing thing happened: I suddenly realized that I may not make it into heaven. I may not deserve heaven. I reflected on all the deeds I'd done, all the horrible, terrible things I've inflicted upon people and other creatures, and it became clear to me that I did not deserve to go to heaven. I did not deserve eternal life.

This is an easier idea to deal with when one is not standing in

front of the pearly gates. (They aren't really pearly or really even gates, but we'll get to that later perhaps.) When I was alive, it had crossed my mind several times that I may not be worthy of the Kingdom of God. On several occasions, I had pondered whether my faith was enough to erase my sins, whether I had faith like a mustard seed or more like a piece of glitter, only shining when the light hits it and small enough to get lost among the tiniest grains of sand. Foolishly, I always figured that I'd have enough time in my life to make up for it, but how can one ever make up for death, heartbreak, and sorrow beyond all comprehensible measure?

There he stood with the Book of Life in hand, awaiting each approaching person, asking each one the same pointless question before revealing their fate: "Why do you deserve eternal life?"

Think about it. Think about it for more than just a moment. Why do you deserve eternal life? It is a question printed on countless flyers and posters, and discussed in numerous sermons. The problem with this question is that on those flyers and posters and in those sermons, the answer is revealed without the reader or listener putting any thought into it whatsoever.

Most spat out their prepared statement, the one they'd been repeating their entire lives only to use on Sundays and presently: "I deserve eternal life because I followed and loved Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the Father is through Him." Some talked about great deeds of kindness they had displayed or explained to which denominations they had been religious devotees.

Allow me to explain right here and now that being religious has almost nothing to do with God. One can be a religious drunk and

still technically be considered religious, as is the pattern with many members of various religions. They go to church on Christmas and Easter, and they do their best to look like good Christians twice a year. Others may go every week, religiously, and not believe a word of what they hear or at least not take it to heart. Few people understand the profound difference between the words *religious* and *spiritual*. One can be a great example of a wholly spiritual being without ever having set foot inside a church of any kind. I always looked at church as being a sort of spiritual guide, more or less a rejuvenation from the previous week's woes as well as a great and entertaining way to praise and learn about the Lord.

St. Peter is a little on the pompous side, I think. He pretends he is the one who decides where you spend your eternity. This question he's prompting the deceased with is meaningless. You go up there and spout off your Miss America answer about world peace, only to have him pull the lever on you anyway. It's a sick way to get your kicks, but, hey, it's probably a pretty boring job. I guess I can't blame him for finding a little humor in the lame answers these people are coming up with to try to save their souls from eternal damnation.

I am a grade-A liar. I could have gone up there and given an answer that would have the other stiff's drowning the skies with applause, but it was not their opinion that mattered. It was not St. Peter's opinion that mattered. Only one opinion mattered, and I had a feeling He was trying to tell me what it was.

My turn. It's a good thing I was dead, or I'd have sweat enough to flood even the highest of peaks. My heart was beating faster and faster until I realized it was not my heart at all, just a figment of my

imagination. This body was in my head, my nervousness was in my head, and everything I saw around me was there because I expected it to be. I had to break it.

I did not answer the question, at least not in the manner he had expected.

“Why do you deserve eternal life?” he prompted.

“I don’t.”

It was in that moment that the others disappeared. It was just St. Peter and I. I could tell he was a little shaken by this answer, yet he still expected a *but* clause to follow. Instead, I offered an alternative: “Make me suffer. Make me feel whatever hurt I’ve caused others. Any wrong that I’ve done in my life, have it done to me.”

And with that, St. Peter was gone. A wisp of a dream, he vanished.

A voice sounded from some distant yet ever-present place: “Good answer.”

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