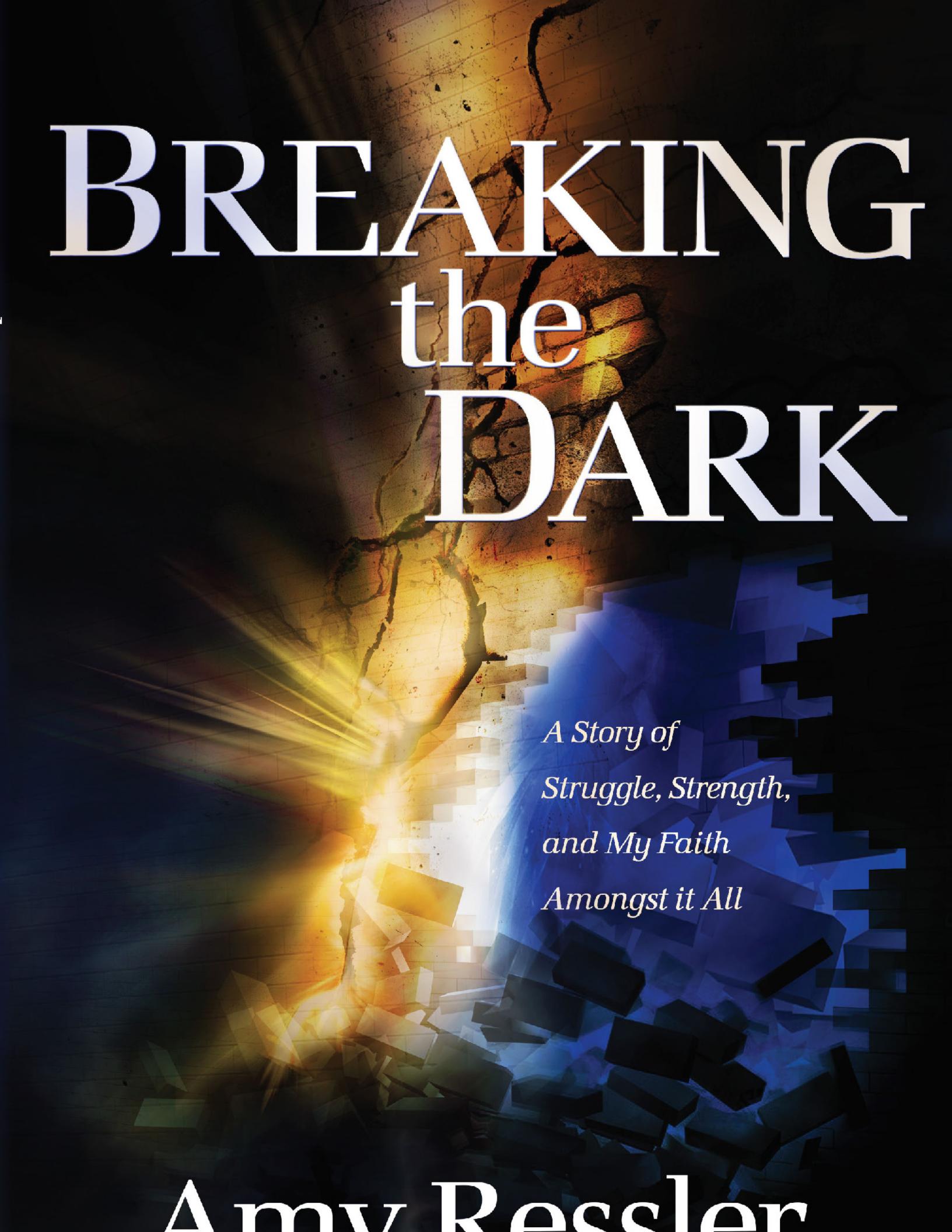


# BREAKING the DARK



*A Story of  
Struggle, Strength,  
and My Faith  
Amongst it All*

Amy Ressler

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REDEMPTION PRESS 

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022  
Toll Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

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ISBN 13: 978-1-68314-719-0  
ePub ISBN: 978-1-68314-720-6  
Kindle ISBN: 978-1-68314-721-3

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2019930948

For my children, who will always be the little  
lights that light up my heart.

For my husband—I couldn't ask for a more sup-  
portive, encouraging, and loving partner to walk  
through life with.

For those that have supported and encouraged me  
along this journey.



# **Contents**

Prologue.....	9
Chapter 1 .....	13
Chapter 2 .....	21
Chapter 3 .....	33
Chapter 4.....	39
Chapter 5 .....	47
Chapter 6.....	55
Chapter 7 .....	61
Chapter 8 .....	67
Chapter 9 .....	75
Chapter 10.....	83
Chapter 11 .....	89
Chapter 12 .....	97
Epilogue.....	103



# Prologue

I grew up in a small farm town in central Illinois. I spent my days riding my bike around town, shopping for candy at the local grocery store, and catching lightning bugs until my mom hollered for me to come inside. I knew every pothole on every street, and everyone knew everyone else's name. Summers were spent at swim lessons, the dirt track, and the community fair. I can remember when I learned how to ride my bike without holding on and then mastered the next step of going around turns, only steering with my torso while my legs maintained the speed. Behind my house was an alley that served as a shortcut where I would race my friends home and a drag strip where I would hop on our moped for a little drive.

The grade school I attended is no longer standing. It was an old building and once served as the high school. Its image is still so vivid in my mind. I can still see every entrance, every staircase, class-

room, and hallway. I could tell you the names of all my teachers and what they looked like. I could probably even describe some of the room decor they had up. I spent many hours at the basketball courts during recess, as well as on my own. That place was so much more than a building to me—it was safety, love, and friendship, filled with an amazing team of educators who poured their hearts into every student.

I loved the small-town life: having my friends within walking distance, slow traffic, the buzz of the grain elevators. It was a comfortable, tight, safe bubble I longed to stay in forever, but at the same time craved to get out of. Sometimes when I would go out for a bike ride, I would stare up at the blue sky, feel the sun on my face and the wind through my ponytail, and wonder what plan there was for me. Was I going to follow in the footsteps of so many others who had graduated and chosen to stay in the same town, raising their children in the same community? Was I going to leave town upon graduation and never return, having found a life away from central Illinois?

From the outside, my little town probably looked perfect, with its friendly community members and good school system. But every community, no matter the size, has its dark spots. Dark corners. Issues that are covered up or talked about in hushed tones. Who did my community see when

they saw me? On the outside I was a blond-haired, blue-eyed, athletic sweetie who loved to ride her bike, go for runs around town, and excel in athletics. They had no idea what I faced within the confines of my house and the battles that raged inside me.



# **Chapter 1**

*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

*—Psalm 139:13–14*

*For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.*

*—Ephesians 1:4–5*

**G**od created each and every one of us, breathing his breath into our lungs to give us life. He knit us together with great plans in mind. Bringing life into the world is such a precious experience,

but it can also be terrifying. Unfortunate circumstances and challenges can bring more questions than answers and put one's faith to the test.

On November 20, 1989, I came into the world eight weeks early, weighing a tiny three pounds, six ounces. My mom went into labor with me, and upon checking her amniotic fluid, they found it to be tainted; for my protection, I needed to make a quick exit. She was rushed by ambulance to Peoria, where I would later be born at the children's hospital. She was afraid and wondered why God had allowed this to happen.

But when my mom's womb became compromised, God made sure he had created me with enough strength and resilience to handle the challenges facing me. These were two key characteristics I would need as I traveled through life. I was tiny but also healthy, strong, and beautiful—and nothing was medically wrong with me. My mom kept her faith during this difficult time, but my dad didn't share in that faith. Unfortunately, my parents' marriage couldn't hold up after going through this trying time, and they filed for divorce soon after the first of the year.

My mother had me baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church. We went to church on Sundays, I participated in vacation Bible school every summer, and I even went on two mission trips with my youth group, but God was never brought home as

a part of everyday life. I can remember my mom coming into my room on Sunday mornings. If I wasn't getting up, she'd say, "Rise and shine, and give God the glory." I'd grumble and think, *I don't want to.* That perfectly described my relationship with God—uninterested.

Once I reached middle school, it felt like Sunday school was becoming cliquey. And just like in school, I didn't really fit into a specific group at church. I got lost in everyone's shadow and pulled away from attending youth events. I continued to follow what came next for the youth in my church, and at that time it was confirmation class. I completed the classes and was confirmed, but the motivation most of my peers and I shared was the party with the cards full of money we would receive upon completion. I'd never learned the books of the Bible, nor actually read it. Most of my youth was spent being afraid of God and his power.

Growing up with divorced parents was awful and a real struggle. I shuffled between households every other weekend, and holidays were split or traded. It was like I had one life at my mom's house and one at my dad's. The first five years—when I was still young and naïve—were peaceful and mostly uneventful. My mom worked multiple jobs and still managed to get me to my speed-skating practices and meets without blinking. She'd carry me half-asleep, wrapped in my Looney Tunes blan-

ket, to the already-warmed-up car and drive me to practice early in the morning. I have few memories of looking up in the stands and not seeing her.

Once my mom remarried, the dynamic of our household, as well as our relationship, drastically changed. The relationship I cherished with my mom was now looked on as toxic. According to my new stepfather, I would “make” her spend money the household didn’t have. I “told lies” and “manipulated her” into believing things that weren’t true. The relationship I had with my mom had to go underground to keep both of us from experiencing backlash. It was heartbreakingly to watch the woman I knew the first five years of my life slowly morph into someone I didn’t recognize. In everyday life, I was criticized relentlessly: “Just eat it. Quit f—ing picking at it to get the onions out.”

“We need milk again?”

“Your dad pays us basically nothing. It doesn’t even cover your food bill, let alone everything else you have to have.”

“That computer game of yours is giving the computer all these viruses and a bunch of other sh—”

“You’re so sour that you must have vinegar running through your body.”

Finances were always a struggle, and my mom often came to me asking to borrow money so she could pay our bills. I knew what she wanted before she started talking. She’d sit on my bed, tears in her eyes, and quietly explain what she need-

ed. At other times during those early years, I'd be asked for money "to go get milk"—and that would be the last time I saw my twenty-dollar bill. I was too young to realize the cost of items, which made it that much easier for my stepfather to take advantage of me in that way. I grew up believing it was acceptable to "rob Peter to pay Paul," as my mom often said.

My dad's house was completely opposite from my mom's, even before he remarried. There was plenty of food, and I was free to consume it without fearing what would happen should I eat the last piece of bread or drink the last serving of milk. But I still hesitated for years when I opened the fridge or pantry and saw there was only one serving left. I'd say to myself, *Oh well. I'm not that thirsty or I'll wait for lunch to eat.* At my dad's house, never once was I asked for money to pay a bill or for groceries. My half sister (we have the same dad), stepsister, stepbrother, and I had the same game on our computer at my dad's house as I did at my mom's. Neither my dad nor my stepmom criticized us about how we were messing up the computer or causing viruses. I was free to roam the house as a normal human would, but I had myself so trained not to draw attention to myself—in an attempt to avoid getting yelled at—that I still tiptoed around and caused as little trouble as possible for the two days I was there. I constantly felt caught in the middle

of my mom and dad—and all I ever wanted was to please both of them. That is a feat no child should ever have to conquer.

Since my parents split when I was so young, I never knew a different life—which, in some ways, I’m thankful for. I had no image of a once-functional marriage that went bad. I had no memories of the three of us vacationing, having family dinners, or watching movies together. And compared to other divorced parents I knew, my parents had a better relationship. However, as I grew older and understood more, they opened up about each other. I don’t know if this was their intention, but I oftentimes felt like a judge, with my mom and dad as the attorneys, stating their cases for how I should feel about the other one. There were many conversations between my mom and me in which she would accuse me of loving my dad because he “bought me stuff.” It came off as jealousy when she would cry and vent about how much I looked up to my dad. My dad openly disagreed with my mom’s choice of spouse and questioned why I was living in a toxic household. I feared having characteristics like my parents. What would happen if I acted like one of them while at the other’s house? Would they scoff at me? Would they think less of me?

When my stepmother, Linda, entered the picture, I was extremely slow to connect with her. I had seen women come and go, all too often not

liking my sister and me too much. Looking back, I realize there was a difference between Linda and the others, but I kept my guard up. Linda brought with her a girl and a boy from her previous marriage—my oldest sister and brother. While I quickly took to having more siblings, it took five years before I gave Linda a hug. After that, I struggled with things like whether I should sign a card “Love, Amy.” Did she care about me the way I cared about her? Too many times to count, I cried on the drive back to my mom’s house because I missed Linda already. During those five years, despite my hesitancy, Linda would include me in tasks if I showed an interest. She’d let me help paint pieces of furniture, have me help her do household chores before a family get-together, and allow me to observe quietly as she prepared a meal or dessert. Every year before school would start, she would take my sisters, brother, and me school-supply shopping, or she’d take me to the outlet mall to get school clothes. She introduced me to scrapbooking. One day she helped me with my fifth-grade project. We spent that afternoon crafting a purple kite with a bright yellow sun on the front. When it was all done, I took it out back and let it fly on that blustery Sunday. The sunshine on my kite matched the sunshine in the sky and the bright smile on my face. My dad’s marriage to her ended three months before I got married. I was off at college, so I didn’t see the fall-

out, but I could sense a problem for years beforehand. Once I became the only child still living in the house, I became aware of the distance between them. Meals were no longer a family event. My dad and I would go to the racetrack while Linda stayed home. Sometimes they would show small amounts of affection toward one another, but it came off as surface-level feelings. The life I had known for fifteen years came to an end. Fifteen years of memories that Linda scrapbooked so beautifully. Fifteen years of watching my sisters, brother, and I grow and chase after life. Fifteen years of vacations, dirt track-racing trips, and early Christmas mornings. I was left with only memories and traces of what feels like another life.

God placed Linda in my and my sister's lives for a reason. She could have treated us with minimal love and care—and even dropped us completely once the divorce became final—but she chose to embrace us instead. Linda chose to continue to love us despite the fallout she experienced with our dad.