

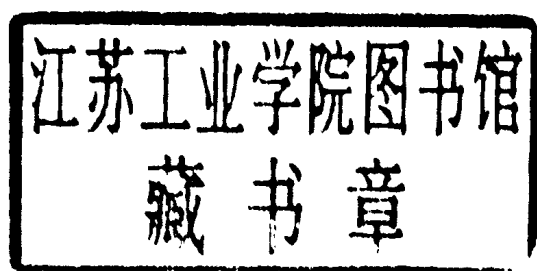
KIMBERLY BRUBAKER BRADLEY

LEAP *of* FAITH



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Dial Books for Young Readers

DIAL BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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To Bart Bradley and Christopher Robinette,
with thanks to Rev. Timothy E. Keeney
for the unofficial imprimatur



LEAP FAITH

Prologue

We sat in the front row of the church. The lights, which had been dimmed all along, went out entirely. The people in the pews murmured softly, and many of them, including Mrs. Brashares, leaned back and looked over their shoulders toward the door. I was caught by the light pouring in through one of the prismside windows, bathing the lilies on the altar in a silver glow. "Look at the moonlight," I whispered.

"That's not moonlight, it's from the light in the parking lot," Mrs. Brashares whispered back.

I was trying to be spiritual; you'd think she would indulge me.

Nothing seemed to be happening. The church had gone still, silent, waiting. Every pew was full, including the one toward the back and off to one side where my parents sat. I wondered if the people surrounding them were saying rosaries or mumbling in Latin or doing something else to set them on edge. I no longer wanted them to be uncomfortable in church, which I knew was progress. On the other hand, I didn't especially care if they were comfortable tonight. Tonight was mine.

Still nothing happened. Seconds, then minutes, ticked by. "When does it start?" I whispered.

"Soon," murmured Mrs. Brashares.

“What do I do with this little candle?” I asked. It was halfway between a birthday candle and the sort you’d stick on your dining room table. One of the ushers gave it to me when I walked in. Everyone had one.

“You’ll see,” said Mrs. Brashares. “Shh.”

“It’s super-cool,” Chris added over my shoulder. I looked. He wasn’t supposed to be here, up front in the reserved seats. They were only for the special people, like his mom and me. “Stinks sitting by myself,” he said. “Scoot over. Pretend I’m your godparent.”

“I’m too old for a godparent.”

“Pretend you’re younger.”

“Shh!” his mom said. She didn’t make him move back, and I was glad. Mrs. Brashares was my sponsor, but Chris was my partner in crime.

Something moved in the darkness at the back of the church. “Here we go,” Chris said.

I took a quick deep breath. My heart beat fast. I looked up at the crucifix, hidden in the shadow thrown by the parking lot lights. What would Jesus do here? I figured, if lightning was going to strike, it would happen now.

CHAPTER

1

School had been in session for two weeks on the Tuesday morning my parents shoved me through the principal's door at St. Catherine's. I had to be shoved; my feet stubbed against the carpet. I didn't want another principal's office. I didn't want another principal. I slumped in the chair where they put me and I stared at my hands.

"Don't slouch," my mother said.

I slouched harder.

"Abigail," she whispered.

"*What?*" I whispered back furiously. Since last week—since what my parents liked to call "the accident," as though what had happened had not been my deliberate action—anger kept shooting out of me at unexpected times. I didn't know who I was most angry at. Top choices included Brett McAvery, both my parents, and middle school principals of any sort.

And myself. Maybe I was first on my list. Who knew? Not me, that was sure.

I'd been straight-out expelled from public middle school at the very beginning of sixth grade. It was a record, the superintendent of schools told my parents. No other student had ever been kicked out as fast as me.

And no, I couldn't go back. Not ever. The weapons policy was very strict. I could go to the county alternative school with the drug-abusing high-schoolers and pregnant fourteen-year-olds, or I could be homeschooled and the county would send a tutor to my house once a week.

Or I could go to a private school, if my parents could find one that would take me. Hence this meeting with the principal of St. Catherine's.

From the silence in the room I realized everyone was looking at me. I saw a tiny piece of dirt under one of my fingernails, and slid my thumbnail across it to push it out.

My mother sighed. "She's not usually like this," she said, presumably to the principal. "She's very quiet—she's never gotten so much as detention before. Never gets in trouble—"

My father cleared his throat. "Abigail's always been a good girl. Before this. She . . . well—" He stopped. My parents had heard the story from so many sides—mine and Brett McAvery's and the middle school's and the teacher who was on lunchroom duty—that they weren't sure who was telling the truth and who was lying. Sometimes they wanted to believe me, but of course they didn't. It made them culpable if they did. They didn't want any of this mess to be my fault, but they absolutely especially also didn't want it to be theirs.

We preferred no-fault expulsions in my family.

We preferred silence. We preferred to put up with things.

We didn't complain. We did not get angry. Except of course for me. Made me wonder, sometimes, what I was even doing in my family.



Flash backward a week, to the last time I sat in a principal's office. My mother burst through the door, dressed in her expensive suit and heels. She stopped dead when she saw me, and her mouth dropped open. She stared at my arm, at the streaks of blood running down it. They'd taken my knife away first thing, the teachers who had tackled me.

My mother stood gasping, like she had personally run all the way from her downtown office. She looked up at the principal, Mr. McAvery—who was plenty angry, let me tell you, given that it was his kid I'd just sent to the emergency room—and said, "It's true?"

Mr. McAvery's face was reddish purple. He'd been pacing up and down in front of me, not saying a word, but his face growing more and more purple all the time. "You bet it's true!" he roared, and went on from there, his words billowing out like steam escaping a pressure cooker.

I stared at my tennis shoes. One had a funny red splotch on it, and I reached down to touch it before I realized it was blood. Brett McAvery's, not mine. Same as on my arms.

The office door burst open again. This time it was a policeman. My mother let out another little gasp. Then

my father came in, also at a run. "Is she hurt?" he asked my mother. My mother shook her head. "Is it true?" he asked.

In all this time Mr. McAvery hadn't stopped yelling. He was telling me off to the policeman now. "It's true," my mother said quietly.

I expected one of them to touch me, but neither did, as though what I'd done was contagious.



"So?" the court-ordered shrink said, a few days later. "They really weren't angry? Not at all?"

I shrugged. I hated the shrink on sight. She wore too much jewelry and her hair was an unnatural color. Also, I didn't like her shoes. "Angry maybe that they had to miss work," I said. "That's all."

It was the truth too. You'd think they'd be angry, but my parents weren't. They talked in low voices to each other and seemed to be avoiding me.

The shrink was supposed to make sure I wasn't psychotic or something. She gave me a test that was so obvious, I answered wrong on purpose. She would say a word, and I was supposed to say the first word that came to my mind. "School," she said, and I answered, "Satan." For every word she said I answered *death*, or *hate*, or *kill*.

At the end of it she looked at me and said, "So, you're not angry?"

“Not really,” I said. “No.” The shrink seemed completely untrustworthy. Court-ordered? Like she was going to be on my side.

I was angry at the *shrink*. At the end she said, “That’s all I need in order to make my recommendation, Abby. But I think maybe it’d be nice if you came to see me again. Maybe your parents could come too.”

Ha. Fat chance.



Fast forward a week, and here I sat at St. Catherine’s, and still no one was angry.

Except maybe me. My hands shook.

The St. Catherine’s principal, a short man I barely glanced at as we walked in, cleared his throat. In a quiet voice he said that he’d telephoned Mr. McAvery after talking to my parents yesterday.

I wanted to run right out the door. I would never be safe here now that this guy was on Mr. McAvery’s side. Mr. McAvery would never forgive me for what I’d done.

The principal cleared his throat again. A bad sign. “I don’t think we’d have any trouble accepting Abigail as a student,” he said. “We have an anti-bullying rule, and a strict code of conduct.”

“Please don’t be concerned,” my mother said. “We’ll make sure Abigail will behave from now on. She’s never—”

The principal cut her off. “I meant that the other way. I

don't think she'll need to *defend* herself from anyone here."

I jerked my head up, and by chance looked the principal right in the eye. Had I heard that right? He looked straight back at me, calm and unsmiling. *Defend myself?* Wow. I looked back at my lap, and heard myself exhale. I waited for my parents to hear what he'd said—that maybe, just maybe, I wasn't the only person to blame.

"Fine," my father said, a little too heartily. "That's fine, then. When can she start? Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," agreed the principal. "And you should know that children quite often begin at St. Catherine's after the normal start of the year. There'll be no need to mention your reasons for sending Abigail here, unless you wish to."

Even looking at my lap I could feel the tension ooze out of my parents. How wonderful; how understanding; how fair.

There'd been something like two hundred witnesses to the fact that I'd attacked Brett McAvery in the school cafeteria, but by chance there'd also been a bus accident in our town the exact same day. The headlines got taken up by the drunken bus driver, not by me. So I wasn't notorious.

One second ago I had been grateful for that, would have begged this man not to share my record with my new teachers. But now I felt another flash of anger. Was I so bad we had to hide the truth?

My parents began discussing class size and the curricu-

lum for the sixth grade, as though those things somehow mattered. “And of course, religion,” the principal said. “As a Catholic school, we require daily religion classes for all our students, no matter what their faith background.”

“We don’t actually go to church,” my father said.

I raised my head. “We don’t actually believe in God.”

“Abigail!” my mother said. “Of course we do!”

“Not me,” I said.

My mother couldn’t decide whether she should act angry or sad. She settled on a mixture of both, her eyebrows arched, her lips pursed. My father looked as if he’d like to slap me into yesterday.

Of course, violence was not condoned at this school. We had an anti-bullying rule and a strict code of conduct.

I looked hard at the principal for the first time. He was bald and plump, with round glasses that made his face and stomach look even rounder. He wore a black shirt with a funny white collar and a black sport coat. I looked at all that black, and I realized I’d just said I didn’t believe in God to a Catholic priest.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” he said. “I think honesty is the first step in any road to faith.”

That made my father nervous. “See here,” he said quickly, “we don’t want her converted. I mean, our faith—our religion—it’s fine with us. We don’t want anybody messing with Abigail’s mind.”

The priest/principal turned his pale eyes toward my father. "Over half our student body is non-Catholic," he said. "We do not attempt to evangelize anybody." He looked at me. "You'll have to learn what you're taught in religion class," he said. "You won't have to believe it."

I nodded. "Good."

My parents switched the topic to uniforms, and school supplies, and which math class I'd be in. Then the priest asked me, "And which elective?"

I'd been picking my fingernails again. "Hmm?" I asked.

"Sixth grade is middle school; middle-schoolers get an elective. Do you want art, computers, economics, journalism—"

"Art," I said.

"No," my father said. "She wants something academic."

I thought of the freedom of a white sheet of paper, a good dark pen. "I want art."

"I'm not paying this kind of tuition for you to take art," my father said. "Pick something else."

Not like he'd wanted to send me here; not like I'd given him a choice. I knew the tuition was expensive. We wouldn't be going to the beach this summer, my mother had said.

"I love art," I whispered.

"Honey," my mother said, "pick something else. Any other thing you want."

I looked at the principal. "Computers," he repeated, "economics, journalism, Spanish, drama—"

“Drama.” The only class more useless than art.

“Abigail!” my father said.

“You don’t want to take drama,” said my mother.

“How about economics? That sounds fun. Think about it, honey. You’ve never been very dramatic.”

Except for that one moment, when I had a knife in my hand.

“Drama,” I said, and did not give in.