



LAREN MALLEY

FINDING
SUNSETTINE

ALPINE SPRINGS
MICRO-READ

Finding Sunshine

A Pine Springs Prequel

Karen Malley

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Finding Sunshine

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Anne emerged from the water, blinking rapidly in the sunlight, and beamed at Daddy as he gazed down at her. She wiped the droplets from her face and stared at all the people clapping. Clapping for her.

“I’m so proud of you, sunshine,” Daddy said. He gave her a squeeze, and she swam to the edge of the pool as the next person took their turn to be baptized. She climbed out and into the towel Mommy held for her.

“Congratulations, Annie. Your father and I are so happy,” Mommy said.

Robert squeezed her shoulder. “Yeah, good job,

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Sis. You didn't get water up your nose or anything."

Anne punched him in the arm. "That's not funny. I was nervous."

Robert whispered close to her ear. "I'm proud of you, too. It's a big grown-up decision you made."

Anne swelled with pride. Robert was twelve. He knew all about grown-up things. Anne was only nine, but she wanted to be baptized and follow Jesus forever. In her mind, He was exactly like Daddy. Daddy was perfect. He never yelled, always read books to her, always spent time with them. She sighed. Life was good.

Later, after she kissed Mommy goodnight, Daddy tucked her in.

"Hey, sunshine. Thanks for making today special for me. It's not every day a dad gets to baptize his own daughter." He tickled Anne beneath her chin.

Anne giggled and burrowed under the covers. "You're so silly, Daddy. You baptize people all the time. It's part of your job."

Daddy studied her face as if trying to memorize it. "But you're not people. You're my special ray of sunshine, and I'm so proud you took this step. You and Mommy and Robert and I will all be together in heaven someday. I love you so much."

Anne yawned, full of contentment and peace. "I love you too, Daddy. When I grow up, I'm going to marry a man just like you."

Daddy stroked her hair. "Well, sunshine, let's hope that doesn't happen for quite a while. I'm not ready to share you yet."

Anne stood in front of the tombstone, fresh grief filling her. "Daddy, I miss you so much. We've been doing OK, but it's not the same. And now Robert is leaving." A car door slammed behind her. She turned as Robert ambled over.

"Hey Sis, whatcha doing?"

"Talking to Daddy."

Lines creased Robert's forehead. "I didn't know you were still coming here." He reached out to touch her shoulder. "It's been six years, Annie."

Anne shrugged. "I don't come here often. Sometimes, when something big is on my mind, I like to talk with Daddy. He's a good listener."

"You can always talk to me. I'll try not to give you stupid advice."

Anne gave him a sad smile. "What if it's about you?"

"You're upset about me leaving for college." It wasn't a question.

Anne nodded.

"I'll only be a couple hours away. You can call. And I'll come back and visit."

Anne smirked. "You'll come back for Katie."

Robert grinned. "Well, yeah. I can't stay away from her for too long." He gave Anne a sidelong glance. "You do like her, don't you?"

Anne studied his face. It touched her that he cared what she thought. "I do. She's always nice to me. She said hi to me in the halls, even though I was a lowly freshman." She pushed a strand of hair from her face. "But I'm almost a sophomore. Maybe I'll find someone who cares about me the way you care about her."

Robert's eyebrows rose. "Hey, Little Sis. No need to rush."

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"I'm not rushing anything. Katie was fifteen when you started dating her. What's wrong with me wanting someone to love me, too?"

Robert slung his arm around Anne's shoulders and guided her back to his car. "Someday, Sis. Someday."

Anne followed Mom and Robert down the hallway, lugging his stuff. Figured he'd have the room farthest from the elevator. Anne adjusted the box in her arms, entered Robert's room, and stopped in her tracks. Who was that?

The most handsome guy Anne had ever seen was unpacking boxes on the other side of the room. "You must be Mark," Robert said. He dropped his box on the empty bed and shook hands with the guy.

Mark smiled, and something fluttered in Anne's stomach. Robert gestured to them. "This is my mom, and my little sister Anne."

Annie glared at her brother. Did he have to call her his little sister? She stood rooted to the spot as Mark shook Mom's hand and then turned to her.

"Anne, you can put the box down. This is my room," Robert said.

Heat flooded Anne's cheeks. She set the box on the bed and thrust her hand toward Mark. He took her hand in his, and a jolt of electricity shot up her arm. This was it. He was the one!

"Glad to meet you, Mrs. Baker, Anne," Mark said.

Oh, he was polite, too, and had such a nice voice. Anne tried to say something, but the words jumbled in her throat.

Mom saved her. "Why don't we get another load from the car?"

Anne turned to follow her mother, but Mark joined them. "I've already brought my stuff to the room. I'm glad to help."

Between the four of them, Robert's things were unloaded much too quickly. Robert didn't need them to help unpack, but Anne didn't want to say goodbye. Not to Robert or to Mark. As she feared, though, Robert was ready to start his new college life.

"Thanks for your help. I've got it from here. I'll text you soon and tell you how things are going."

Mom hugged Robert for a long time, and then it was Anne's turn. She would not cry. She didn't want Mark to think she was a baby. She gave Robert a hug and turned toward Mark. "It was nice to meet you, Mark. Good luck living with my weirdo brother."

Mark smiled. A smile for her. She replayed the moment in her mind the whole drive home.

"Mom, when are we going to visit Robert?" Anne asked.

"He's only been gone three weeks. You'll have to learn to get along without him longer than that, sweetheart."

It wasn't Robert Anne wanted to see, but she couldn't tell Mom that. "But what if he's lonely? Don't you miss him?"

"Of course, I do, but I have to work weekends. Besides, he won't want his mother checking on him already. He'll be home for Thanksgiving."

Thanksgiving! Anne couldn't wait that long. It was

time to find another ally. The next morning, she waited in the hallway near Katie's locker.

"Hey Anne, what's up?"

"I was wondering when you planned to visit Robert. I could keep you company on the drive."

Katie chewed her lip. "You miss him, huh?"

"Yeah, he's a great big brother."

Katie smiled. "He's a good guy all around. How about next weekend? I'll call him tonight and ask if we can spend Saturday there."

Excitement surged through Anne's veins. "You'd let me tag along?" A thought entered her head. "Robert might not be too happy to have me there if he's spending time with you."

Katie spun the dial on her locker and pulled out her books. "Nonsense. He'll be glad to see both of us. It'll be fun."

Saturday morning, Anne stood in front of her closet mirror, checking her reflection. Frowning, she straightened her shirt. She still looked like a seventh grader. Why couldn't she have a figure like her friends? She stuffed some tissues in her bra. Better. She carefully applied her makeup and curled her hair. Finally satisfied, she bounded down the stairs to wait for Katie.

Katie's eyes widened in surprise when Anne opened the door. "Why are you all dressed up? We're taking a road trip to see your brother. You're fixed up more than me, and he's my boyfriend."

Anne brushed off the comment. "You never get dressed up. You always wear your hair in a ponytail,

and you never wear makeup. What's wrong with me wanting to look nice?"

Katie shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. I never saw the point of makeup and stuff."

"That's because all you care about is school. And you've already got my brother wrapped around your little finger, so you don't need to worry about it."

"I do not have him, oh, never mind." Katie started the car, and the conversation soon turned to other things.

When they reached Robert's room, Anne's heart thumped against her chest. This was her chance to make a better impression on Mark. Show him she wasn't a dumb kid sister.

Robert threw open the door and wrapped his arms around Katie. Anne's heart plummeted. Mark wasn't even there. Robert released Katie from the hug, and pulled Anne into a hug, too.

"Hey squirt, thanks for convincing my girl to make the trip."

"Don't call me squirt. And you're not mad I'm here, too?"

"Naw. Why would I be mad? I get to see my two best girls." He studied Anne's face. "What are you all made up for?"

"It's not a big deal, ok?"

Robert was too perceptive. "What's wrong?"

What could she say? 'I'm disappointed your cute roommate isn't here' wouldn't work. "Nothing. I miss having you around, that's all." She didn't have to pretend for long, because minutes later, Mark entered the room. Anne's gaze followed him, as Robert introduced him to Katie.

"And you remember Anne," Robert said,

gesturing to her.

"Sure, your little sister. Nice to see you again."
Mark turned that smile on her.

Not the little sister thing again. No, this time she was going to show him she wasn't some stupid high school kid. She opened her mouth to talk to him, but he spoke first.

"I forgot my notes. I've got to get to Bible study. Hope you have a great visit." With that, he was gone.

Anne turned to Robert. "Bible study?"

Robert shrugged. "Yeah. Mark attends a few and even leads one. I've gone to it a couple of times. It's interesting. He wants to be a pastor someday."

Mark wanted to be a pastor? Anne's mind floated back to the last words she spoke to Daddy. 'I'm going to marry a man just like you.'

After the visit to Robert, Anne spent some time in prayer. Mark's Bible study struck a chord. Her thoughts turned to her father and all his hopes for her. She hadn't touched her Bible in months. Daddy would have been disappointed. If Robert was going to Bible study with Mark, it was time for her to get back into Bible reading herself. After she finished her homework that night, she opened her Bible and began reading. She could hear Daddy's voice in her mind, reciting the familiar passages to her, and peace washed over her. The more she read, though, the more questions surfaced. Daddy wasn't around to explain things to her, and she didn't want to bother Mom. She was so busy all the time.

Between homework, babysitting, and school

activities, Anne didn't have a lot of time either. No wonder Bible reading took such a low priority. Still, she wouldn't change a thing. She loved babysitting and earning extra spending money. Most of her friends didn't understand, but she loved children. Someday she wanted a house full of kids of her own. She talked to Katie about it once.

"You want to have kids, don't you Katie?"

Katie blinked, surprised. "I never thought about it. That's so far away." She narrowed her gaze at Anne. "Why are you asking me? Did Robert tell you to?"

Uh oh. She didn't want to get Robert mad. "No, of course not. I can't wait to be a mom. My friends think I'm nuts, but you're two years older than me, so I thought you might get it."

"I may be older, but I still have high school, college and grad school, and then a job. Maybe then I'll consider kids."

Anne sighed. Someday.

The next time she talked to Robert on the phone, she asked him some of her questions about the Bible.

"I don't know, Sis. Some of those questions are deep," Robert said. "Mark might, though. He's not here, but I can ask him when he gets back." Anne heard him clicking the keys of his computer.

"I have a better idea. Mark started a website for students who go to his Bible study, but I'm sure you could ask questions, too. I'll send you the address."

"Thanks," Anne said. "How is Mark as a roommate? Is it weird sharing a room with someone?"

"Nah, Mark's great. He's super considerate, and isn't here a lot. He's trying to get lots of practice helping people so he'll be a good pastor." Robert laughed. "He may convert this whole campus to

Christianity by the time we graduate.”

Anne chewed on her bottom lip. “So, does he have a girlfriend?”

“What? No, he doesn’t have time for girls.” Robert’s tone changed. “Annie, you’re not thinking about Mark like that are you? First, he’s too busy. Second, you’re a kid.”

Anne clenched her fists. “I am not a kid. I’m only three years younger than you.”

“Three years is a lifetime at our age. He wouldn’t go out with a high schooler.”

“You are.”

“Katie’s a senior. She’s only six months younger than me. That’s completely different.”

Anne huffed. “Why are we even talking about this? All I wanted were answers.”

“I shouldn’t have sent you the link.”

“I’m not going to ask him for a date on his website. How stupid do you think I am?” Anne’s irritation with her brother grew.

“Sis, I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight with you. Ask him whatever questions you want. Bible questions, that is.”

“Yes, Bible questions. Don’t tell him you gave me the address. I don’t want him to worry your little sister will pester him.”

“All right. And say hi to Mom.”

“Will do. Take care, big brother.”

Anne opened her email and clicked the link Robert sent. Mark’s website was a simple blog site, but people posted questions. She stayed awake long past bedtime reading every one of his posts. Impressed with his insight into the Bible, she posted some questions of her own. She paused for a minute, not wanting to sign her

name. Remembering her father, she signed her post "SS," short for Sunshine.

The next few days, Anne checked Mark's site constantly, until finally she saw the answers to her questions. They made a lot of sense. Over the next several weeks, she fell into a rhythm. She did her Bible reading at night and posted questions, but eventually posted ideas of what the text meant. She was usually rewarded a few days later with a new post from Mark, along with his comments. More often than not, he agreed with her ideas. She gained more confidence in her Bible knowledge and drew closer to God in the process.

Life at high school continued as usual around her, but with her head in the Bible, she started to question what she was doing. She asked Mark about it one evening.

"I love reading the Bible, but I have to spend so much time studying. I'm getting impatient. I want to serve God now."

The next evening, Mark's response came back. "You can serve God wherever you are. Don't live life for the future. I'm spending a ton of time studying too, but in my conversations with other students, I'm able to serve Him. I'm hopeful even with this website, I'm serving Him."

Anne loved listening to his advice, but hated waiting so long for a response. How she wished she could sit in on his Bible studies. She could learn so much from him, if she weren't too distracted by seeing him in person. She finally gained the courage to ask him the one question on her mind.

"Do you believe God has one special person for everyone?"

She waited. He posted a few times on other comments, but nothing. A few days later, she checked again, and saw a reply to her question.

“SS—sorry I haven’t replied. I wasn’t sure what to say. I don’t have a lot of experience in this department. Be patient. If God means for you to be married, He has someone for you. Don’t rush it. Live your life, and when it happens it happens. If you’re considering getting married, pray about it, and God will give you both the same answer. And if God blesses it, commit to stay together forever.”

Anne sat back against the pillow on her bed. Be patient. Mark was right. If God meant for her to be married, it would happen.

Anne got more involved with school and the local church youth group. She continued to read her Bible faithfully and read and posted on Mark’s page at least once or twice a month. Eventually they exchanged emails and began lengthy conversations. Katie went off to college, and Anne finished high school. Finally the day came for her to go to college. She thought back to the conversation with her mom.

“Annie, there are a lot of colleges. You don’t have attend State just because Robert is there.”

“Mom, I’m not picking State because of Robert. It’s a great school, with a good education program. You know I want to teach.”

“I want you to go for the right reasons. I know how hard it’s been on you since your father died. I’m sorry I’ve needed to work so much, but—”

“You’re an amazing mom. You’ve been both mother and father to us, and we love you. Yes, I miss Daddy, and Robert too, but there are a lot of good reasons for me to go to State.”

And so it was on that steamy August day, when Robert packed his old beater of a car to head back for senior year, Anne was going along with him. Mom tried to be strong, but watching both her kids drive off together was bound to be hard on her. Anne and Robert gave her extra-long hugs.

Mark took advantage of the quiet time driving back to school to reflect on his college days. He'd learned so much the past three years. His courses in religious studies were fascinating, but the Bible studies with the students were the highlight. He'd had some amazing conversations. Still, none of them compared to the online talks with SS.

Oh, SS. Such a mystery. No one in his studies had those initials. And to be honest, no one ever engaged with him the way she did. After the first semester, he'd given her his direct email, and over the past year, they'd been emailing one another nightly. Even over the summer. They'd started their communications by her asking him questions, but over the years, he counted on her advice more than anyone else's. He talked to her about what he was learning in his classes, and she told him about hers, but she wasn't taking any religious studies. He still didn't know her major. She was always elusive about what dorm she lived in or what she was doing on the weekends. Still, he hoped one day he'd get to meet her.

As Mark pulled up to the apartment building, he saw Robert in the parking lot with a beautiful girl. It wasn't Katie. Did Robert have a new girlfriend? He hadn't mentioned problems with Katie when they last

talked. Mark said he didn't have time for girls, but he longed for someone he could talk to the way he talked to SS. He walked over to Robert and the girl with chestnut hair flowing over her shoulders.

"Good to see you again, man." Robert clapped him on the back. The girl turned and smiled at him. There was something familiar about her, but Mark would have remembered a smile like that.

"Hi again, Mark," the girl said, holding out her hand.

Mark reached for her hand, and held it in his a moment too long, trying to figure out why she knew his name.

"You remember my sister Anne, don't you?" Robert said. "I guess it's been a couple of years."

Mark studied her face. This wasn't Robert's little sister. She was a skinny kid with braces. No, this beautiful young woman was not the Anne he remembered.

Anne pulled her hand out of Mark's and covered her mouth with it. "What? Do I have food in my teeth or something?"

Mark snapped out of it. "No, no, of course not. You look different than I remembered.

Anne blushed and dropped her hand. "I hope that's not a bad thing."

Mark shook his head. "No, not at all."

Robert frowned. "Ahh, OK. So I'll take Annie over to her dorm and get her settled in. I'll catch you later."

Anne gave Mark a little wave, and she and Robert drove to the other side of campus, leaving Mark staring after them. Anne was a student here? When he first met her, she seemed a lot younger. The years had been good to her. He hoped he'd run into her again,

and soon.

He didn't have to wait long. Wednesday night, Mark went to the classroom for his weekly Bible study. After a few minutes, Anne walked in. She flashed him a smile, took a seat, and struck up a conversation with a pair of girls sitting nearby.

Mark started to sweat.

This was ridiculous. He'd run this study since he was a freshman. He swallowed the butterflies dancing up his throat and began. After opening in prayer, he was back in his element.

By the time the study ended, Anne had contributed several insights when he asked for opinions. After three weeks of this, Anne made an indelible impression in Mark's brain.

One afternoon, Mark sat alone at a table in the cafeteria, a tray to one side, and a stack of books in front of him. Concentrating on his senior seminar was not going well. He needed to get his mind off Anne. Just as he managed to write a few lines, a familiar voice interrupted him.

"Can I join you?"

Mark glanced up, and his mouth dropped open when he saw the object of his distraction standing over him, tray in hand.

"Ahh, sure, yes. Please do," Mark said.

Anne remained standing. "Are you sure I'm not bothering you?"

"Why would you be bothering me?"

"Because you're studying, and I don't want to interrupt some amazing theological argument," Anne

said.

"Hardly," Mark said. He pushed his books to the side, and Anne set her tray across from him. They found themselves discussing everything under the sun, and for the first time in his life, Mark lost track of time. Finally, he got the courage to ask the question that had been on his mind since before she sat down.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Mark asked.

Anne's eyes twinkled. "Oh, I'm being patient."

Mark wrinkled his brow. "Patient?"

"A wise person once told me, 'If God means for you to be married, then He has someone for you. Don't rush it. Live your life, and when it happens it happens.' So, I'm being patient," Anne said, a mysterious smile on her face.

Mark's mind spun. Something about Anne's words were familiar, but he couldn't quite place them. "I guess that's a no," he said. "Waiting to meet the right guy then?"

"Not exactly," Anne said. "We've met." With that, she picked up her tray and walked out of the cafeteria.

Mark tried to process her words. What did that mean? She wasn't seeing anyone, but she'd already met a guy? And why did what she said sound so familiar? He must have been deep in thought, because the next thing he knew, Robert was sitting across from him, waving his hand in front of his face.

"Earth to Mark," Robert said. "What's going on with you?"

Mark felt his face grow hot. "Guess I'm trying to understand girls."

Robert let out a hoot. "Good luck. Tell me if you figure anything out. I could use some help in that department." He studied Mark's face. "Since when did

you start thinking about girls, anyway? Last we talked about it, you didn't have time."

Mark sighed. "I still don't. But sometimes things happen you don't plan. Besides, we're seniors. I want to have a wife by my side when I'm a pastor. And a family."

"Definitely need a girl for that," Robert said. He pointed a finger at Mark. "In the past three years, the only time you've gone out on a date was when I forced you to bring someone along to double with Katie and me. None of those dates ever went anywhere. You have someone in mind?"

"I've had someone in mind for years," Mark said, "but I've never been able to find her."

Robert lifted a brow. "What does that mean?"

"I've been emailing someone since freshman year. We've never met, but I think she's amazing."

"Seriously?" Robert asked. "Why have you never met?"

"She's always been elusive. I don't even know what her major is, who any of her friends are, or even where she lives on campus."

"What do you know about her?"

Mark sighed. "She loves God, loves the Bible, and we have the most meaningful conversations. She makes me see life in a whole new way."

"So why not try to find her?"

"I'm not sure she wants to be found."

"What's her name?" Robert asked.

"SS," Mark said.

"Have you checked in the student directory for someone with those initials?"

"Of course. Years ago."

"Are you sure she goes to this school?" Robert