

“Captivating. Heart-stopping. Soul-searching. Honest. Challenging. All of these words describe *Letters from My Father’s Murderer*. As the mother of a convicted murderer, I understand the painful process of writing out of the depths of raw emotions, combined with the goal of using the truth to help set people free. If you long to understand and experience true forgiveness, don’t miss this book. It will give you renewed hope, fresh faith, and a platform upon which you can build redemption, restoration, and a new kind of normal.”

CAROL KENT, speaker and author of *When I Lay My Isaac Down*

“I stand amazed! As I finished this book about the journey of a daughter seeking to forgive her father’s killer, I was overwhelmed at the mercy and grace of God who transformed not only the daughter but the murderer as well. *Letters from My Father’s Murderer* examines the darkness within all of our hearts and exposes how light can shine brightly, even in the darkest places, when we seek to find the truth. The real truth. Whether we live in suburbia or peek through twelve-foot barbed wire fences to the outside world, the power of Jesus can set us free.”

TAMMY WHITEHURST, motivational speaker and
founder of Joy for the Journey

“There is no easy fix for life’s most devastating circumstances. I’m grateful to Laurie Coombs for finding the courage to share from the heart about her loss and how her newfound faith in God gave her the strength to endure. If you are currently facing uncertainty or the unthinkable—I encourage you to pick up a copy of *Letters from My Father’s Murderer* and be encouraged. Truly!”

RENEE FISHER, author of *Forgiving Others, Forgiving Me*

“Laurie is a living, breathing example that God does work all things together for good to those who love Him and surrender their lives, their hurts, and their circumstances to Him. In *Letters from My Father’s Murderer*, Laurie invites the reader to journey with her through her pain, her confusion, her questions, and her anger toward the man who murdered her father, and the transforming process God led her through to find true forgiveness and ultimate peace. . . . Through it all, she is now able to take the blessings which God so graciously poured out to her as she kept her eyes on Him throughout

her journey, and to bring them forth to bless others and encourage them in their journey of forgiveness, of trusting God, and of surrendering all to Him. It is a shining testimony that nothing is impossible with God and that Jesus came to redeem mankind to Himself. His desire is to set you free! If you have been wounded and struggle with forgiveness, this book is for you. It is truly transformational.”

KRISTIE CALDER, founder of TRANS4MATION Ministries,
speaker, and certified professional life coach

“This is a story of redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Truthfully, I could not put the book down. I found Laurie’s vulnerability, authenticity, and rawness refreshing. I know that this book will lead many to God’s grace, not only to learn forgiveness, but to find forgiveness. Read this book carefully; you will probably discover some lies buried in your own heart.”

DAN FRANK, lead pastor of Grace Church, Reno, Nevada

“In *Letters from My Father’s Murderer*, Laurie Coombs weaves an intriguing true story—one that captivated me from page one. This story of forgiveness, redemption, restoration, and repentance is full of real and raw emotion that brings the reader to understand their own need for forgiveness or for extending forgiveness. Though not all of us have experienced the horror of losing a loved one to murder, we all deal with our own dark corners of the heart. Laurie’s motives for extending forgiveness and looking through the ‘lens of the gospel’ will echo in my heart for many moments to come.”

SARAH FRANCIS MARTIN, author of *Just RISE UP!*

“When you are a pastor, people come into your office seeking advice. You can only hope that what you offer and the small part you play will be used to the glory of God and for their joy. In these pages, you have just that. It didn’t come easy or without struggle but Laurie has penned her journey of forgiveness in hopes that it can help you do the same, to the glory of God and for your joy.”

BOBBY GROSSI, pastor of Living Stones Church, Reno, Nevada

LETTERS *from*
MY FATHER'S MURDERER

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A JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS

LAURIE A. COOMBS

 **Kregel**
Publications

Letters from My Father's Murderer: A Journey of Forgiveness

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Although this case is a matter of public record, due to the highly sensitive nature of this story, the names of some individuals involved have been changed to protect their identity and privacy. All correspondence has been used with permission; portions of some correspondence have been omitted to ensure privacy. In addition, typographical or other errors have been left in the correspondence to re-create them as closely as possible.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4229-2

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 / 5 4 3 2 1

*For Jesus.
For Mom and Dad.
For Travis.
And for my amazing children.
I love you.*

*The night is far gone; the day is at hand.
So then let us cast off the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light.*

Romans 13:12

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Preface

As I sat across from my dad at a local restaurant, he said to me, “Laurie, when I die, I want people to remember me for who I am. I don’t want anyone turning me into something I’m not.” It was an unusual comment. Enough to make me rest my overstuffed fajita on the plate in front of me and stare at him in bewilderment. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond, so I didn’t.

“It’s just that, when someone dies,” Dad continued to explain after a moment, “people only want to talk about the good parts of that person. But that’s not who they really are. There are good parts and bad parts to every one of us.”

Admittedly, as strange as the comment was, I thought my dad had a point. But I don’t think either one of us knew the significance of those words when spoken. Neither one of us knew what was to come. My dad did not know when he was going to die.

But a month later, he did. Abruptly. Unexpectedly. Tragically. My dad was murdered. And that conversation we had over dinner was engraved upon my heart.

I tried to honor his request. His words weighed heavy upon my heart as I wrote his eulogy a few days after his death, and each time I spoke about his life and death, his words resounded in my mind. But still, the significance of those words eluded me for many years. It wasn’t until I began to write this book—as I began to share my story publicly—that I knew why those words were spoken. I knew then, without a doubt, that the Holy Spirit encouraged my dad to speak those words to me, over

a decade before I needed them, to give me the freedom to write what I have to say here.

Now, I must tell you, throughout this book I share many difficult, intimate details about my dad's murder, but this story is not ultimately about the circumstances behind my dad's death. Its intent is not to sensationalize sin or murder in any way. I honestly think our culture does entirely way too much of that as it is, and the thought of contributing to this unhealthy fascination repulses me.

No. Instead, this book is about redemption. It tells the crazy, messy story of a baby Christian having witnessed enough of God's grace to follow Jesus into the depths of her darkness, knowing good would ultimately prevail. It's the story of two enemies willing to trust God enough to walk down a path neither one wanted to enter.

This book is about learning true forgiveness.

It's about learning to love your enemies.

It's about trading bitterness for joy.

It's about freedom.

It's a book about the grace, mercy, healing, forgiveness, and redemption that can only be given by Jesus. But ultimately, it's a story that displays the glory of our God.

I never thought it possible to see any good come out of my past, let alone to see good emerge out of my dad's murder. That's not to say I abandoned all my hopes and dreams, but I had mistakenly thought any good in my future would result in spite of my past, not *as a result of it*. But I had grossly underestimated the grace of God.

You see, God loves us. He is with us, whether we recognize His presence or not. He is intimately acquainted with the inner workings of our lives. He knows what we've been through. He knows our sorrows. He knows our greatest hopes and dreams. And what never ceases to amaze me is that God continually holds His hand out toward us,

beckoning us to come and receive all He has to offer despite our unruly hearts.

God has not left us to sit in our pain. Jesus came to heal. He is our redeemer, and I know it is His desire to lift each of us out of our despair and bring us in—to a new, better place. A place rich in beauty and blessings.

But I must confess. The path toward redemption isn't easy, and it's certainly not pretty. It requires us to lay ourselves down before God. To take His commands seriously. To not only read the Bible and agree with its precepts in thought, but to *do* the Word of God. To do whatever it is God calls us to do, even when it doesn't make much sense at the time. Even when it means we must sacrifice our will for His. This, my friend, is where redemption begins. The moment we lay down our fear, our pride, and our resistance—the moment we say yes to God—we begin to experience life as He intended, the life Jesus died for us to have.

A life marked by grace.

Now, I know my story is not an easy one to embrace, but I believe it has the power to transform lives. I have witnessed God do the impossible. I have seen Him redeem a situation that seemed without hope or purpose. He has brought good out of evil, love out of hate, and peace out of despair. God has truly worked all things for good in my life. And I believe with all my heart that He will do that for you as well, if you let Him.

I pray you will.

Thank you for entering into this journey with me. For giving me the privilege to speak into your life. It is an honor not taken lightly.

Note: In writing this book, I tried to re-create the events, locales, and conversations to the best of my ability from my memories of them. Due to the highly sensitive nature of this story, I have changed the names of some individuals involved to protect their identity and privacy.

Introduction

I was nearing a major transition in my life. A transition I had looked forward to for many years. Summer had come. With one more semester finished and only two more left before college graduation, I could hardly contain my excitement. I was so close to the time when I'd finally be able to spread my wings and experience all life had to offer. To the time when I'd be on my own. When I could start my career and marry the man I loved.

It seemed my life was finally about to begin.

Travis and I had been dating for nearly three years at this point—all of which were long distance. He was part of my plan. Part of what I looked forward to, and I could hardly wait for the day when our good-byes would be a thing of the past.

It was hard saying good-bye to one another over and over again; but for that summer, we wouldn't have to. Travis was coming home from the university he was attending, and I was practically giddy with excitement. The prospect of being able to spend three whole months in the same city was just about as thrilling as anything could have been.

He ended up working for my dad's construction company when he got back. This arrangement wasn't planned. It just sort of worked out that way, and I was glad it did. My dad had come to know Travis as much as he could over the years, but he didn't really know him. So I liked the idea of them spending more time together. I thought it was about time they became better acquainted.

We saw a lot more of Dad than usual at that time. The two of them

working together provided opportunity and motivation for me to come around a bit more. I lived some thirty-plus miles away from the site where they worked, but I made sure to stop by for lunch or to drop off some Big Gulps every once in a while as an excuse to see them. It was kind of nice having the two most important men in my life together all the time. They really did seem to like one another, and that made me happy.

Outside of work, Travis and I were practically inseparable. It was a little ridiculous, I must say. We just couldn't seem to get enough of one another and were so tired of being apart that we felt we had to make the most of our time together. But Dad and I did do our own thing every now and again. In fact, I invited my dad to take me out to dinner one night when Travis was busy with his family. I did that a lot back then, and Dad always eagerly took me up on it. He seemed to relish every opportunity I gave him to see me.

We talked about a lot of things that night, but one part of our conversation in particular struck me. My dad told me about a woman he'd been dating. He said she was "a good Christian woman." I know it's normal for a lot of people to say things like that, but it wasn't for my dad. Not once had I heard him label someone a "good Christian." Quite honestly, I don't think he gave much importance—or thought, for that matter—to being a Christian at all, up to this point. That's just not who my dad was.

Dad didn't say much about this woman, but he did tell me a little. He seemed smitten. He lit up as he talked about her and the new direction she seemed to be pointing him toward. "I've been going to church again," he told me.

"Oh," I said, a bit surprised.

"And I've been reading the Bible, too."

"Really?" I asked. No one in my family read the Bible, especially my dad. Growing up, we had a Bible in the house, but it was the pristine white, hard leather kind you set on display and never pick up.

He continued to talk. To be honest, I don't remember all he said, but I do remember it had a lot to do with Jesus. And I didn't get it. I smiled and nodded as he spoke, trying to be polite, while thinking, *Whatever's going to make you happy, Dad.* I wasn't trying to be condescending or anything like that. It's just that I had dismissed religion as some elaborate hoax years before. But I had to admit, as I listened to my dad speak about God, he seemed happy. And I wanted him to be happy. I wanted him to find peace in this life—a peace that seemed to escape him ever since his own dad died close to six years before—and if this Jesus thing would ultimately help him, then I was for it. Though admittedly, I didn't quite understand it.

I began to notice subtle changes in my dad after that. He never did talk to me about his faith again, but I saw it in his actions. It was nothing crazy, but there definitely was something different about him.

My dad took us houseboating on Lake Powell toward the end of that summer. A bunch of us ended up going. Travis came along, of course, as did my sister and her family. My Aunt Patsy and Uncle Rick were there with their sons as well.

It was a fun vacation. We spent the week waterskiing, wakeboarding, and tubing. We went swimming and rock jumping. We explored some of the Native American ruins, seeing petroglyphs from days of old. And we also spent quite a bit of time just hanging out with one another, talking or playing board games.

Most of our time that week was spent together, and I liked that, but as the week was coming to an end, I kind of wanted to steal away a bit of time with my dad. While the others were busy doing something else, I motioned to my dad, asking him to take Travis and me out on the boat. He hesitated for a moment and seemed to wonder whether he should invite the rest of the crew, but I quickly mouthed, "No. Let's just go." And we did.

Travis was wakeboarding behind the boat while Dad drove and I watched—ready to hold my orange flag high to tell other boaters to watch out for him if he fell. I smiled as I watched Travis, and I'm not quite sure if the look on my face betrayed the depth of my feelings for him or if my dad was simply thinking about all the time he'd spent with Travis himself that summer, but out of nowhere, my dad said, "I know you're going to marry that guy, and I just want you to know that I approve."

"What?" I asked, shifting in my seat. Travis and I had not broached the subject with Dad yet.

He looked at me. "I just want you to know that I think he's a really good guy."

"He is a good guy," I said.

"I really like him."

"Thanks, Dad," I said, feeling a bit awkward. "I really like him, too." Dad stared at me with a knowing smile for a few moments before I playfully pushed him and said, "Okay, stop being weird." And we both laughed.

The rest of the week went by in a blur, and before we knew it, we were packing up.

Dad was headed home, but we weren't. We had a wedding to go to the following weekend in San Diego, so Travis and one of my cousins and I figured it was a good opportunity to take a road trip.

I didn't want my dad to drive all fourteen hours alone. I felt kind of bad for him, so I rode in his truck to where our routes separated, with Travis and my cousin Jeremy following behind. I don't remember exactly where we were when Dad pulled over to let me out. It was just some dry, dusty little town somewhere in southern Utah. But I do remember receiving one of those great big bear hugs my dad always gave me, as Travis pulled up behind us. Standing there beside the highway, my dad told me he loved me. I thanked him for our trip. And we unknowingly said our final good-bye.

Chapter 1

CAST INTO DARKNESS

I had always thought the world was a beautiful place, a place full of love and joy and light. I was dazzled by life, completely taken by its beauty. But just as I was coming into my own, just as I was about to embark on this thing called life—the very thing that captivated and excited me—I caught my first real glimpse of evil. The unthinkable happened and, for the first time in my life, I became intimately acquainted with the depths of human depravity. It broke my heart. It seemed all the beauty I'd once discovered was simply a veil masking the dark realities of life and, with that veil removed, the only thing left to see was darkness and pain and suffering.

What is wrong with this world? I wondered. *What is wrong with people?*

Aunt Patsy and Uncle Rick were standing in the light of their porch, waiting for Travis and their son, Jeremy, and me as we pulled up to their house in the darkness of early morning. We had driven all night after the wedding in San Diego through some of the most desolate parts of the California and Nevada desert. I had felt something the night before. I didn't know something bad had happened, but I had felt something. Something I cannot even begin to explain. It seemed my spirit knew

what my mind had not yet been told, and all I knew was that I needed to be home.

Before getting out of the car, I paused for a moment to watch my aunt and uncle briefly from a distance. The call we had received sometime in the middle of the night asking us to come to their house had left the three of us feeling uneasy, and the sight of them on that porch only increased the feeling. They seemed anxious—deeply troubled—and that scared me. I love these two people dearly, but I didn't want to see them this time. Not under these circumstances. But as they began walking toward the car, I figured I had no other option but to get out and meet them, and so I did.

The darkness seemed to press in on me as I followed Jeremy up the familiar steps toward his parents' house. Travis trailed behind. "What's going on?" Jeremy asked nervously. The question was left unanswered, perhaps not even heard by his parents, who were both looking past him to me. Aunt Patsy stared at me as I drew near, with brows furrowed and sorrow so deep in her eyes that I could not even begin to understand the depth of pain she was feeling. Tears rolled freely down her cheeks, revealing a truth I did not want to know. And in that moment, I sensed the pain I saw in her eyes would soon become my own.

Shaking my head, I adamantly whispered, "No, no, no, no, no," through my tears.

Travis came near, and I grabbed his arm a bit too tight, I imagine, as my mind began to spin out of control. It was my dad. I knew it.

"Laurie, come inside," my aunt said softly, interrupting my thoughts. I hesitated.

I didn't want to go in. I didn't want to hear what they had to say. All I wanted was to run away. To pretend this wasn't happening. To pretend my life was no different than it was the day before, but I couldn't. I couldn't ignore what was happening. I couldn't go back. I couldn't change any of it. I knew that, and so when Travis gently urged me to

go in a moment later, I did. Though every part of me was screaming inside, I unwillingly walked in and sat in an armchair in the family room to receive news that I knew would most assuredly crush my spirit and change the course of my life forever.

I don't remember how my aunt and uncle began the conversation. I'm sure they cushioned the blow somehow, but all I remember were the words, "Your dad was murdered last night. He's dead."

Travis was holding my hand, and I think I just about crushed it. I was stunned. Completely and totally taken aback. I thought maybe Dad had gotten in a car accident or been hit by a drunk driver or something. But murder? How was that even possible? We lived in a nice, quiet small town. We had a good family. We were honest, good people. How could my dad have been murdered?

"The man who killed your dad is in custody," I remember them saying as a storm raged in my mind. "He admitted to the murder. His name is Anthony Echols."

Anthony Echols. I knew that name. My dad had spoken to me about this man a month before. *That guy is suicidal,* I thought. *He left a note threatening suicide a while back. Why didn't he just kill himself? Why would he kill Dad when he could have just killed himself?* The thought played in my mind over and over until it came screaming out of my mouth. "Why the hell didn't he just kill himself?" I cried out with a few added expletives, as tears ran down my face.

And then I think I just about lost it.

I didn't quite know what to do with myself after that. I felt trapped, weighed down by a reality I could not accept. I could not accept the fact that my dad was gone. Taken by a senseless murderer. Snuffed out like the flame of a candle, just like that. I wanted to lash out. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hit something, throw something. I was so totally and completely full of anger and hatred that it nearly consumed me. And as I sat there in that chair, I felt a tidal wave of grief overtake every

part of my soul, as I came to know intimately the pain I had seen in my aunt's eyes only moments before.

I don't know how long we stayed at my aunt and uncle's house. I don't remember much of anything that happened right after I was told, but I do know that Travis and I ended up down the street at my mom's house sometime later that morning. No one was there. My mom and her husband, Gary, were still on their way home from the wedding, which suited me just fine. I needed to process the whole thing for a while before I talked to anyone else, even my mom.

I stood in the middle of the living room in a fog. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to go from there. I wondered how I'd be able to return to a life that even remotely resembled something normal after what had happened. And as I stared off into the distance, I was struck by just how different everything looked. The whole world seemed to have changed around me. It was light outside by this time, but even the light of day seemed to have grown dim.

Travis and I lay down to try to get some rest. I closed my eyes, hoping to escape the nightmare that had become my reality, but it seemed my thoughts only grew louder in the stillness of that room. Tears escaped through fluttering eyelids, soaking the pillow beneath my head as I wrestled through the pain. I thought about my dad. About what he must have gone through the night before, and it simply tore me up. I wondered if he knew he was going to die. If he was scared. If he died quickly or suffered a slow death. And then it hit me. "He's gone," I whispered to myself. The full weight of what had happened pressed in on me. *I'll never be able to see my daddy again*, I thought sobbing uncontrollably. *I'll never have the chance to say good-bye. Or tell him I love him. He's gone. He's gone forever.*

I didn't know if what I was asking was even possible but, with eyes closed and hands tightly clutched around the sheet covering me, I silently pleaded with my dad to show himself one last time. I had heard stories of people coming in spirit to their loved ones moments after

their death, and I wanted that. I desperately wanted to see my dad one last time. I wanted to know that he was okay. That he was in a better place. So I implored the heavens and begged my dad for a vision. I spent hours, it seemed, silently pleading, *Please . . . please show yourself . . . please*, until I fell silent in exhaustion.

I never did get what I asked for, and I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't disappointed about that, but as I lay perfectly still in that bed, no longer able to plead or cry or think, I did feel something. Even as an unbelieving skeptic, I could not deny the very real, peaceful presence in the room with us that morning. I couldn't explain it, and I certainly did not know what it was, but I felt it. And Travis did, too.

Mom came home a little later, just in time to help us field calls from reporters. None of us had done anything like this before, and we really didn't know what we were doing, but we tried our best, pushing our way through with a sense of duty and a desire to honor my dad. That first day was a long, terrible day. And as it came to a close, we all sat together in front of the TV to watch the news through dry, bloodshot eyes.

My family and I tried to pick up the pieces after that. Mark and Sheri—my brother and sister—and I were the heirs to Dad's estate. We were all in our early twenties at that time, entirely too young to be dealing with all that entailed, especially under these circumstances. And while I can't speak for my brother or sister, I certainly did not feel equipped to be doing what we were doing, so I welcomed all the help my mom and extended family offered. But there was still plenty we had to do on our own.

Here's the thing. After a normal death, there are wills, trusts, probate, distribution of property, and a funeral to arrange, but when someone is murdered, it's a different story altogether. On top of all that normal stuff, there are countless meetings with the DA, preliminary hearings, and a trial to deal with. But with all that aside, I think the most difficult thing I had to endure was the day Dad's house was released back to my family and me.

My dad had been murdered in his home and several days later, after the investigation was complete, it was time to take ownership of the property. I didn't want anything to do with it. I hated the very thought of having to deal with that place, but we had no choice. The house was legally ours.

Most people don't really think about this, but crime scenes are not cleaned up by the sheriff's department. They're given back to the legal owner just as they're found. I'm not sure if that's the case across the board, but that certainly was our experience. And let me tell you: that was a pretty awful thing to deal with.

The prospect of going to that place was daunting. I knew it was going to be ridiculously difficult for me to go into the house. To see the place Dad died. But I also knew that I needed to face the reality of what happened. And I figured if I didn't deal with it, others would be forced to deal with it in my stead.

Travis and I, along with my mom and brother, drove over to the house the day it was to be given back to us. As we pulled up, we saw several of my uncles carrying a bloodstained couch out of the house. I watched them for a moment, then turned away quickly as they loaded it into the bed of a truck headed for the dump. My uncles had apparently received permission from the sheriff's department to show up a bit early to remove a few things before we came so we wouldn't have to deal with them. They were there to carry part of our burden. I didn't know they were going to do that, but I was grateful they did.

Dad's camper was still loaded on his truck from our Powell trip. His boat was parked next to it. It seemed my dad hadn't even had the chance to fully unpack, and that made me sad. I stared at that camper for a moment and thought about all the fun things I had done with my dad growing up. About all the camping trips and the times we spent out on a lake somewhere. So many wonderful memories came to mind and, as I thought of them, I simply couldn't believe they were over. I thought I had so much more time with my dad, but time had run out.

As we got out of the car, Travis grabbed my hand tight and held it close to his body. I was thankful to have him there. He hadn't left my side since we had heard the news several days before, and I don't think he did until fall semester began later that month.

Some of the deputies on the case were standing on the front lawn, waiting for the appropriate time to approach us. My mom and brother walked up to them first; Travis and I slowly followed. I can't begin to explain how I felt in that moment, out in front of that house. No words can capture the full range of emotions. I was terrified, literally trembling with fear, as I looked at that house and thought about what I'd see inside.

I didn't really want to go in there, but I felt like I needed to face it, though I wasn't sure I'd make it through unscathed.

"Are you sure you want to go in there?" I heard Mom ask. She looked concerned. She hated that her children had to go through this whole mess.

"Yeah," I said.

I walked into the garage with Travis, behind Mom and Mark, looking for signs of anything out of the ordinary before going into the house. I seemed to have unintentionally taken on the role of detective, carefully noting every detail as I went. I wanted Anthony put away for life, and so I slowly and carefully searched every corner of that house to ensure nothing was missed.

The house was relatively clean except for the place the couch had been. My uncles had done their best to protect us but, even with the couch gone, the bloodstained carpet gave evidence to what had taken place several days before. I turned away the moment I saw that crimson stain, hoping to protect my heart; but a moment later, I found myself staring at it, wishing things had turned out differently.

The funeral took place a day or so later. I remember standing in front of hundreds of people, looking out over a sea of faces blurred by my tears. My voice quavered as I spoke of my dad. I really did love that

man, and I just couldn't believe I had to say good-bye. Mark and Sheri said a few words as well, as did a few other family members. When the service ended, we dutifully stood at the back of the church to greet those who had come.

"He's in a better place," I heard over and over from guests as they left. But I wasn't entirely convinced they were right. Quite frankly, I didn't know where my dad was, and I think that was the thing I struggled with most.

The hope of heaven is written on every human heart. No one wants to believe this life is all there is to it; but to me, all that stuff in the Bible just seemed too good to be true, like some fanciful fairy tale concocted to tickle our ears and make our hearts feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

I have to admit, as I wrestled with Dad's death, I wanted to believe. For the first time in my life, I wanted to believe in God because ultimately I wanted to believe that my dad was in that better place those people talked about. I was so utterly desperate to know that Dad was okay—that he was somehow still there. But no matter how much I wanted to believe, I couldn't. I saw no proof. And I certainly wasn't about to abandon sound reason in order to make myself feel better.

I walked to a nearby park after the funeral. Travis and my cousins thought I needed to get away from it all, and they were right. I tried to think of other things, but my mind was still spinning on all that had happened, trying to make sense of the whole mess.

Anthony was less than a mile away in a jail cell.

I thought of him.

I thought of my dad.

It all felt so meaningless. Like a waste.

"They say everything happens for a reason," I said aloud as I struggled through confusion and grief and anger, "but how could there be a reason for *this*?"

Nothing good can come out of this, I thought. Nothing.