

Chapter 1

When Tragedy Strikes

George slammed on the brakes, and the car slid to a stop in front of our house. A dozen police cars and ambulances set the night ablaze with pulsating red lights. I pushed open the door on my side of the car, leaped out, and dashed toward the house. Suddenly two ambulance attendants grabbed me.

“No!” I screamed, “I’ve got to get in there! Those are my kids in there!”

But they held me tightly and pushed me across the road to the rear of an ambulance. I turned just as they set me down and saw George at the front door of the house struggling with two policemen who obviously wouldn’t let him inside either.

“Where are my kids?” I asked the attendants who stood guard over me as if I were some dangerous criminal. “Are they in the ambulance?”

I whirled around. But when I looked inside, the gurneys were empty. The woman wouldn’t look me straight in the eye. “They’re still in the house,” she said evasively.

My eyes strained toward the front window, but the house was dark, and I could not detect any activity inside.

“Why won’t they let us inside?” I wondered. “If the kids are hurt, why isn’t anybody in there helping them? If they’re all right, why won’t they let them come out to me?”

I sat there on the back end of the ambulance, trying to be rational, trying so hard to show some self-control, trying to figure out what was happening to my children. All at once it hit me. I turned to search the woman’s eyes.

“They’re all dead, aren’t they?” I said.

The two attendants gazed at the ground. The man kicked at a stone with the toe of his shoe. The woman nodded her head Yes. All of a sudden I felt cold and hollow inside. I wept silently.

George and I had been away only a few hours. We had left our fourteen-year-old son, Steve, in charge of our three younger children: Greg, twelve; Tonya, three; and Stacy, seventeen months. Our oldest child, Stephanie, seventeen, lay in a hospital bed 100 miles away, dying of cancer. We had spent much of our time with her these past few weeks.

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We had needed to get away for just a little while to distract our minds from the turmoil caused by Stephanie's illness. Steve was a responsible young man for his age, so we knew there was no need to worry about the younger children's safety when we left them at home with him that evening. But now they were dead! Gunned down in their own living room.

After notifying relatives, we spent the rest of the night at the police station answering questions. Five days later we buried four of our children at Mount Moriah Cemetery in Kansas City.

Stephanie was all we had left now, and we were with her every waking moment. But in her grief she could no longer fight the cancer that was killing her. Eighteen days after the funeral for the four who had been murdered, we buried Stephanie beside them.

George and I never learned the full story behind the killing of our four healthy children. One of the murderers was identified as Billy Dyer, a fourteen-year-old friend of the family. The police told us only that Billy had intended to steal guns from our home - guns George had acquired as a police officer in Kansas City - and that Billy had told classmates that he would not hesitate to use violence to get them. Following psychiatric evaluation, he was charged as an adult and is serving two life sentences in the Missouri State Penitentiary. His accomplice, twenty-year-old Ray Richardson, Jr., was sentenced to ten years for his part in the killings. We understand he was paroled on January 10, 1984, after serving only six-and-a-half years.*

*In Joy Swift's book, *They're All Dead, Aren't They*, it is stated that Ray Richardson served only two years. This was incorrect. A newspaper reporter who spoke to the prison authorities informed her that Ray had served less than seven years.

Without question, the hardest thing a parent will ever have to face is burying one of his own children - and no parent is ever prepared for that. Only those who have gone through the experience can truly understand the immense pain and emptiness it creates.

Every parent wants his child to have more than he had. We patiently watch our babies grow and develop and mature. We feel pride at their accomplishments and sorrow at their failures, recognizing always that they are human and that we too make mistakes.

Our natural instinct as parents is to protect our brood; to love and nurture our children; to laugh with them, cry with them, and hurt with them; to mold them into fine human beings who will reflect our own values and go on to raise families of their own. The one thing that we

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take for granted is that our children will grow up and outlive us. But sometimes things happen to destroy all that we love and work for.

We as parents tend to relive our youths through our children. They are the instrument by which we fulfill our dreams and desires. When a child dies, his parents' dreams begin to die with him. No death, in any form whatever, is justified when it comes to children. Children simply are not supposed to die. But children do die every day, all across this land, leaving parents with empty arms and shattered dreams, wondering why it had to happen to them. The enormous void left in their hearts leaves a wound that never fully heals. There is an aching deep inside that cannot be eased. But we must learn to live with it because it will never completely go away.

There are those who say that tragedy happens only to those who are strong enough to handle it. This is not true. We get strong because these things do happen to us, and many of us have had to search very hard to find that strength. Most of us learn that, of ourselves, we haven't the strength to see it through alone and must seek that strength from a Higher Source.

Even after years have passed tears will well up from down deep at the injustice of our little ones' deaths. But we must learn to cope with the loss and go on with our lives.

Many people who have heard about the tragedy that devastated our home tell me that they could never be strong enough to handle such an enormous loss. They seem to admire our strength and our ability to cope with it. But I can assure them that we are no stronger than they. We are simply parents, just as they are. Grief really isn't something we want to talk about until we are confronted with it. Only then do we seek to understand it. The leading authorities on grief recovery today are those who have lived through a nightmare tragedy firsthand.

I think that every parent who has lost a child has considered at some point in the grieving process that perhaps he didn't want to go on living. The mental anguish, multiplied by the physical strain involved with burying a loved one, can easily lead to exhaustion and surrender.

Frequently bereaved parents find themselves consoling those who should be consoling them. They may want to run away from it all, but they soon realize that there is no one else to take their place, no one to assume their responsibilities. It seems it would be so much easier to just die with the child than continue to go on through the horrible ordeal. But something within them keeps them going in spite of the vast emptiness they carry.

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You may be a parent who is reading this book years after the death of your child. If you are, this book may help you understand your feelings and answer some of the questions you have carried far too long.

On the other hand, you may be right in the middle of a bereavement crisis, and by reading this book you may be able to overcome your grief a little faster and with a bit more understanding. Just knowing that you are not alone and that your feelings are normal may help. There are millions out there who are hurting just like you. From the day that Cain killed his brother Abel, mothers and fathers have been trying to deal with the guilt and grief that comes with burying a child.

I also hope that others who read this book will be helped in their efforts to minister to grief-stricken families. You have no idea how much they need your help. Many years later, these individuals will remember you as the one who was there when they needed a shoulder to cry on.

In a sense then, this book is for everyone; even if you have never known the sting of losing a child, all of us have lost loved ones. No one knows what the future holds, but we do know that although the world in which we live is ruled by death, there is a God who cares.

If you have never known the pain of losing a child, I fervently hope you never have to go through the experience. But even if you have not, perhaps by reading this book it will help you to know how to be more sympathetic toward those who have sustained the death of a loved one and that you will be able to comfort them in a more meaningful way. There are so many of us who, years later, are still crying for someone to listen.

So, how does one survive the death of a child, and how should those around the bereaved treat them in order to help them overcome their grief more quickly?

In the chapters that follow I hope to answer these questions. However, let me tell you right at the outset that this book will not heal your wound. And yet, I hope to be able to help you better understand the grieving process and learn how to adjust to life without the smiling face of your little one.

One is never the same after the loss of a child, but you can learn to laugh again in between the tears, and you can find hope for tomorrow.