



RAW SURVIVAL

*A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO LIVING
THROUGH LOSS*

JAN ROZGA

FOREWORD BY JON DUEY

PRAISE FOR *RAW SURVIVAL*

“In an era of reality stories, it is rare to find the truth, clarity of experiences, and memories as shared by Jan Rozga in her new book, *Raw Survival*. While I was only a small part of this story of a mother’s joy turned to heartache, I can testify that all of what is recorded in this riveting book is true, and the emotions are real. If you have your own teenagers, hug them every day and tell them you love them, because life can change in an instant.”

—ANTHONY J. SCALZO, MD, *Director, Division of Toxicology, Saint Louis University School of Medicine*

“Incredibly well-written and vulnerable. I felt the hope and love of God as I read *Raw Survival*. Each passage of Scripture shared connects powerfully to surviving grief, regardless of the type of loss experienced by the reader. Very, very important guidance throughout the book. This needs to be shared!”

—SUSIE SHER, *Iowa Governor’s Office of Drug Control Policy*

“Jan speaks directly from her broken heart into the grieving hearts of those devastated by the sudden, tragic death of someone they love. Masterfully written, this book not only pulls the reader in closely as Jan shares her own compelling and devastating story, but it challenges the reader to consider their own grief journey, bringing hope and healing through thought-provoking questions, poignant Scripture passages, and comforting prayers that the reader can personalize as their own when there just are no words.”

—SASHA J. MUDLAFF, *Vice President, Hamilton’s Funeral Home, Des Moines, Iowa*

“When we wander through grief valleys of despair, we doubt anybody understands. Oh, sweet soul, my friend Jan does. Her book *Raw Survival* is a heartbreaking, hope-gushing story about the healing love of Jesus. She doesn’t sugarcoat the hard; instead, she shares with brave transparency, beautiful authenticity, and a kindred vibe. By inviting us into her own raw survival, Jan helps us discover healing and hope in ours. What a gift.”

—TINA SAVANT GIBSON, *contributing author to Let Your Light Shine: Being a Light in a Dark World*

“This book is really well done and it’s going to bless, comfort, and impact so many people at their point of need. I love the balance of spiritual elements and the raw, honest trust in our God. It is boldly transparent and clearly presents the Gospel.”

—KAREN LANGSTRAAT, *Regional Director, Stonecroft*

“I definitely recommend this book to others. It takes a poignant look at the grieving process and gives readers important strategies needed to navigate it: counseling, journaling, prayer, connecting with others who are grieving, self-care, etc. *Raw Survival* is a tool that will positively impact the mental health of readers.”

—TINA CHAPLIN, *School Counselor*

“I’m beyond amazed. As I read *Raw Survival*, I tried to put my own grief aside, but it was simply impossible. Time and time again, I felt God saying, ‘Come to me, trust me,’ and I found courage and hope that I will be able to look back after a few years and see progress in my own battle with grief. The realism and raw emotion pour off the pages.”

—VICKY OHNEMUS, *grieving parent*

“God is going to use this book to minister to so many who need the hope and truth of Jesus Christ in their moments of deepest pain and loss.”

—MIKE SHIELDS, *District Superintendent, Evangelical Free Church of America*

“This book is real, it’s truth, and it offers *hope*! There is a tremendous ministry between its covers, making it a great gift to share with someone who has lost a loved one! The reader sees how God can (and will) meet us where we’re at and continue to bring healing. Great guidance for dealing with the thoughts and emotions of grief.”

—SANDY BLOEM, *grieving grandparent*

"I am dealing with the emotional loss of a close family relationship. Although I would never compare my struggle with the loss of a child, I find great hope in the words and scriptures in *Raw Survival* and appreciate Jan's transparency in sharing personal struggles, like needing a nightcap before bed to keep her mind from wandering. It is relatable and makes me feel less alone."

—*JAKE LETTINGTON, friend of David Rozga*

"Jan brings to life an unfathomable loss and how God steps in and 'carries' us through our biggest struggles. *Raw Survival* shows how he gives us our daily bread by speaking through his word and the special people he has put in our lives. Jesus is the only hope and peace in these times!"

—*ADAM TIMMERMAN, Director, Northwest Iowa Fellowship of Christian Athletes*

"A wonderfully inspiring book that is a real page-turner! The information is presented in a straightforward manner that is easy to read, well organized, and Jesus centered. 'The Truth Companion' is a tremendous asset to help readers distinguish the lies that come to them and turn them around with the power of God's truth. Powerful!"

—*MARGE THOMPSON, author of I Love You Anyhow*

"Exceptional content that is worthy of publishing. Specific guidance for walking through grief, encouragement for readers to lean on God's Word as a foundation for healing, and the 'First Aid for Your Grieving Heart' sections, with prayers and journal prompts, make this book extremely practical for anyone suffering from loss."

—*LINTON LUNDEEN, Pastor of Care & Counseling, Valley Church*

"With profound vulnerability Jan ushers the reader through the depths of her loss and the truths she found along the way. *Raw Survival* is a beacon of hope and healing for the grieving and non-grieving alike."

—*ZACH SIKORA, Licensed Clinical Psychologist*

“I believe the deepest teaching is drawn from the well of one’s lived experience—particularly painful experience. Jan has survived the greatest pain any parent can imagine. *Raw Survival* is her gift to us. It contains the lived lessons that will sustain each of us through our own dark night of the soul. More than a book, it’s a lifeline and it’s an honor to commend it to you.”

—*RYAN HUGULEY, author of 8 Hours, or Less: Writing Faithful Sermons Faster*

“Jan Rozga’s stirring book is a gift of heart-rending transparency and ultimate hope for anyone who has suffered deep loss—and for those who seek to support them. The chapters are not theory. Each one is intensely honest and real. The depth and breadth of her empathy and wisdom are truly life-giving. Highly recommended!”

—*QUINTIN STIEFF, Lead Pastor, Valley Church, Des Moines, Iowa*

Raw Survival

Raw Survival

A Practical Guide to Living through Loss

JAN ROZGA

Foreword by Jon Duey

RESOURCE *Publications* • Eugene, Oregon

RAW SURVIVAL

A Practical Guide to Living through Loss

Copyright © 2021 Jan Rozga. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Resource Publications

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-7252-9987-0

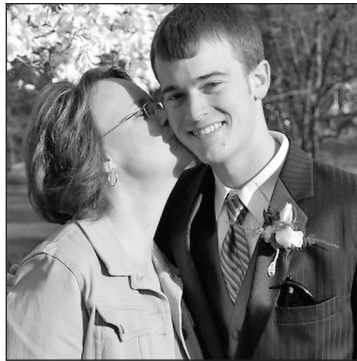
HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-7252-9988-7

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-7252-9989-4

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

07/14/21

For my David.
These pages hold the shattered pieces of my heart,
left in the wake of your death.
They hold the messy details of my journey to survive life without you.
And incredibly, they hold the joy of keeping the promise I made to you
(and to God) under the stars in the wee hours of that horrible night.
Forever your mom—I love you, sweet boy.



*“My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.
The waves of death swirled about me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called to the Lord; I called out to my God.
He reached down from on high and took hold of me;
he drew me out of deep waters.
You, Lord, are my lamp; the Lord turns my darkness into light.
It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure.
The Lord lives! Praise be to my Rock!
Exalted be my God, the Rock, my Savior!”*

2 SAMUEL 22:3, 5-7, 17, 29, 33, 47

Contents

<i>Foreword by Jon Duey</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii

PART I: SURVIVING THE FIRST DAYS

Chapter 1	Oh God!	3
Chapter 2	Our David	11
Chapter 3	Shaking from the Inside Out	20
Chapter 4	Saying Goodbye	28

PART II: SURVIVING THE FIRST YEAR

Chapter 5	Now What?	37
Chapter 6	Fighting for Control	45
Chapter 7	Checkmarks	55
Chapter 8	The Same Power	66

PART III: SURVIVAL AS A WAY OF LIFE

Chapter 9	Simmering Pots: <i>Grief and Marriage</i>	77
Chapter 10	Repeat Mourning	89
Chapter 11	The Tide of Ministry	100
Chapter 12	When the Bumper Sticker Fades	110

PART IV: SEEKING A SURVIVING LEGACY

Chapter 13	Beauty from Ashes	123
Chapter 14	The David Mitchell Rozga Act	132

PART V: REDISCOVERING JOY

Rediscovering Joy	151
-------------------	-----

PART VI: THE TRUTH COMPANION

Introduction to a Topical Tool for Crushing Lies	155
I Can't Pray	157
My Identity is Gone	160
I Could Have Stopped This	163
I Will Never Sleep Well Again	166
Fear Controls Me	169
My Loved One May Not be in Heaven	172
I Will Never Feel Content Again	175
My Faith is Too Weak	178
I Am Alone in this Darkness	181
I Can Get through this on My Own	184
I'm Failing to Meet the Needs of My Family	187
If I Worry Enough Something Will Change	190
What Others Think of My Grief Matters	193
Grieving During the Christmas Season Dishonors God	196
If I Don't Say Yes to Everything, then I'm Failing to Heal	200
Death will Always Define My Life	204
Grief Has Power Over Me	207
Our Marriage Is Never Going to Make It	210
We Shouldn't Desire Sex When We're Grieving	213
I Can't Celebrate Something that My Loved One Won't Get to Experience	217
I Don't Need to Socialize with Others	220
I'm Too Broken to Help Others	223
Nobody Will Ever Understand or Make Me Feel Better about My Loss	227
I'm Forgetting My Loved One	230
I Just Need to "Get Over It"	233
People Don't Care Anymore	236
Nothing Good Can Come from This	239
It's Easier Not to Know the Dangers that Threaten My Family	242
Telling My Story is Futile and/or Self-Serving	246
<i>Appendix A: God's Free Gift of Eternal Life</i>	251
<i>Appendix B: Resources for Walking through Grief and Understanding Youth Culture</i>	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	261

Foreword

by Jon Duey

David's youth pastor, worship partner, and friend

Dear David, I miss you.

Wow, that's hard to say.

What I wouldn't give to sit down and talk with you.

To hear you laugh. To play guitar together.

To pray over your friends. To talk football.

I still like the Bears. Come on, you knew that wasn't going to change! And I never learned those guitar leads, even after all the lessons you gave me. Nope.

I don't know a single one. As I think about it, I wonder if I ever really cared about learning those leads or if the lessons were far more about spending time together!

David, you would be proud.

Proud of your brother for growing into a mature, caring, funny, intentional man of God.

Proud of who he is. Proud of what he is doing, and of what he stands for.

And you would be so proud of your parents.

Losing you has been hard on them. But wow, God is using them in amazing ways. They have chosen to intentionally lean into their grief and pain so God can use their story—your story—for his glory. It's pretty incredible to watch.



As I read this book and relive the moments that I shared with David's family in those first frantic hours of losing him, and in the years to follow, two words come to mind. Hard and Hopeful.

It is HARD for me to read. It's hard because it reminds me of that day. Of the phone call from Dan and the scene at the Rozga home. Of the blur and pain and numbness of that week, that month, that summer. As David's youth pastor, I was shattered. As youth pastor to the dozens of broken kids and families left with only questions, I had to push through. It is hard to read because being reminded of their pain, brings back my own. Pain of loss. Pain of rejection. Pain of abandonment. Pain of life.

Yet, it is HOPEFUL.

God's faithfulness.

His nearness.

His provision.

Right in the middle of the mess, the hurt, the impossible. . .there is so much HOPE.

If God can redeem even this; then there is nowhere and no situation where he cannot bring beauty from ashes. Even mine. Even yours.

As you read the pages of this book, you will be confronted with your own brokenness, your own hurt and your own pain. I was. Not only did it stir up the grief of losing David, it stirred-up the heartache of my parents' divorce, of miscarriage, of the tragic death of my brother-in-law and the too-soon loss of my father-in-law. It stirred the pain of seeing loved ones struggle with deep depression and anxiety. . .of seeing people I love take their own lives.

Left on my own, I have default reactions to such grief.

I IGNORE IT. Just pretend it isn't there. Pretend it didn't happen. Pretend it doesn't affect me. When in reality, I am wounded at the core. And because I choose to ignore it, I develop all sorts of unhealthy habits and actions to mask my grief.

OR I GIVE IN TO IT. The grief becomes so overwhelming and all-encompassing that I let it take over; my emotions, my actions, how I react to people, how I work.

Ignore it? Give in to it? Either way, grief holds me captive.

BUT, God's Word (and this book) remind me that there IS another way.

A BETTER way.

There is a way to WALK THROUGH IT.

I've read that one of the unique things about bison is that they are made to walk through storms. If you picture them, they've got lots of fur covering them. When they sense a storm coming, they gather together and walk straight into it. They charge through the storm to the other side of it. Because all storms pass. Cows, on the other hand, try to escape by running away from the storm. And instead of escaping, they find themselves

running right along with it. Stuck in the intensity. Unable to get away. When we face our storm head-on and walk straight into it, like the buffalo, we find ourselves closer to the other side; closer to peace and calm.

I am learning that the same is true with grief and hardship.

Don't ignore it. Don't pretend it away. Don't linger in it.

Gird yourself up in the strength of the Lord.

Gather your people around you.

And walk straight toward it.

Limp through the storm.

Crawl through the storm.

Just keep moving.

You can't shortcut recovery, so choose to walk through the storm.

And know that hope and healing is ultimately only found in Jesus.

I know it's a church answer.

For you, it may be a hollow answer.

But it's true. Trying to find hope or healing anywhere else is like trying to catch the wind.

Hope and healing is found in the PRESENCE of Jesus. He is near. Scripture tells us that he is not far. He's not somewhere else. Rather, he is near. He's as close as your next breath. And for the believer, he's not just near you; he's in you. At the very center and core of who you are.

Hope and healing are found in the PROMISE of Jesus. God keeps his word. He fulfills his promises. And he promises so many things to his children:

All things work together.

Your story isn't over.

Victory is yours in him.

Goodness will follow you.

Blessings and favor are yours.

His promises will carry you through all situations and all circumstances.

Hope and healing are found in the POWER of Jesus.

The cross is empty. The grave is empty. Jesus has power over sin.

Power over brokenness.

Over grief.

Over desperation.

Jesus HAS power. And that power is IN you.

His PRESENCE, his PROMISE, and his Power are made known by his Word.

By his Spirit. And by his people.

These truths, along with so many practical tools for living through loss, are explained in *Raw Survival*. This book delivers the ANCHOR and LIFE VEST your grieving heart needs.

Are pain and grief causing you to feel like you are drifting aimlessly, with nothing to tether you to life, to hope, or to healing? Let the words in this book be your ANCHOR. An anchor to the truth of God's Word. An anchor to the promises of God's Word.

Are pain and grief causing you to feel like you're drowning in deep waves? Are the hurt, the emotion, the grief just too overwhelming? Allow the following pages to throw you a LIFE VEST. To remind you that there is more life to live. There is healing to be found. There is a path to restoration. And a vision for life that is bigger than your immediate suffering.

Do you need hope?

Real. Tangible. Earthy. Messy. Hope?

Take time to read this book. More than that, work through it.

Read it slow.

When you get to the hard parts, take time to sit in it.

Ask people to surround you with prayer as you read it.

Do the work. Answer the questions. Especially the ones you don't want to answer.

As you read . . . as you work . . . as you pray . . . know that hope is on the way.

Darkness is but a fleeting shadow.

And light is on the horizon.

Acknowledgments

To my husband Mike. I could never have imagined when we said our vows so long ago that we would experience the profound loss of our son. Living without him will continue to challenge us until we meet him again face to face. I'm so thankful for your love and support through it all. Thank you for consoling me when I was down, encouraging me when I doubted myself, praying for me always and believing in me. I love you.

To my son Daniel. I can't imagine what it was like to lose your brother at such a young age. You could have chosen many unhealthy alternatives to cope with grief, but you chose to cling to Jesus. God gave you wisdom and you took it to heart. You'll never know how much you've ministered to me during this journey. David is proud of you, Daniel, and I know he would love Savannah.

To our parents and extended family. Spending time with family was so important to David and he loved you all so much. I will always be thankful for the precious memories you shared with him. Thank you, Mom, for encouraging me when I questioned whether or not I was strong enough to relive and share the most intimate parts of my broken heart. You said, "David's worth it Jan. He would want you to help others and I know he's saying, 'Go Mom go.'" Thank you so much for that.

To Kristi Dusenbery, my editor and one of my very best friends. Through this whole process you've given me an abundance of emotional encouragement so that I could keep my head above water. You reminded me of the 'why' when I doubted myself; to honor David's life and record God's faithfulness. The following pages wouldn't be possible without your love, wisdom and support. God knew I needed you and we make a good team. You are truly a gifted editor and a forever friend.

To our dear friends. Lori and Jerry Lehr, thank you for loving David as one of your own and grieving alongside us. DeDe Rankin, thank you for feeding me saltines when I was too weak to eat. And yes, for sitting beside me and watching, to ensure I actually ate them! Martha Miller, your example of survival after losing your Sam inspired me so many years before I lost David. I love you friend. We are forever connected.

To Dawn Johnson, thank you for all of your “hello friend” texts, and encouraging me to earn “checkmarks” as I faced life’s challenges without David. Thank you for capturing the joy of David’s high school graduation celebration and for taking our last family pictures with him. I will cherish them forever.

To Pastor Jon Duey. I thank God for you, Jon. You’ve made an eternal impact on David and Daniel as their youth pastor and friend. I’ve not met anyone as passionate about young people as you. David loved laughing with you, worshiping with you, and razzing you about the Bears, and he would be so proud that you authored the Foreword of this book.

To Dave Turnball and Adam Timmerman. Dave, thank you for introducing me to Adam, Green Bay Packer alum. And Adam, thank you for providing input on the manuscript and for your encouragement. David would be thrilled that his Mom is hobnobbing with a Green Bay Packer and that most of our correspondence ended with “Go Pack Go!” The Green Bay Packer fanatics in the Rozga family are over the moon.

To so many others. Carrie Leimbach, you will always have a special place in my heart! Jake and Holly, Sean and Shelby, Anne Woodward, and Cheryl—thank you for letting me share. Joel, your counsel continues to be a godsend. Our GriefShare family, your support and honesty and shared-struggle continue to get us through. The staff of Overton Funeral Home, the emotional tenderness you offered during our darkest days meant more than you can imagine. An amazing group of Beta Readers, your support and meaningful feedback greatly enhanced the content of this book. Mike Shields and Ryan Huguley, thank you for your spiritual wisdom and professional guidance. To the *Wild Bible Study Girls of Warren County, Iowa*—we’re not really wild but I love you and I’m forever blessed by your love and prayers.

Our mission to protect others from the devastating effects of synthetic drugs introduced us to so many government officials and passionate citizens who care deeply about the wellbeing of others. After David died, Governor Culver initiated a formal public campaign to educate Iowans of the dangers of K2 and other synthetic drugs. Governor Branstad’s support led to the signing of Iowa’s first synthetic drug bill into law. U.S. Senator Charles Grassley led a bipartisan effort, with the support of Senator Dianne Feinstein, to share David’s story and to introduce and see signed into law

the David Mitchell Rozga Act, which bans the chemicals used to make K2. Additional thanks goes to Judge Mark Schlenker, Brian and Susie Sher, Chief Steve Bonnett, Kent Sorenson, Gary Kendell, Mark Schouten, Dale Woolery, Peter Komendowski, Linda Kalin, Dr. Edward Bottei, Mark Ryan, Dr. Anthony Scalzo, and Veronica and Devin Eckhardt.

Finally, and perhaps most of all, to every parent who has buried a child. To every person grieving a precious friend or family member. To every family who has lost a child to K2 or equally dangerous substances. May God bless you and keep you as you walk this long and difficult road. You are not alone. There is hope for healing. And even though I don't know you, I will always pray for you.

PART I

SURVIVING THE FIRST DAYS

Chapter 1

Oh God!

It was springtime. The snow was finally gone and green shoots were just beginning to peek up through the cold ground. High school seniors could taste the freedom of graduation and were anxious for the future. Parents of high school seniors were planning the graduation parties they'd been anticipating for years: the right decorations, the right photos, invitations, senior pictures, cake, and (of course) getting the house just right. Such an exciting time.

It was no different for us. Our oldest son, David, was a senior and we were scrambling. *March 2010. Already? Where did the years go? He's graduating in three months?* Not gonna lie, I was emotional. So, there I was, at the party store, list in hand. The mission was to find purple and gold plates, napkins, tablecloths, decorations, cutlery . . . you name it. *Focus. Okay, everything purple and gold. Should all of the napkins be purple? All gold? A mix of the two? Why is this such a difficult decision? It's napkins!* The ugly lip-tremors came first, and then the tears. I was overwhelmed. Not with napkins, but with the idea of buying stuff for his going-away party. Yes, I know it was a celebration, but it was also "goodbye."

A few people stared at me from the card aisle but I didn't care. I knew I'd still have my husband Mike and our younger son Daniel at home, but the anticipation of missing David was too much. He was already enrolled at the University of Northern Iowa, where he would study business and room with one of his best friends from high school. They had big plans for the dorm

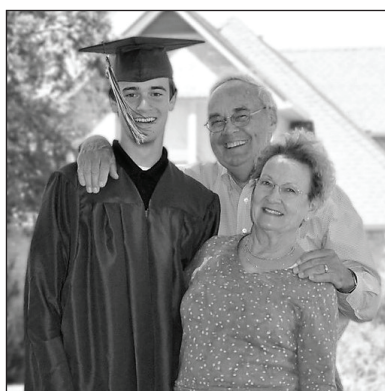
room and they were so excited. We were excited for them too . . . and so proud. Still, I couldn't imagine not seeing him every morning. Not going to band concerts or baseball games. Not having to yell at him for having laundry all over his bedroom or leaving the kitchen a mess. Not eating together every night. Maybe it was selfish, but it was real. I would miss all of it.

Enough with the pity party, Jan. It's time to buy napkins. I took a deep breath, brushed away the tears, and finished shopping. But who was I kidding? If the cashier asked anything about the party, I was toast.

The party was awesome. My parents came and my brother drove in from Colorado with my niece, Anna. Mike's whole family came from Wisconsin. Dozens of friends showed up. And David greeted each one with a hug and smile. The camera captured it all.



David with grandpa and grandma Rozga.



David with grandpa and grandma Mitchell.

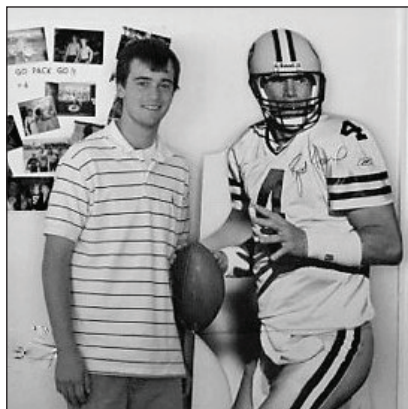
I'm pretty sure I set a personal record that day by not peeing for several hours. Seriously. I know, TMI, but I didn't want to miss anything. . . . Not one single photo . . . not one. *Someday, he'll appreciate my cat-like paparazzi skills. You're welcome.* I took hundreds of photos. So many special memories for him to remember. Special memories for us to remember, too.



A treasured father-son moment.

One detail David cared about most was the food. It had to be BBQ and it had to be catered by a local guy who made the best. So we hired him, along with a local gal who made the best sugar cookies, each frosted in purple or gold . . . of course. No cake, which was weird to me, but we wanted it to be all about what David wanted that day. He chose bottled water with flavored add-in packets, cups of purple and gold M&Ms at each table, and a soft-serve ice cream machine . . . which was a huge hit.

As for the decorations—or more specifically, *thee* decoration—it was standing proudly between the tables of food and the tables of all-things-David. It was a life-size cardboard cutout of Green Bay Packer legend Brett Favre. That's right. Too much? Oh yeah! Most guests just smiled and shook their heads because they knew David was an extreme Packer fan. By the end of the party, there were no unwanted drawings on Brett's face, so I considered it a win. Let's just say, in addition to being the official photographer that afternoon, I also kept a close eye out for any disgruntled Vikings or Bears fans. It was all part of the job that day.



David with his favorite guest of the day.

David's favorite gift arrived in the back of a pickup truck, delivered by his friends. A refrigerator. No, not a dorm fridge for college, as one might expect. This was a full-sized (rescued from somebody's curb) refrigerator. Why? I have absolutely no idea, but David laughed so hard. His friends laughed so hard. And everyone at the party roared. We never did find out why they did it, but I'm pretty sure it had everything to do with the priceless look on David's face when it was delivered. Mike, on the other hand, stood there wondering how the heck we were going to get rid of it. I just kept snapping pictures. It was awesome!

As the last guest drove away, David told me that his mouth hurt from smiling. So did mine. It was a cloud-nine sort of day, and it left us with so much joy. We were incredibly proud of the young man he had become and excited to see him chase his dreams. But the festivities weren't over. David thought all the pictures had been taken, but wait, there's more!

Knowing our extended families would be in town for the weekend, I made plans for family pictures to be taken after graduation. The only photographer I trusted for the job was my friend Dawn. She has twin boys who went to school and played sports with our younger son, Daniel, and her photos always amaze me. Not only does she take great photos; she also has what it takes to keep our families in check, which is no easy task. I warned everyone in advance about getting photos taken and made it clear that there would be no eye-rolls allowed; before, during, or after the shoot, thank you very much.

It turned out to be a gorgeous day. Everyone was there and they were all good sports about it. Dawn took hundreds of pictures: this family, that family, the whole family, posed, candid, and action shots. The results were

incredible and timeless reminders of a perfect weekend. We had no idea they would be our last family portraits ever taken . . . with David.



Our last family photo with David.

The following Saturday, he left home early to drive to St. Louis, where he would join his girlfriend, Carrie. Her family had lived in St. Louis prior to moving to Iowa and most of her friends and extended family still lived there, so that is where they would have her graduation party. It was a big deal for David to make such a long drive alone, but we knew it was a great chance for him to get to know her family and for them to get to know him. After all, it was a week of cutting apron strings, right? He made it there without a problem, and he and Carrie returned home the next afternoon. Again, I was proud (and relieved) to have him back safely. . .and without a speeding ticket! After taking Carrie home and visiting with her mom about mowing their lawn for the summer, he came home briefly before heading out to spend some time with friends. He'd be home later so I could catch up with him and hear all about it.

I was enjoying the afternoon sun on the deck, talking on the phone with a friend, when I heard him pulling up the driveway, so I headed inside to let him know that I was finishing a call and then we could talk about his weekend. *But, where was he?* I looked out the front window and saw his red truck parked in the usual spot. But he was nowhere to be seen, so I stepped outside to look. He was walking near the prairie grass that borders our yard so I held the phone to my chest, to ask what he was doing. He waved his finger in a circular motion, his lips saying, "Just walking around." I didn't think much of that either, so I went back to the deck to finish my phone conversation.

Several minutes later, I heard a pop. "I'm sure it was just a firecracker," I told my friend. I mean, he just got back from the fireworks capital of the Midwest and it wouldn't be uncommon for him to light fireworks off in the yard, just to annoy me. *Of course it was a firecracker.* I shrugged it off.

But as quickly as I dismissed it, I was flooded with a sinking, sick feeling. *Was it a firecracker?* I ran to look where he'd been walking. He wasn't there. I went inside. I didn't see him. Room by room, I yelled his name. Nothing. *He should hear me.* And then I smelled it. . . smoke. I continued to call his name, but now I was frantic. *Where are you, David!* The sinking feeling was gone and horror made it hard to breathe.

I opened the basement door. Gunpowder. *What? Gunpowder?* The smell got stronger as I walked down the stairs. And then I saw him. And I saw what happened. *Oh God!* He had taken his life. I didn't have to take another step to know that he was gone. He was gone and there was nothing I could do. I was hysterical as I stumbled up the stairs, the phone still in my hand. *Oh God! Oh my God!*

What I experienced in that room was horrific. And the crushing truth of it will stay between God, David, and me. I only shared it with two people, Mike and my counselor. . . and it took a long time to get there.

Everything about me was overwhelmed. Somehow, I got to the deck and yelled for our neighbor, hoping he was working outside and would hear my cries. He wasn't. I dialed 911. My fingers felt like lead. I could barely press the buttons. It was unreal. I told them to hurry . . . even though I knew it was too late.

I needed to call Mike. He and Daniel were fishing at a friend's farm pond, 45 minutes away. *How do I tell my husband that his son is dead? How do I tell him he took his own life? How does he tell Daniel that his brother is gone? How?* There are no words for that. I knew what I saw was real, but how could any of this be real? I can't imagine what the ride home was like for them.

Sirens howled in the distance, getting louder and louder. I couldn't move. Ambulance and police lights flew over the crest of the hill, screaming down the long road that leads to our driveway. I still couldn't move. It was like I was being pulled under by ocean waves, fighting to breathe.

When Mike and Daniel arrived, we just held each other and cried, in absolute disbelief. What else could we do? Nothing. I don't even think we spoke. There was nothing to say. The paramedics finished what they had to do. The police asked the questions they had to ask. And then we stood in the yard and watched the ambulance drive away. No sirens this time. No speeding. They just drove off . . . in silence. With my son. He was gone.

RAW JOURNAL ENTRY

October 2010—Five months after burying our son

It is a cold, blustery day and I finally feel like I can jot down some of the feelings I am experiencing. I have kept a journal off and on since I was in elementary school. When in the writing mode I found it to be a great release. A place to put my heart on paper. My hands shake as I write this now. After David died, I thought about writing down my thoughts, but I just couldn't bring myself to verbalize them, let alone write them. I wasn't capable of either it seemed. I couldn't even pray for the longest time. All I could say was, "Oh God," with the heaviest heart I have ever felt, and somehow that was the best prayer I could pray to the Lord. Just "Oh God." It spoke a thousand words from my heart to his.

My prayers continued to be short words. Nothing more, because that's all I was capable of. I realized after a few weeks of this that even though my prayers were merely a few short words at a time, the Lord heard every last syllable uttered. And then one of God's promises hit me. . .Romans 8:26–27, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts, knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

I had heard this scripture a million times during sermons at our church or in Bible studies, but I had never personally owned this myself because I had never experienced this before. I am usually never at a loss for words. Why should my prayer life be any different? But at this time in my life, losing my precious David, I could better understand the profound truth of this scripture, and believe me, I was banking on it. It was the only glimmer of hope I had.

FIRST AID FOR YOUR GRIEVING HEART

Healing Prayer

Dear Jesus, I don't understand why my loved one is gone or how to move forward. You are the one who knows the beginning and the end (Isaiah 46:10) and you also know the pain of my heart (Psalm 56:8). I need your help, Lord, hold me in your arms and bring peace to my frightened heart.

Healing Truth

Go to page 157 to access scripture and daily prayers to help you crush the lie that *you can't pray*, and to unleash the healing power of God's truth.

Healing Words

Embrace your grieving heart today by writing the raw details of your own story. It will pierce your heart to relive it, but it will also bring relief as you express your raw emotion in writing. What do you remember about the day your loved one died? What about the days or weeks just before and after?