





This book is in memory of our precious baby girl, Whitley Reese, who went to Jesus before she was even born. I will love you until the sun turns cold and all the stars fall from the heavens.

When my grandparents died, I knew it was hard for my father. He had a very strong connection to both of them. He'd talk about them and tell us his childhood memories of them. But I never saw him cry or exhibit any pain over their loss. I assumed that because they were elderly when they died, losing them was just a part of growing older and that people had it in them to deal with that.

I've learned that it's not as easy as people make it seem to be. It doesn't matter how old you or your parents are when they die, their passing is one of the most difficult things in the world to deal with. And it seems that it doesn't matter what culture you come from, people tend to hold in their emotions while in front of others. People seem to think that they need to be strong for others. I know. I've done this.

I don't want my own children to know I'm in pain over the loss of their Papa Reese. If they are around and Papa Reese is brought up, I'll put on a strong face, and even muster up a little grin and talk about him lovingly. But then I may need to rush to the bathroom to let go of the tears in private.

So does it get any easier with time? Not for me. It's like I'm on a roller coaster. I have times where the pain eases and I don't think of him as often. Then, another phase of intensity begins again. Almost everything reminds me of my Dad. I think a lot in my head and somehow most of my thought processes end up leading me to my father even when they start out having nothing to do with him at all. And the minute the thought of him comes into my head, that's it. It's worse in the mornings, and evenings, coming to and going home from work. But it can happen almost anytime. When I'm sad about something I remember my Dad because he's the person I'd always go to for advice or consoling. When I'm

happy about something I remember my Dad because he was always the first—and sometime only—person I really wanted to share my good news with. When I'm just normal I remember my Dad because it would have been nice to stop by his house for a few minutes on my way shopping to say hello or even to phone him up.

The two dreams I have had have been intense as well. You will read about these two dreams in my story. These two dreams have actually had significant meaning in my life—a premonition for something that he was warning me or praising me would happen in my future.

It must be important for our subconscious mind to convince itself that our loved ones are in a better place. This must be part of the healing process. I wake up from these dreams and sad days, missing my father terribly but feeling happy for him. It does help to think of him in Heaven.

I remember exactly one week before Dad passed, he came up to visit me and the kids. He took us to lunch, then came back to our house and helped me fix Lilly's broken jewelry box. He told me that he had been down to the farm the day before and had had a vision of his grandma on the porch. He was in the front yard on the tractor. He looked over to the house and could see her on the front porch, waving her hands and motioning for him to come to her. Was this, too, a premonition on his part? Maybe so. But, only God knows that answer.

October 18, 2010:

Alissa,

I LOVE YOU and ALWAYS WILL.

Hope you have a good week.

Love,
Dad

Little did I know this would be the last correspondence between my father and me. Five days later, his life would tragically come to an end.

I remember that Saturday like it was yesterday. My husband, the kids, and I decided to wake up early and visit the local pumpkin patch, Stewart Farms. We arrived at Stewart's around 9a.m. I had my cell phone with me, but as we pulled into the parking lot I noticed my phone was blinking low battery. I decided to turn it off and put it in the cup holder. As we parked, I had an eerie feeling about not taking my phone with me. Despite this, I chose not to take it. James and I jumped out, got Lilly and Wyatt out of the backseat, and headed to the front gate.

It was an unusually warm Saturday for October. We paid our way inside and rode the tractor over to the farm animals. We bought a few bags of animal feed and let Lilly and Wyatt feed the animals while I took pictures with James' new digital camera. After that, we followed the corn maize around to the front and went into the store. There, we bought honey (the kids had never tried honey before) and Chap Stick

for Lilly (her favorite thing to buy). We went out to the pumpkin fields, found a few pumpkins to purchase, paid the man, and left.

Due to the eventful morning, I had forgotten to check my phone for any missed calls or messages on the drive home. As soon as we arrived at our house, I got the kids out of the car and went inside to cook lunch. I inadvertently left my phone in the car. We ate our lunch while James and I discussed whether or not to attend our nephew's batting cage birthday party at 3p.m. Since Lilly was four at the time, we decided she was old enough to attend. Wyatt, not quite being two, would stay behind with me at the house. I quickly went to the closet, found Sulli's present, and wrapped it. James and Lilly headed out.

Wyatt and I went to the bedroom to watch TV while I folded clothes on the bed. About an hour had gone by and the phone rang. The caller id on the TV showed up an Anderson area phone number but no name. I knew my Dad's sister and her family lived in Anderson but it wasn't a number of theirs that I knew. I decided to answer the phone anyway.

"Alissa? This is Kelly. My Dad has something to tell you." She handed her father (a medical doctor) the phone.

"Alissa? This is Uncle Mike. Where are you?"

"At home," I replied.

"Who is there with you?" he asked.

"Just Wyatt, why?" I questioned.

I will never forget the words that rang out at that moment. "Apparently your father went down to the farm earlier this morning."

He paused for a second then continued, "There has been an altercation at the farm."

There was complete silence.

Uncle Mike finished by telling me, “Your father passed away earlier today. Your cousin Kim found him lying on the ground. She has the police and coroner there. They are waiting on you to arrive so you can identify the body.”

Identify the body. Those words infuriated me. The body? That “body” was MY Dad! I was so distraught I didn’t even respond. I just hung up the phone and immediately dialed James. No answer. I was screaming my head off at the point—there was no way I was *leaving a message!* I hung up and called again. Voice mail again. I did this about five times before I began screaming bloody murder—furious at the fact that my worthless husband couldn’t even answer my phone call. What could I do? I’m in no state of mind to *drive* there with a baby. Who could I call? Could I call someone I knew to drive over there and get him? After racking my brain for a few minutes, I realized that I had Sulli’s father’s cell phone number in my phone. I ran outside to my car, turned it on, and dialed Wade.

“Hello?” he answered.

At least HE answered phone calls from me! I don’t even remember exactly what I said to him. I remember a lot of crying and trying to explain that my Dad died and James wouldn’t answer the phone and I was alone with Wyatt and I couldn’t physically drive down there in this state of mind and where was James and why couldn’t he answer his stupid phone when I’m constantly calling him five or six times and to tell James to get home immediately. I hung up the phone and began packing bags for all of us.

I decided to call the next person I knew. I called my mom. I informed her, “Dad is dead!”

Mom argued, “No... Honey, I just talked to him this morning...”

I disagreed, “Yeah, well, Uncle Mike just called. Dad must have driven down to the farm because Kim found him on the ground. He’s been there for a few hours.”

She was in shock. She commented that he had just called her this morning to check on her and John, Mom’s new husband. According to her recollection, Dad acted fine on the phone and didn’t say anything about going down to the farm. She promised that she would call and tell my brother, Ashley, since I didn’t have his phone number down in Charleston.

Within a few minutes, James and Lilly were home. I explained what I knew and he began putting our bags in the car. We buckled the kids up and jumped in the front seat. As soon as James cranked the car, the low gas light beeped. 15 miles to empty. Great.

“I don’t have any money to get there. How much do you have?” James questioned.

“I have three dollars!” I responded.

Great! My father is dead. He is literally lying on the ground—has been for several hours. We don’t even have the money to get there! I had to think fast. I called my cousin Kim. I explained to her that we were at least two hours away and because Dad had been lying there already for several hours, I didn’t want him lying there for at least two more. She put the coroner on the phone and he allowed me to give him permission to move “the body” to the funeral home.

At least I had that part taken care of—now how do we get there?

In the mean time, James was sending a text to a friend who owed him \$40. When I looked at him with fear, he

responded, “Wesley owes me money. We just have to make it there with the gas we have.”

Wesley lived about twenty minutes away. I prayed we had enough gas—and God saw through with my prayer.

It took an hour and a half to get to the farm. Kim and her family waited on us to get there. It was dark outside at the farm. When we drove up, I saw Dad’s old brown Ford pickup truck. It seemed so empty inside. It had this dark, silent feeling about it—like a scene of a dark, empty car in a murder movie. I immediately ran over to his truck and began crying. I couldn’t breathe. How could this happen? Why didn’t he call me if he didn’t feel well? Why come all the way down here and die alone? He knew if he had called me, I would have called an ambulance and found a way to get to him and saved his life! Why did he have to do this and chose to die instead of getting help?!

As I was standing there crying, I happened to look in the window and noticed Dad’s pistol in the front seat. At least he had brought protection in case someone tried to come up and hurt him while at this huge, lonely farm. But why did he come down here if he didn’t feel well? Maybe he tried to call me and couldn’t get in touch with me because my phone was off.

Kim came over and hugged me. There was a small street light that allowed us to visit for a few minutes. It had turned cold very quickly, and we were both shivering in the moonlight wind. She let me know how Kevin had fed the dogs early that morning. After dinner, Kevin kept saying that something was telling him to go back to the farm to check on the dogs. She explained that when they pulled up; they saw Dad lying on the ground. Kevin described the blowing wind

and how it was causing Dad’s shirt to flap around. They saw him lying on the ground, but they thought he had just fallen. Kim called the police while Kevin went to go try and help him up. As soon as Kevin tried to grab his arm, he knew that he had passed away. She explained that Dad had been burning some bushes near the clothes line. She walked me over and showed me the burnt bushes. She explained there was a huge gash in the back of his head and a hatchet still in his right hand. What was and always will be unusual to me is that dad was ambidextrous—but favored his left hand when working. Why was it in his right hand?

We visited for several hours at the farm. I asked Kim about Dad’s cell phone. The coroner and police took it as evidence for the time being until fowl play could be ruled out. The police searched the phone and found that the last number dialed was last night (Friday night) to a man that worked with Dad. The police called the number and asked the man how he knew Dad and about their conversation last night. The police had informed Kim that the man had worked with Dad for over fifteen years and was upset to hear about Dad’s passing.

Aunt Joy (Dad’s younger sister), Uncle Mike (her husband), my brother Ashley and wife Audrey arrived within the hour. We drove next door to Kim’s trailer and got out of the cold to visit. We talked about memories we had of Dad. Uncle Mike explained to us that the way the coroner described the scene to him, Dad went pretty fast and wasn’t in pain long. Soon it was getting late and we decided to head back home. Ash, as I called him, asked if we were staying at Dad’s house. I expressed to him that I just couldn’t stay there. So, James and I packed up the kids and headed home.

The next morning, James' mother arrived to watch Lilly and Wyatt for us. I found out later that she had asked James where to send flowers. Instead of sending them, he asked his mother to send money so that we would have it for gas. She gave him cash that morning and we headed to Columbia to try and find Dad's will. I had created one a few years back—but he never sent me a copy. Without it, we would have a mess.

We met Kim, Aunt Joy, and Uncle Mike at the funeral home in Orangeburg. Uncle Mike stopped James in the parking lot and asked him if they could talk. Later on, I found out that he had asked James about us buying their share of the farm. He made the comment that "We have a buyer that is really interested and is to buy our share of the property by Christmas. They are ready to build a huge house and make a pond on it. If y'all want it, y'all have to act fast." How dare he confront my husband at the funeral home about a business deal at a time like this! I'm so glad that James informed me weeks later instead of that day.

Once we got inside, Kim, Ash, Aunt Joy, Uncle Mike, and I went inside a private office. I was fine with Kim being in there. This was her brother-in-law's funeral home. Kim had, just a few years earlier, experienced her father (my Dad's brother) dying tragically as well. I knew she could relate and could also advise me on what to do. Why was Mike in there? What business was it of his? I guess Joy was there because she was his sister. However, I was the executor of the estate. Just having all of those people crammed in one little room made me uneasy and upset.

The funeral home guy immediately handed me a pamphlet. I opened it up and it was a price list. There wasn't a "Hi... Sorry to hear of your loss..." With him, it was straight

business. He began going over how many hearses we needed. Hearse? He mentioned getting embalmed. Embalmed? He talked about where we could have the funeral and those costs along with it. After a few minutes, I began to get upset.

I stopped him in mid sentence, "My father will not be embalmed. You can scratch that off the list."

Uncle Mike (being a medical doctor) began, "Well, medically, being embalmed is pretty important, Alissa..."

I cut him off, "My Dad will NOT be embalmed. He hated doctors. He hated hospitals. He hated medicine. He believed that you should go out the same way you come into this world—naturally. He will NOT be embalmed. End of story."

The guy paused for a moment then began to proceed again. He began asking about how many hearses we needed and how many tents.

Uncle Mike began to say, "We will need three hearses and at least 3 tents..."

Again, I grew more upset. I stopped him again, "And who exactly is paying for those? Not us. I didn't order those."

Mike began again, "Well, how else are we going to get to the funeral?" and began to snicker.

My response was, "Ummm... How did you get *here*? You have your *own* vehicle right?"

My Dad was not a huge "production" type person. He didn't like making a big deal out of things. Having a huge, big-to-do funeral was NOT my Dad. My Dad was a simple man. He grew up on a farm and they didn't have much growing up. He always talked about how people spend money left and right on unnecessary things nowadays and how the world just needed to go back to a simpler life. My Dad never

went to Christmas parties with his work or even large birthday parties—as he hated big crowds or any “whoop-dee-doo get together.” He always worried that he would feel out of place at big parties with doctors and lawyers and people he just didn’t fit in with.

After a few minutes of bantering back and forth, I stood up and opened the door. I was bawling at this point. I had no idea what to do. I had never done this before. How was I to know exactly what we needed? When I opened the door, the first person I saw was James. Well, he wouldn’t know either because he had never experienced a death of a parent. Mom. Mom would know what to do. I asked her to step in the office.

As soon as she walked in I began asking her the same questions that the man had asked me. How many tents? How many hearses or do we even need one? What about embalming even though Dad didn’t believe in it? She began rattling the answers off one by one like she was a professional at it. Whew. I felt...relief. I knew that Mom wouldn’t go overboard in what we would do for the funeral. I mean, he was my Dad, but I don’t believe in paying twenty grand for anyone’s funeral just to “have a show.”

We had tried to get in touch with his hometown church. It being Sunday, no one answered. I left a message but we hadn’t heard back by 4p.m. I pulled out a copy of the receipt where Mom and Dad had purchased two side-by-side plots when they first got married. I announced, “Here. We will just use this. I mean, he kept these all these years for a reason. They will take care of the property for us—maintain his portion. We won’t have to worry about upkeep like we would at the church. It’s nice with lots of grass and flowers and huge angel statues.” Mom and Ash agreed. So, there it was. We would have a

small, quaint grave-side funeral for Dad. We would request the Masonites attend his funeral because he was an avid member for many years. We would ask James’ Dad to sing Amazing Grace. The funeral home would find one other person to help sing. We would use the preacher from his hometown church to lead the funeral.

Next, was picking out the casket. The man urged, “Please follow me into the next room.”

I felt a little uneasy when I got up. Ash looked at me and gave a “oh boy can’t believe we’re doing this” grin. The man opened the door and I fell to the floor. The sight of all those caskets! So morbid! I mean, he was asking us to pick out a BOX (literally a wooden box) that my Dad would live in for the rest of time. I couldn’t breathe. Kim ran and got James.

I kept saying, “I can’t do this... I can’t do this...” Lilly and Wyatt ran to me when they saw me in the floor sobbing and couldn’t breathe. They began to cry. I hugged them so tight they could barely breathe themselves. I didn’t want them to ever have to go through something like this for me. I never wanted them to be upset and crying over me for anything.

So, James and Ash picked out the casket.

The funeral home director pulled James aside and warned him that Dad’s body was a little...darker than normal due to the fire. He wanted to warn him of Dad’s appearance before allowing family members in the room. They asked if we were ready to see “the body” and I just sat there—staring into space. There was no way that I could go in that room and see my Dad in that manner. I couldn’t have that one last image in my head for the rest of my life. I stated to Ash that whoever wanted to go in there could—but I couldn’t see Dad like that. So, as the executor, I gave everyone else permission to see him.

I wanted to remember my Dad like he looked last weekend—his plaid button-up dress shirt, grey dress slacks, dressy black Rockport's, black leather jacket, round-rimmed silver glasses, and freshly cut thinning grey hair. I wanted to remember him for who he was—not by what happened to him. After everyone said their goodbyes to Dad, we all headed back to our homes for the evening.

The funeral was small, quaint, and quiet. To me, it was a reflection of my father. I don't remember much about it, except my Aunt Sherry singing after James' Dad. Amazing Grace was Dads grandmother's favorite song. I had the bagpipe player play it at my wedding right before Dad walked me down the aisle.

I also remember that my brother just stood by Dad's casket the entire time—wouldn't move or even sit down with us. It was like he was going to go down with Dad and get buried alive.

As the days went by, Ash found the will (lying on Dad's favorite bedroom chair underneath a pile of clothes).

He called me ecstatic, "I found his will! I found his will!"

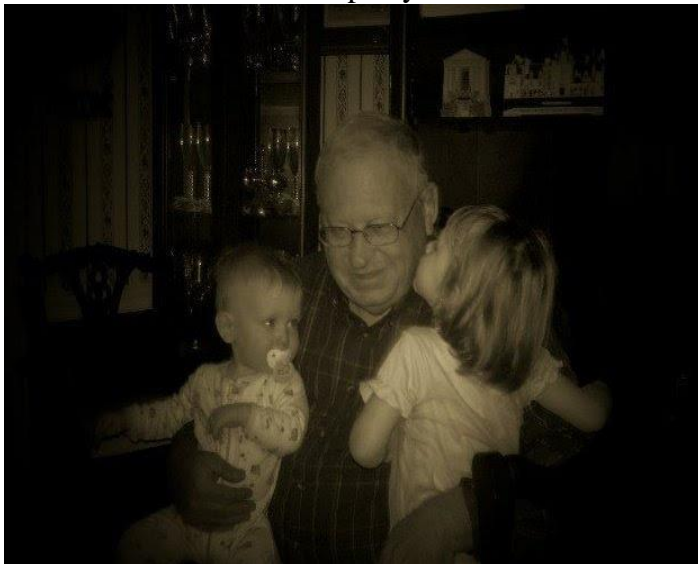
It was like Christmas morning for two five year olds! We had never been so happy and relieved in our lives.

I chose not to do an autopsy or have him embalmed, as Dad firmly believed that you go out the way you come into this world—naturally. The coroner and police determined the best possible scenario on Dad's death. They concluded that he was burning bushes and trying to chop them down while burning them. He began having a stroke and got light headed. He fell forward into the fire. The top part of his body was burnt. They decided the gash in the back of his head was from him possibly

wailing his arms to get the fire off of his face. Forgetting the hatchet was in his hand, he flung it backwards and it struck the back of his skull—causing his brain to hemorrhage. He turned to walk away (maybe to get inside the house or get to the water faucet) and fell to the ground. Because no autopsy was performed, they could not rule it accidental or foul play. I was fine with that-- knowing that Dad would have been upset if I had agreed to an autopsy. He hated doctors, medicine, surgeries, knives, you name it. He hated hospitals. I knew he was exactly where he wanted to be when he passed. After all, he died right outside of the bedroom window in which he was born.

Having to deal with my father's death at only 32 years old was challenging for me. At the time, I thought it would be the most difficult thing that I would ever have to go through. My Dad had become my hero. My father had become my best friend once I had gotten married and moved away. He would come up and visit every other weekend. We would go to lunch and he would come back and help me around the house. He knew that James didn't help much—and Dad never helped my mom when they were married. After he and my mom divorced, I think he had regretted things like not helping her around the house, helping fix things when they broke, and the like. I think he was trying to make it an easy transition for mine and James' marriage and help us to not fight over me always having to be the "cleaner" and the "fixer upper" in the marriage, especially since James was never home. When Lilly, and eventually Wyatt, were born, he would come up every weekend and just sit and talk to them while I was able to clean. He would help me by bringing cans and cans of formula (because they had to have special soy formula that was so darn

expensive). He would call a few times a week to check on us. We would talk about everything. He would advise me on everything. He was the “one in a billion” kind of Dads—and a “one in a trillion” kind of a man—I knew it and so did everyone that knew him. He became my very best friend. And now, I had none. However, how lucky had I been to even get the years I did get with him... He WAS my very best friend and understood me better than anyone because we were so much alike. Tender hearted for others, quiet, reserved, and would bend over backwards to help anyone in need.



About a year after my father passed, I began to want another baby. At first, James was apprehensive. He felt that two was enough—how in the world would he ever handle three? We had tried for 5 years before being successful with Lilly. Years of doctor’s visits, medical procedures, and even fertility treatments were rough on me, and even him to some

extent. We finally got pregnant after trying for 4 years, but the pregnancy resulted in the non-development of the fetus and it was removed. We were devastated. Finally, we got pregnant with Lilly about a year later. After Lilly, we got pregnant with Wyatt 16 months later. Now that Wyatt was a little over 2, I began to have that “urge” for another baby. Over the course of the next few months, he changed his mind and we decided to try for another child.

At first, I was prepared for it to be a year or two of trying to conceive. However, we got pregnant after two months of trying to conceive. I didn’t even have to go for fertility anything! I was ecstatic! It was Fourth of July and James was WAY out of town (in Ohio). I sent him a picture via a text message of a positive pregnancy test. He didn’t respond. I waited about an hour and called. No answer. I called again and again. He finally answered the third time. I asked what he thought.

He inquired, “What do you want me to say? I mean, it’s negative...”

I pointed out, “No, James, two lines means positive...”

His only response was, “Hmmm...”

At this point, I figured I was “fertile-mentile.”

Truly, truly, what a journey thus far...

But now, looking back, that was really only the start.

From the beginning, the pregnancy felt a little strange. I can’t explain it—like a disconnected feeling the entire time. The doctors did the ultrasound at the beginning and addressed that the baby seemed to be measuring slightly smaller than should be at twelve weeks, but that there was nothing to worry about. At the 20 week ultrasound, they concluded the same thing about her size but again and also vowed that there was

nothing to worry about. The ultrasound tech, however, did tell us that she was a girl! I was ecstatic! Lilly and Wyatt were at the appointment with us. Lilly was excited to finally have a baby sister!

After several weeks of looking at names, we decided to name her Whitley Reese--Reese being in memory of my father Wyman Reese. Her due date was February 29, 2012. Wow! A leap year baby! How on earth would we celebrate her birthday? Maybe she would come a day early or a day later so that we wouldn't have that dilemma each year.

As the pregnancy progressed, I started feeling weirder and weirder. I kept having this urge to be induced.

Each week, I would ask the doctor, "How soon can you induce me?" and every week each doctor would respond the same exact way, "We don't induce until week 39 unless there is a reason."

I was never happy with that answer.

James at one point got upset with me on the phone after an appointment saying, "Why do you keep worrying about being induced?! Just let her come when she's ready!" and he hung up.

This was something that I just could not explain. The doctors would say week 39 is the soonest, but I just wasn't settling with week 39. For some reason, my body kept urging me to have her come sooner but the doctors never would comply.

Around December, I began having sharp pains in my rib areas. I was at school when the first one happened. I was standing up teaching and got a pain so bad that I couldn't breathe. Working in an at-risk school, I tried to proceed like normal—but couldn't. Thankful for having a set of caring

students at the time, one of them went for help. The secretary, Mrs. Drakeford, called James and asked him to come get me because I thought I was in labor. In the mean time, I was calling my doctor to ask them what to do. They asked me to come into the office and let them check me out. James arrived at school by the time I got off the phone with the doctor and we were on our way to Greenville.

It took us around thirty minutes to get there. By the time we made it, I wasn't having the pains anymore. However, the doctor did blood work and asked me some questions about the pain. He mentioned that it may be either my pancreas or my gallbladder. He decided to send me to another doctor for a 3-D ultrasound on my vital organs. However, the appointment wasn't for four more days. On the other hand, during that visit he did notice that I had a hernia under my belly button from one side all the way to the other. With all three pregnancies, I had difficulty lifting my legs (even to put pants on). I never knew what caused it—just always thought the weight of the baby was causing the pain. Instead, it was a huge hernia in my abdomen. He commented that it was called a pregnancy hernia. He continued by stating that it usually develops while pregnant and then gets better once the pregnancy is over (but never goes away completely). He warned that the more pregnancies I have, the worse it will get.

Four days came and went fast. Working all day at the at-risk school, nursing school at night twice a week (which meant driving an hour to class and an hour back home in the dark), cooking, cleaning, taking care of two kids already... I was overwhelmed. I got up that morning, got the kids ready for school and day care, and drove myself to this appointment at Greenville Hospital. I was nervous that something bad was

wrong. In my nursing classes, a girl revealed that her sister had the same thing. She continued by explaining that her sister was rushed to Charleston and they had to take her gallbladder out through her back while she was pregnant. I was scared to death.

Thankfully, the ultrasound tech decided that she didn't see anything in particular that was wrong when doing my ultrasound. She affirmed that all of my vital organs seemed to be working fine with no indication of any major issues. She did confirm that we were having a girl! I was so excited—James didn't believe the first ultrasound that we were having another girl. He kept saying that they were wrong, even though we saw the “hamburger” lines twice with the first ultrasound.

The days and weeks flew by. However, my problems grew worse. When I would eat, I would get nauseas and dizzy. Sometimes I would be so dizzy with a migraine at the same time that I couldn't even walk or function. The doctors advised me not to drive for at least one hour after eating—as I could pass out in the car and have a wreck. This meant that I could no longer drive to lunch with the middle school students. For a few weeks, I rode the bus. Eventually, I didn't feel so safe in riding the bumpy bus so I just passed on going to lunch altogether and they brought my lunch back to me. The doctors advised me to cut down on sugary foods and carbs. To me, it didn't matter what I ate or didn't eat. One night, James was actually home in time to make dinner. He grilled me a steak and I ate a salad with it. My head felt like it was going to explode. I wound up going to bed at 6:30 and sleeping all night through. I found the only way to cure this problem WAS

sleep. For some reason, nothing else would stop my migraines and dizziness except sleep for several hours.

Christmas came and went like a flash. My two children were growing older. It was the second Christmas without my Dad. It was the first Christmas in our new house. And we were expecting our third baby soon. It seemed so surreal at the time. Things were moving so quickly in our lives.

One January night, I dreamed of my Dad. It was the first time ever that I had dreamed of him. I appeared in the kitchen of his house that I grew up. I was leaned with my right side against the wall--watching him sit in front of me at the kitchen table. He was crying but I couldn't see his face, as his back was facing me. To my left was a little brown-haired girl in a dress twirling around in his kitchen. Who was the girl? I looked down. I wasn't pregnant. Where were Lilly, Wyatt, and Whitley? Who was this girl? Maybe this was Lilly. But this little girl was only about 2 or 3 and she had longer hair. Lilly by now was 5. Where were MY children? Did James have them? Finally, I decided that the little girl was Lilly—the way Dad remembered her. She was around that age when he passed and her hair *was* longer at the time of his death...

I put my questions aside and began trying to talk to my Dad. “I love you Dad...”

I kept saying over and over. He wouldn't look at me or even say anything back. Finally, I walked up to him from behind and put my right arm around him.

I cried, “I love you Dad. I know you're in Heaven and can't talk to me and tell me you love me too. Don't be upset. I love you and that's all I need you to know.”

I woke up from my dream. I was relieved that I was finally able to tell him I loved him one more time. For the first

time since his death, I felt a little... relief. But I just couldn't settle on who that little girl was in that dream.

As the days progressed and work grew more stressful, I soon forgot about the dream. I was more focused on passing my SAFE-T test with the school. People were coming in left and right to observe me and I had to get it right this time or else lose my certificate altogether. When Dad had passed away, I debated on just quitting teaching completely.

However, I thought of what Dad stated to me once, "Don't quit. They will then know they got to you. Do your best and stick it out. Show them you are there no matter what to try your best and not get discouraged."

I had decided to try one last year—but this was my *LAST* year to try and "get it right." My job literally was on the line at this point. I tried my best to push through January as quickly and whole-heartily as I could. Before I knew it, the observation time frame was over. I could do a little relaxing—at least until my final results came back.

Finally, it was February--February 17, 2012 to be exact. This was a half day—teacher work day for us. I had decided that this day would be my last day working and I would go on "bed rest" for a week. I had worked the morning, had an unexpected diaper/wipes shower at work, and got Lilly and Wyatt from day care after work. Too tired to cook lunch, I decided to take the kids to McDonalds for lunch and let them play for a few hours. We ordered our lunch and headed to the playground. While Lilly and Wyatt were playing, I noticed that Whitley wasn't moving. Usually, she would move for a little while after I ate. I thought to myself how weird it was to not feel her move after eating a greasy burger, fries, and diet coke. I brushed it off that her schedule would be messed up

when she was born—as she was probably taking a day time nap and would keep me up kicking all night long.

After dinner that evening, I lay in bed watching TV and trying to relax. I was focused on the kids, trying to figure out what to clean the next few days at the house (as my husband does VERY minimal house chores), and watching TV when it dawned on me that I still hadn't felt her move. What's going on? So I got on my phone and Googled. I read that sometimes when you are fixing to go into labor the baby doesn't move as much. Did Lilly and Wyatt do the same thing? I just couldn't seem to remember if I went through it with the other two or not. I remember that Wyatt came so quickly—2 hours total! I just didn't have time to pay attention to many things during my delivery with him.

When James arrived home, I admitted to him my concern.

He joked that "She's too big to move in there!" and didn't really address my concerns on this. I was a little upset but hoped that he was right. I lay around watching TV for the rest of the night—hopeful that I would begin contractions or any signs of labor. By 9 p.m.—still nothing. I decided to call it a night and see if she would move while I was asleep.

By Saturday at lunch time, I felt very uneasy. I knew in my heart something had happened to her. I just couldn't bear going to the hospital and going facing what I knew in my heart had happened. I called the doctor and told them that I hadn't felt her move in 24 hours. They told me to immediately drink a glass of coke and lay on my side for one hour. She insisted that if I didn't feel 5 kick counts in 1 hour to come in. I drank a LITER of coke and lay on my side for THREE hours. Nothing. I even tried to reposition the way that I was laying—

to see if maybe HOW I was laying was preventing her from moving. Still nothing. I knew she was no longer there—but I just couldn't face the facts.

Sunday morning, I got up and cooked breakfast for everyone. After breakfast, I laid in bed wondering how in the world I was going to go through with this. I was trying to figure out what to do with the kids—what to tell people—you name it. Finally, I fixed lunch for everyone. After we all ate, I began getting dressed and getting the kids' things together. James asked me what I was doing. I told him that we needed to go to the hospital—and that he needed to have his mom meet us there ASAP to get the kids. He started telling the kids, "Ok guys, we're going to the hospital to bring Whitley home!" Lilly and Wyatt got all excited. I tried to give him a look that urged, "Please stop..." but he didn't catch on.

When we got to the hospital, his mom wasn't there. I kept asking him where she was. His response was, "She reassured me that she's on the way..." We went inside the hospital and went up to labor and delivery. As we were walking down labor and delivery halls, I noticed Dr. Keller. I went to her and explained that I hadn't felt movement in two days. She ordered, "Let's go get you hooked up." She took off to get a room ready.

They got me on the bed and hooked up the belt around my stomach. Nothing. No heart beat. No movement. Nothing.

I began screaming, "Oh my god!"

I remember the nurse telling James, "Sir, I need you to get the children out of the room..."

I remember looking at him like GET THE KIDS OUT OF THE ROOM YOU IDIOT! But he wasn't paying me any

attention! I kept screaming "Oh my god!" and I know it was scaring the kids.

I remember one of the nurses telling Lilly and Wyatt, "Ok... let's go get some juice and do some coloring!"

Lilly and Wyatt immediately went with her. Dr. Keller came in with her laptop ultrasound.

She put the monitor against my stomach and began yelling, "This thing's not even on!" and she slammed it down. It took her a minute or two to get it working.

When she put it back on my stomach, she began to cry, "There's no heartbeat or movement... Let me get a high risk doctor in here for a second opinion." Immediately a male doctor came in and looked and shook his head.

I remember screaming and crying for what seemed like hours. The doctor gave us a little while to "process what was happening..." After about an hour or so, the doctor came back in and talked to us about what was going to happen next. I immediately announced that I wanted a c-section. She explained that, when there is a stillborn baby, c-sections would cause infections and the mother could potentially die. Therefore, a c-section wasn't even an option at this point. I remember I kept saying, "I can't do this..." She did tell me that she could use enough drugs that I could be entirely asleep for the birth of Whitley. I thought about it, but the idea of being completely under while my child was coming from my womb was scary. What if something went wrong? I wouldn't be awake to know anything. I also decided that I WANTED to be awake. I wanted to feel the labor pains with her—just like I felt them with Lilly and Wyatt. I didn't want to treat her any different and just "brush this labor off" like it's some surgical procedure. I told her I wanted an epidural and maybe

something to calm my nerves, but I wanted to be awake to SEE her, hold her, and love her for as long as we could.

I remember getting wheeled into the delivery room. As soon as I saw the room, I grabbed the door frame and pulled backwards in the wheelchair saying over and over again, “I can’t do this... I can’t do this...”

They pried my hands from the door frame and wheeled me to the bed. They pretty much had to pick me up and force me into the bed. I remember sending out texts to the first ten people in my phone. I figured after that, word would get out. I posted on Facebook that she had passed—and to say a prayer as we were being induced as I typed the message.

The nurse that they sent us was like an angel from heaven. She was an older lady, who obviously had years of nursing experience. She came in and began to cry. She held me tight and kissed my cheek. She explained that her husband had passed away several years before. She explained that he had been very sick and that they would often talk of heaven during his time of sickness. She confided in us that towards the end, he depicted to her that he knew Jesus had a little house with a front porch and rocking chairs on it waiting on him in heaven. He revealed to her that he knew it was meant for him to go to heaven, because his job in heaven would be to spend the days rocking and caring for babies and children in heaven. She promised me that Whitley was in heaven on her husband’s front porch rocking with him in a rocking chair while he read stories to her. She was the best nurse I have ever had in all of my deliveries. If I had a million dollars, I would find her name and give her all the money to my name.

During the time that they were running blood work, tests, and prepping me for induction, the nurses asked if I

wanted visitors. At first, I addressed the fact that I didn’t want to see anyone. She asked if I wanted to see the kids before they left for Nanny’s house. I informed her and James that I didn’t want to see the kids because I didn’t want them to see me so upset and get them upset and have them worry about what was happening. After all, they were only 5 and 3. James decided to go tell them goodbye in the hallway. He sat them down and explained to them that Whitley went to heaven to be with Papa Reese (my Dad).

Wyatt’s first response was, “Can I give her a bath first?”

James came back to the room crying that Wyatt asked that. I wanted so bad to allow him to bathe her, but felt that he was far too young to see a stillborn baby. We chose to allow them to go on to Nanny and Papa’s house and tell them we would see them in a day or two.

After that, James mentioned that his family and also my mother had all arrived.

At first, I didn’t want to see anyone. Then, the nurse made the comment that they may have World War III out there with my mother if she wasn’t allowed in the room. Finally, I decided that she could come in for a minute but that was it. James went and got her.

As soon as she entered the room, her first words to me were, “Honey, this is a blessing from God! Now you can finish nursing school and not have to worry about another baby to take care of!”

I just shook my head and began to cry. I wanted to cuss her out and scream at her for saying that. My daughter just DIED. She was inside of me when she died. And I was going to have to give birth to her knowing that she wasn’t alive. I

would never get to feed her, clothe her, give her a bath, hear her cry, nothing. And my own mother was talking about how much of a blessing this was! How dare her! After a few minutes, I cut James “the look” and he redirected her to the lobby area.

After mom left, I was just too upset to let anyone else in the room. They began the induction process. I began having sharp pains in my right side. The doctors kept bringing the epidural people back into the room to give me more meds. They gave me three extra doses of pain meds. Nothing seemed to help.

Finally, the nurse coaxed me, “Let’s just get her out of you and that will make you feel better...”

So, I did. I remember as I was pushing her out, I looked at James. I will never forget the look on his face when he saw her for the first time. His mouth was wide open and he gasped. He threw his hands over his mouth and began to cry. They took her over to the other side of the room to check her out.

In the meantime, James whispered to me, “She was beautiful...”

I asked, “I saw the dark hair, does she look like Lilly?” He nodded yes.

When they handed her to me, I began to cry and saying over and over, “She looks like Lilly... and my Dad.... Oh my poor baby... my poor, beautiful baby... Why?...my poor baby... why?”

How does someone say goodbye before they can even say hello?

She was born at 1:10 am on February 20, 2012. She was 6 pounds 1 ounce and 18 ½ inches long. She was slightly

smaller than Lilly and Wyatt at birth. Lilly was 7 pounds 7 ounces and 21 ½ inches long. Wyatt was 7 pounds 8 ounces and 21 ¾ inches long. The nurses washed her off quickly and wrapped her ever so perfectly before handing her precious body to me.

I held Whitley for a long time. I enunciated to her how much I loved her and how grateful I was that I was able to be her mother. I held her so close to me that I could barely breathe myself. I never wanted to let her go.

Her left eye was “missing.” And when I say missing, I mean her eyelid was almost gone. Her skin was peeling back off of her hands and her poor tiny feet. Her hands were red. She was so cold. The doctors concluded that because she lay in the amniotic fluid for so long, that it began deteriorating her skin. I didn’t care. She was MY baby and she was the most beautiful baby in the whole world!

After her birth, I allowed James’ dad and sister in our delivery room. They stayed for about an hour. They held her and cried with us. James’ dad talked of how he knew I wished my Dad would have been able to be there. He spoke about how he knew my Dad was in heaven with Whitley right now taking care of her. He was exactly right.

For the next fifteen hours, we spent time with our baby girl. We went to our own private room, apart from the other rooms in the hospital. It was nice and quiet so that we weren’t distracted and upset by hearing crying babies all over. They hung a butterfly on the door so that people would know that we had a death.

James’ first words to Whitley were, “I won’t even get to sleep with you on my chest like I did with Lilly and Wyatt...” then he began to cry.

The nurse asked us if we would mind them taking her to the nursery to give her a bath.

I immediately objected, "I prefer not. Can you give her a bath in here?"

My reaction was so quick. I knew I wouldn't have all the time in the world to spend with her. I knew our time with her was precious. I didn't want them taking her all over the hospital and wasting our precious time we had with her.

The next few hours flew by like no other day had ever. James took a nap with her on his chest—his wish came true. We ate and held her. James went down to the flower shop and bought some Gamecock booties to put on her. For Lilly and Wyatt, we bought "pig" piggy banks and wrote their names, birth dates, and sizes at birth. He came back crying that they were all out. He really wanted her to have one just like Lilly and Wyatt had theirs.

We watched TV with her. We sang to her. We talked to her. We rocked her. James nicknamed her "Daddy's Little Angel."

The nurses were wonderful, too. One made her a beaded bracelet with her name and hearts. Another nurse made molds of her praying hands and also of her feet. When they found out that I came only with some onesies, she went next door to the March of Dimes. They donated a pink smocked dress, white crocheted hat, and matching white crocheted blanket for her. She looked like a little princess.

We put the Gamecock booties on her and began taking pictures. The nurse that did her molds came back in with a brown teddy bear. She asked to see Whitley for a few minutes—but that she wasn't leaving the room with her. She proceeded to lay Whitley in the basinet with the teddy bear and

take some of the most angelic pictures known to mankind. Due to her eye, the nurse had to be very cautious on how to lay her to take the pictures. She did a wonderful job at hiding her left eye and all those "imperfections" caused by the fluids. When it was said and done, we have the most perfect pictures of her lying there with her teddy bear as if she was sleeping baby.

Around 4p.m., Dr Keller came in and asked what we wanted to do—stay another night or go on home. I looked at James distraught. If we left, I would have to leave her here. Why in the world would I ever want to leave her? I mean, I can't leave her. I began to cry. She continued by saying that she would give us a little while and if we needed anything to let her know.

A few minutes after she left, James started talking about how staying at the hospital forever would be the easy way out. The hardest part would be to leave—to leave her here and go home without our baby girl. And even though neither one of us want to do that, we would eventually have to do it. And, to him, the sooner we did it, the easier the transition would be. I thought about what he had said for a few minutes.

Finally, I agreed, "Ok. If you want to go home, we can go. But if we're going, we need to go now before I change my mind."

So I got up and began to get dressed and pack the bags. James called transportation and informed them that we were leaving. He also notified the nurse to get our discharge papers. He then began taking our bags to the car. Transport called about 30 minutes later and reported James they were sending a wheelchair. They ordered James to go ahead downstairs and get the car pulled out front. They explained to him that the guy

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