

MISSING

the **Jaryd Atadero** story

A FATHER TURNS TRAGEDY INTO HOPE AFTER
THE 1999 DISAPPEARANCE OF HIS SON IN THE
COLORADO MOUNTAINS

A L L Y N & A R L Y N A T A D E R O



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Missing: The Jaryd Atadero Story

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my beautiful daughter, Josallyn. I know you didn't understand everything that happened, but you knew every moment I was hurting and exactly what to do to comfort me.

You watched as I cried and called out for Jaryd, and you always knew the right moment to sneak up, put your arms around me, and ask, "Daddy, is Jaryd bothering you right now?"

How did you know your love would have a way of calming my pain? Your presence was like your brother's, and each time I held your hand, it made me realize Jaryd was alive in you.

Our lives were touched by a handsome little boy, and with the blink of an eye, he was gone forever. I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect him. I know that each step we take, our lives will never be the same.

I wrote this book to help you understand my moods and to help you remember the moments we shared with our little man, Jaryd. I'm sorry he won't be there for you anymore.

I love you,
Daddy

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PROLOGUE

BY ARLYN ATADERO

This dreadful story is about my brother and his quest to discover the truth in his son's disappearance in October 1999. The story made world news, and through the tragic events, he developed many wonderful relationships that will last throughout his lifetime. For years, it was difficult for any of our family to escape the tragedy of my brother's plight. Like a leaky faucet, questions continuously dripped from a vast well of facts, rumors, insinuations, and clairvoyant attention seekers. Most fragments of information only blurred the truth as his search turned into a true-life mystery.

Although I lived over a thousand miles from where my nephew vanished, I often found myself face to face with his innocent, and what seemed to be, bewildered gaze. One afternoon I decided to visit our local Wal-Mart. I had been there over a hundred times, but this time I felt compelled to glance to my right as I entered the store. To my amazement, I came face to face with a missing person's poster of my nephew. His eyes were so captivating and piercing that I instantly felt as though I were in a freefalling elevator. I often opened magazines to discover those eyes again. The Center for Missing and Exploited Children often included my nephew's picture in national publications. The Internet was definitely a haunting ground that provoked many more questions than answers. New stories and photos constantly materialized, challenging the events and evidence surrounding that October day. My Aunt Molly, in the state of Washington, said she had deposited some money in a jar for missing children. As she walked away, she noticed the picture of the little boy on the jar was her nephew. My Uncle Adolpho, while visiting

Germany, intently listened to the news as he watched the story about a little lost boy. It was his nephew. A Poudre Canyon neighbor, who was a friend of ours, later shared the shock he experienced when he saw the Ataderos on the news while visiting friends in South Korea.

This story, in my brother's words, is a gripping tale of a parent's true nightmare. Many parents have experienced that fleeting moment when they couldn't account for the location of a child. Those few seconds conjure up fears so devastating that the horror of actually living them is unimaginable to our human spirit. Thankfully, most of these experiences are only glimpses of the shock, panic, and terror of the wicked reality commonly referred to as a living hell. The rediscovery of our lost children produces euphoria equally as powerful as what the wrenching pain could have been. We become overjoyed to realize we only flirted with disaster and the taunting reality of a lost child. Like a sucker punch to the stomach, the thought of such an ordeal actually takes our breath away. But when it really happens, darkness so sinister will overshadow one's will to survive. The only thing that kept Allyn from giving up on life was the fear that he would be abandoning his son, who may have been patiently waiting, and possibly watching, his immanent rescue unfold. Constant doubt eroded the tiny slivers of hope to which he struggled to hold.

This story is sure to challenge your emotions. The day my three-year-old nephew walked off into the mountains was only the beginning of my brother's private, unimaginable ride that would last for several years. As he attempted to find the answers to his many questions, the puzzle seemed to only become more complex. Although each path offered a semblance of resolution, it was the many forks in the road that worked to create a web of confusion in which he found himself more and more entangled.

I stood by and helplessly watched my identical twin produce sounds of grief that I could never duplicate, nor do I ever wish to experience them myself. They were sounds so primal that I was sure they originated somewhere deep from within his soul. Although I grieved, it was obvious through our private moments that he was at a depth that I had never imagined existed.

Our lives have paralleled each other in many respects, but that probably is because we are identical twins. After we both entered the teaching profession, we actually spent five interesting years teaching on the same campus in Calexico, California. While teaching at De Anza Junior High, we de-

cided to go into business together. We purchased some cabins and a store in Colorado's Poudre Canyon. We operated that business for about two years. It was there that my brother and nephew spent their last day together.

As a twin, I was often asked if I could feel my brother's pain, but it usually accompanied an additional comment about when he was hit or had gotten hurt. On the day my brother's life came crashing down, I was in San Diego with my wife. We had just experienced a wonderful day with the company of several teachers from McCabe School. That night, my wife and I decided to not return to El Centro. We stayed in San Diego and didn't tell anybody where we were. After all, my logic was, *What could possibly go wrong in a day?* In the back of my mind, that thought silently tormented me, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. Little did I know, Allyn and the rest of my family were desperately attempting to contact me. Maybe, in a peculiar way, I was feeling his pain.

This is his story.

IN THE BEGINNING

In all of our lives, we have those days that are forever etched into our memory. Many of us know exactly what we were doing when Kennedy was shot, or when three planes changed the heartbeat of our nation on September 11, 2001. For you, October 2, 1999, may have been just another day. You could have been mowing your lawn, taking your kids to the movies, planning an evening with your spouse. For me, this was the day that began the most painful and unpredicted chapter of my life. In retrospect, I often find that my life is broken into two sections: the days before Jaryd's disappearance and those after. Thankfully, I treasure the memories of him, and the sweetness of his existence will always be with me. He was the light that melted away the darkness from the many challenging days I had to endure. Like precious jewels, each of our days together represents a piece of my life's treasure, and as long as I live, he will live in me. I am the man I am today because of my children, and my only regret is that I was not able to spend more time with one of the two gifts God graciously provided to me. Life is delicate, and each day we spend together is much more significant than what we can imagine. My heart was pierced by this fact and the remaining wound has become a constant reminder of what once was.

It was 11:30 on Friday evening, October 1, 1999. Jaryd was still awake because his favorite movie, *Godzilla*, was on. It had been a long day, and I was very tired, but Jaryd wouldn't let me go to sleep. How could I sleep when, according to my son, the greatest movie ever made was playing on our TV? I actually tried to fall to sleep several times, but each time I closed my eyes, he yelled, "Daddy, watch this part!" He was pretty persistent because I ended up watching a movie I'll never forget.

As long as I live, I'll always cherish this simple experience we shared. For a boy who was only three-years-old, Jaryd had a remarkable sense of humor. In fact, it took Jaryd to make me realize *Godzilla* was actually a comedy. During one part of the movie, Godzilla chased a helicopter while running through the streets of New York. As the monster turned to run down another street, Jaryd yelled, "Daddy, did you see that, did you see that?"

"Did I see what, Jaryd?" I asked. He was obviously pretty excited about something that must have gone right over my head.

With the thrill only seen in the eyes of a little boy, Jaryd replied, "Daddy, when Godzilla turned, you could see his wee-wee."

I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard. Sadly, it would be awhile before I could laugh like this again. The movie ended about twelve-thirty, and our final nine hours together had begun to count down. Even now when I think of this, it makes me nauseated. As I sit here typing, I can't help but notice the tears welling up in my eyes. No one understands how much I miss my son. His leaving was like a nuclear bomb. The original impact made me want to die, and although the fallout has blown away, the radiation from the bomb entered my system and I feel as if I'm slowly wasting away.

After the movie, I put Jaryd and his six-year-old sister, Josallyn, to sleep on the floor next to the couch where I slept. At about four a.m., I was awakened by a presence I felt above me. When I opened my eyes, Jaryd was standing there looking at me with his deep, penetrating, brown eyes. I asked him if he was okay, and he told me he had wet the bed. I noticed he was shaking and his pants and underwear were missing. I cleaned him up and placed him on the couch next to me. We snuggled and drifted back to sleep for another two hours.

It was about six-thirty when Jaryd and I woke up. Unbeknownst to me, the final three hours of our being together were inconspicuously drifting by. I dressed him for the day in a pair of blue sweatpants and a hooded gray sweatshirt. I then told him to find his shoes and put them on. Of course, I didn't bother with his socks because Jaryd hated them and I knew he wouldn't put them on.

As soon as Jaryd put his shoes on, we went into the store area of the resort to make some coffee and hot chocolate. That's how Jaryd wished he could start every day, *a cup of hot chocolate and a cookie*. After he was gone, it was these little details about our mornings that became extremely haunting.

THE DAY JARYD DISAPPEARED

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2, 1999

The Poudre River Resort is located about thirty miles up the Poudre Canyon on Highway 14, northwest of Fort Collins, and is nestled between the cool waters of the Poudre River and the majestic peaks of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. We were having a retreat for the Christian Singles Association that doubled as a work weekend because we would be doing some repairs on the resort that my twin brother, Arlyn, and I had purchased about a year and half earlier. When not working, everyone in the group would enjoy the natural beauty of the surroundings and the outdoor activities, especially hiking, offered by the resort. The weekend would come to a close with a church service on Sunday morning.

When Josallyn woke up Saturday morning, she and Jaryd went to Janet's cabin to spend some time with her. They both liked Janet because she had a warm heart and she genuinely enjoyed their company. Like most parents, I only trust certain people with my children, and at that time, Janet was one of them.

It was about nine a.m. when Josallyn ran up to me and asked if she could go on a hike. I wasn't sure who she was going with, because this was supposed to be a work weekend. That was the deal: the weekend was free as long as the members from the Christian Singles Association helped with cleaning the premises.

Before long, a crowd of about fifteen people, including Janet, gathered

outside, preparing to go for a hike. Again, I was confused because I thought people were up here to work.

Deciding not to cause a ruckus, I asked Josallyn if it was okay with Janet if she tagged along. Josallyn was very animated when she told me “yes.” Never in my wildest dreams did I think Jaryd would come running up to me with the same request. I thought, *Now what do I do?* To this day, I made it a practice never to let Jaryd out of my sight. Once again, I asked Josallyn and Jaryd if it was okay with Janet. “Yes!” they said and jumped up and down like two dogs knowing the Frisbee competition was about to start. Jaryd’s face glowed with excitement when I gave in and said, “Okay, but be careful.”

Both kids ran to put their jackets on. They came back down to the gathering area and climbed into a white Chevy Blazer. Someone made a comment about going to a trail just up the road about three to five miles from the resort next to the trout fishery. I thought, *The kids should enjoy the area because it’s an easy area to hike.* The Blazer drove up to the front of the resort, parked in front of the store, and waited for the rest of the group to arrive.

As they waited, I walked up to the Blazer and looked through the window at my son.

“Jaryd, roll the window down!” I yelled. “I haven’t given you a good-bye kiss yet.” He pushed the button, and the window slowly came down while we continued to look into each other’s eyes. I stuck my head through the window, kissed Jaryd’s face, and said, “I love you. Be careful.”

Jaryd looked at me with his killer smile and said, “I love you, too, Daddy.”

I replied, “I love you more.”

Josallyn, sitting on the other side of the Blazer, yelled, “Daddy, you haven’t kissed me good-bye either.” I ran to the other side to kiss my other angel good-bye.



It was mid-morning when the party of eleven adult hikers and two children pulled into the trailhead’s parking lot. The group was part of Denver’s Christian Singles Association, an organization created to facilitate fellowship between single Christians in the Front Range area of Colorado. The

hike would be a pleasant getaway with friends and would surely provide an opportunity to create memories for those in attendance.

The Big South Trailhead sits approximately forty-eight miles up the Poudre Canyon on the south side of the road. It's a beautiful, meandering drive that's worth experiencing anytime of the year, but especially during autumn. Nature has a keen ability to captivate the visual sense of humans with majestic displays of orange, yellow, and bronze, and has drawn many people to the mountains to witness its annual spectacle. October 2, 1999, was no different.

The hikers were relaxed as they eagerly hit the trail. The large gathering slowly divided into two smaller groups, as the lead hikers pressed ahead of the others. With spectacular scenery all around, it was easy to become overwhelmed by the awe of God's creation. There's something about the mountains that appeals to the human soul. Our own existence becomes strangely insignificant as we stand in the shadow of the works of a great creator. The adults were consumed by the glorious abundance of beauty displayed around them. The children were just happy to be there!

The little boy in the slower group was full of energy and ready for the Saturday adventure. He slowly pulled away from his chaperone, but she wasn't alarmed, considering he was headed directly toward the other group, and even though she couldn't see them, she knew they couldn't be too far ahead. He vanished on the trail before her.

The little boy scrambled past the second group of adults. He was in his own world controlled only by the limits of his imagination. He relished the freedom to run and explore in hopes of quenching the energy in his inquisitive spirit, and nobody seemed to care. How much better could it get for a three-year-old?

Somebody needs to keep a closer eye on that little boy before something happens, noted one of the women in the second group of adults as the little boy charged ahead of her.

"The mountains are beautiful during this time of the year. It's no wonder they call this God's country."

"Listen to the river. It's so relaxing here," observed another.

The Big South Trail dipped, twisted, and climbed through the pines and aspens while the river to the west gently splashed over boulders as it made its way to the Poudre. The morning air was cool and extraordinarily refreshing. A mild breeze pressed through the small canyon, tickling the aspens, whose

leaves danced and shimmered in the wash of the sun. The little boy ventured farther into the depths of the inviting mountains in total awe of his newly gained freedom. In the back of his mind, he knew his dad would never allow this type of liberty, but Dad was back at the resort. The stories he could later share were being formed at this very moment. And when the time came, his excitement would surely captivate the amazement of his father. Fixed on the challenges immediately before him, the young boy continued on.

The little boy ran up the narrow dirt trail away from the adult voices as a Steller's jay flew overhead and announced its presence. All around him nature was in motion, beckoning him closer. He reached down with his small hand and picked up a rock. After studying its shape, he flung it toward the river below. The projectile disappeared in the underbrush and cracked against the stone surface of a piece of granite, causing a sharp echo. A second rock was retrieved and, accompanied by a little grunt, was given a similar fate. A smile of satisfaction overwhelmed his face as he brushed his hands together to remove the left-behind grit. He thought, *Time to run again*, so off he went, consuming more of the trail beneath him.

As his feet thumped against the dirt path, leaving the adults farther behind, the little boy came upon a stick. He was always able to entertain himself with the simple things provided by the Rocky Mountain wilderness. He gripped the stick in both hands and inspected it. A quick swing through the air and he was satisfied with his newfound toy. Off he went again, the stick pointed in front of him toward the trees ahead. A three-year-old could only experience the imaginary world that he eagerly rushed into, and as the mountain welcomed his charge, not a single person seemed to notice the enthusiasm he displayed.

The trail and the river's edge finally paralleled each other. The boy walked up to the river's brim and studied its flow. For over a year the river had been the rear boundary of his backyard. It wasn't moving with the fury it usually had in late spring or during the summer months; instead, there was a more relaxed gentleness about the way the water passed. He dipped his fingers into its coolness and then yanked them back out, fully expecting to be reprimanded for his actions, but the flow of the water and the breeze wrestling through the trees was all he heard. He quickly glanced over his left shoulder, then his right, and when he was sure that trouble had no intention of seeking him, he triumphantly slapped at the current, sending a myriad of independent beads of water through the air before him, each one sparkling

as the sun's rays penetrated its mass. Amazingly, he heard not a single adult voice.

The boy stood quickly, causing the bangs of his straight dark hair to bounce. He considered, but only for a fleeting second, whether to continue up the trail or go back toward the grownups. With the stick in his left hand and remnants of the river dripping from his right, he began a more casual pace toward the higher elevations of the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Life had dealt him his first real opportunity to learn and explore at a pace only he controlled. *If my sister could see me now, she would be so jealous.* The thought created a smirky grin of achievement he was sure she would never experience. But throughout his experience of freedom, he found himself missing her. When something is this good, it's always more fun to share it with another person.



The pole whipped through the air several times as more and more fishing line was fed through the rod's eyelets. Finally, the tiny artificial fly at the end of the leader sailed over a provocative area of the river before touching down on its surface. Floating, it navigated its way up and over stones in quest of an unsuspecting trout searching for a meal. The fisherman patiently observed the fly darting over the water toward him as his partner readied his own line for a cast. The two men had located the perfect quiet spot far away from the noise of civilization, and nothing could spoil the adventure they had set out to enjoy. As the two anglers worked the river, a strange cracking noise interrupted the typical sounds of the wilderness. It started from somewhere back down the trail and then stopped. The two men eyed each other as if the other knew the source of the clamor, but after each shrugged his shoulders, their attention returned to the task of fishing.

Crack! Crack! Crack! There it was again, but this time louder. Silence, then cracking, then silence again. Strangely, and seemingly from nowhere, a small boy appeared on the trail. He was extremely intent on beating the huge rocks along the river's edge with what appeared to be a walking stick. He hadn't noticed the fishermen in the river and was obviously very satisfied with the rhythm he was creating.

Annoyed, the two men looked around to see who was accompanying the distracting child, but no one appeared. There had to be somebody they

could communicate their dissatisfaction to—somebody who could put an end to the racket created by this kid, but nobody came. What were they to do now? This wasn't their child, and obviously somebody had failed to be a responsible adult. They would just have to chase him away—hopefully back to from where he had come. There was no way this kid was going to ruin their fishing trip.

“Hey kid, you need to stop that. You're scaring the fish.”

Startled, the young boy looked up to see who had spoken to him. *Ah, big people*, he thought. Being on this trail alone wasn't as great as he thought it would be. After all, this was the wilderness that his dad had warned him about. In his high-pitched, young voice, he asked, “Are there any bears here?” It may have been the first sign of concern he experienced, but surely these big men would protect him. He asked again, “Are there bears here?”

“Go away, we're fishing!”

“Yeah, you're scaring the fish. Get on outta here, kid.”

The boy turned and disappeared back in the direction of the trail. He was starting to get hungry, but he knew he didn't want to bother the two men he just left in the river.



“I thought you were watching him,” said one of the ladies back in the group in an effort to appear as though she hadn't considered watching the children. “After all, I didn't bring him up here.”

“Well, he's gotta be 'round here somewhere. I figured you guys would see him and keep an eye on him,” said a different female as she placed her hands on her hips in frustration. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. “So...*nobody* saw him?”

“Come on, you guys. A little boy doesn't just disappear in the mountains,” said one of the men in the group. “He's around here somewhere.”

The boy's sister watched the drama unfold around her as the adults questioned each other about her brother's whereabouts. Unaware of the potential magnitude of the situation, all she wanted was to head back home.

“He did go past us,” responded another woman, “but I don't remember seeing him come back. What about any of you guys?”

Eleven adults stood in bewildered disbelief as the gripping reality of a nightmare began to play its hideous hand. The manifestation of an event

that is usually only read about in the paper or watched on the news had leaped upon them. Regardless of the actual role each had played, one by one the cards were dealt, and it was looking like everybody was about to become an instant loser. It was time to ante up.

“Jaryd!” The search had begun.



Back at the resort, it was as routine of a Saturday as one could be. Nothing earthshaking had occurred, and who really anticipates a catastrophic event prior to its arrival? I had just finished cleaning our hot tub; knowing my friends in the singles group, I knew the hot tub had the potential of being a big draw.

I’ll never forget that day, October 2, 1999. I completed my cleaning chores around two in the afternoon and retreated to our apartment for some well-earned relaxation. As I collapsed on the couch, it caressed my tired body like never before. I’m a big sports fan, so I checked the results of the day’s college football games, but even that couldn’t keep me awake. Before long, sleep overcame my tired body. I must have drifted off for about ten minutes or so when a commotion coming from the store jolted me awake. The apartment and the store are connected, so it’s not unusual to hear what’s going on there. Since I was very tired, it was easy at first to ignore the clamor because I could also hear the voice of Melvin “Butch” Shoning, our resort manager. He’s very capable of rendering assistance to those in need of service and neutralizing potential problems; but this time the disturbance continued.

There are times when an event on the premises demands my attention as co-owner, regardless of how tired I may be. As the disturbance continued, I assumed this was turning into one of those times. Sleep was calling my name, but fate was about to rob me of sleep for many days to come. I had no idea of the collision course with disaster I was on.

One of the ladies who had taken my children on the hike abruptly entered my apartment. There was something very strange about her behavior. In fact, she seemed severely frustrated and panicked beyond anything I had ever witnessed. It was so bad, I felt my own tension mounting in response. She made me nervous, and I wasn’t sure why. She fidgeted as her eyes roamed about the room, never actually focusing on anything. Confusion

reigned and the order of the day was about to turn into a game of twenty questions.

Our eyes finally met and locked in a sense of despair that was somewhat hypnotic. She tried to communicate something to me that lacked verbal description, and this caused her breathing to be considerably labored. She had been chosen to be the bearer of news that no one else was willing to give. This grave information was the source of a distinct separation between her thoughts and her reality. This wedge that was lodged between her soul and spirit was about to be hammered into the very essence of mine.

Then she spoke, “Allyn, everything is okay, but Jaryd had a little problem.”

What an opening statement to an awkward situation that was! Besides, what’s a parent to think when suddenly confronted with words of that nature? From her actions alone, I had a dreadful feeling she was giving me a glance at the tip of an iceberg.

“What do you mean ‘Jaryd had a little problem’? Is he okay? What happened?” No answer. The questions streamed from my mouth as if they had a life of their own. My voice wasn’t normal either. The uneasy feeling this woman had was spreading to me and I didn’t like it. An uncontrollable shiver swept across the surface of my skin as I kept my eyes fixed on her every move, but she just stood there. As if on autopilot, I continued to probe. “Did he fall and cut himself?” I waited, yet there was no answer. “Did he break his arm?”

“No, no, no, no.” Her voice had turned to suffering, which only troubled me more. The craving for sleep, which only minutes ago had been so strong, now totally deserted me. I raised my voice and took a more aggressive approach.

“Then what happened? Where is he?” I demanded. My stare seemed to drill right through her, and the response she gave continues to haunt me to this day. In the private stillness of my nights it echoes a chilling message that monopolizes my mind. The vision of my son dances before me as her words reverberate. I question life as the echo leaps back and forth through me. What she said has become part of my motivation.

“He’s okay, we just can’t find him.”

The statement immediately brought me to my feet. When I first heard these words, they made no sense at all—and they still make no sense today. How could he possibly be okay if he was lost? I stood there, lightheaded and

bewildered, sure that this was a dream from which I was about to wake. As blood flowed through my body, it actually became peculiarly audible to me. My senses became so keen they were raw and nearly unbearable. How could my son be alone on that mountain? How could he be okay if they couldn't find him? No parent ever wants to hear what she really should have said, especially in a wilderness environment with an elevation of nine thousand feet. *Allyn, your son is lost!* That's what she really wanted me to know, but those words eluded her.

I can't adequately explain the horror that raged through me. In some ways, it was like a falling sensation I've had in dreams when I couldn't wake up. In other ways, it was as though a beast had been turned loose inside of me and it was ripping at the fibers of life that make me who I am. I was under a siege of fear, and it ran rampant through me, twisting and kicking as it delivered grief and distress to every cell in my body. It was a parent's worst nightmare, and I was engulfed by the evil reality that it wasn't going away. I had been snared by a cruel event that mocked my emotions. The more I thought I could gain control, the tighter it gripped me, choking off the free flow of air that I had taken for granted every day of my life. If I could only breathe!

I staggered around the room, speaking to Jaryd as if he were there with me. No matter what direction I looked, I could see his concerned eyes calling for help. How could they take my son on a hike and lose him? How could they?

"They may have lost you, but I promised I would always be there for you." The words flowed past my lips with a zealous passion to hold my son even though he wasn't there. Then I yelled with a crackling voice, "Hold on, Jaryd! Daddy's coming to get you!"

I prayed, and I know God heard every word gushing from my mouth. "Please God," I pleaded. "Let him be okay, and let me find him. Let Jaryd know that his dad is on his way and comfort him."

As I gathered my thoughts, I ran into the store. It was obvious from the looks that greeted me that the magnitude of the situation was unbearable to everyone. Although Jaryd is my son, he was the male child of the Poudre River Resort too. My pain was also theirs, and the concern for Jaryd's safety had become the group's burden. Butch was so worried that he wanted to contact search and rescue right then and there, but I was naïve. I thought I would be able to go to the area where Jaryd disappeared and as soon as he

heard my voice, he would come charging over to me. In my best hopes, the trial of my life would be short and come to a jubilant conclusion. Then, as the day ended, we would all go home.

I grabbed my jacket and sweatpants and impatiently hunted for the keys to my Blazer. While I was behind the store counter, I yelled at Butch to get me one of the resort radios. I planned to be on my way up the trail by the time the rest of the group arrived at the trailhead, and I wanted to be able to communicate with him from my location. As I located my keys and hurried out of the store's front door, the turmoil of emotions jolting through me settled into a knot of panic in my stomach. It was crazy. I just couldn't believe Jaryd was missing!

I got into my Blazer and waited in the parking lot for the people I needed to follow. Patience was a virtue I lacked as I yelled, "Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Brenda, the leader of the Christian Singles Association, came out to my car and informed me the trail was sixteen miles up the road. That didn't make sense to me. When the group initially departed the resort, I was under the impression they were on their way to a trail four or five miles away. What else could go wrong? Even under the best conditions, the drive could take up to thirty minutes or more, assuming I was going to follow the speed limit—which I didn't. I shook my head in disbelief as I started the long journey to the Big South Trail.

As I drove, my world slowly crumbled. I glanced at the odometer over and over hoping to discover I was almost there, but each time my eyes focused on the numbers in front of me, only a tenth of a mile had gone by. It was then I realized I was experiencing the longest drive of my life. My body trembled uncontrollably, and I became a person I didn't know. I was possibly going into some sort of shock as I physically and emotionally transformed into survival mode. I yelled, screamed, beat my steering wheel, and pounded my dashboard. Fate had impaled my heart with an imaginary knife and the pain was excruciating. I beat at my chest in an attempt to lessen its sting, but the pain wouldn't stop.

I remembered how the day before I had dreaded coming up to the resort and making the two-and-a-half-hour arduous drive, fighting the Denver-area traffic monster, only to then climb a thirty-three mile winding ribbon of highway called The Poudre Canyon. I remembered how I kept hearing a voice inside of my head pleading with me, *Don't go!* I thought I had little choice; I had already promised a very good friend of mine, Leanne, that I

would give her a ride, and I didn't want to let her down. Leanne had called to let me know she was running late and was thinking about driving up on her own. Inside, my mind pleaded with my reason telling me, *Let her go, just let her go*. I really did not want to go. I could not stop thinking about the last two trips up the mountain and how they both had caused problems in my life.

The first trip started with a rock hitting my windshield and cracking it. The second trip ended at about eleven-thirty on a Sunday night with my kids and me arriving home tired and eager for bed. I couldn't wait to get them inside. Unfortunately, the comfort of our own beds would have to wait. When I approached the front door, I realized I had left my keys at the resort. Having neither the time nor the energy to drive back to the resort and then back home again, I called our apartment hotline and requested someone come and unlock our door for us. That situation cost me a little money and a lot of aggravation. As I thought about those two events now, an odd echo of a line from the *Lord of the Rings* came to haunt my thoughts: *Third time takes all*.

A current of tears fell from my eyes and down my checks, many of them dripping onto my lap. I wiped at them, but my efforts were in vain as the tide continued its progression down the crevices of my face, making it difficult to see where I was going. "Jaryd, Jaryd, Jaryd!" I wailed as I fought the onslaught of guilt nibbling away at the remaining fragment of control to which I desperately needed to hold on. It was a guilt born of not being there when one of my children needed me. No parent ever wants to let a child down, and it was this notion that was eating away at my remaining sanity.

"Calm down, Allyn, you're going to find him," I said in an attempt to reassure myself that everything was going to be okay, but the more I told myself to calm down, the more I felt myself losing control.

"How could you people lose my son?" My sobbing grew louder as I continued to wipe the tears from my face. "How could you take my son up the mountain to his death? He's a three-year-old who should never have been out of your sight! He's my son, not yours! What have you people done to my son—to me?" My feelings were changing so fast I found myself questioning what was real. The actual world I had perceived became distorted as it mingled with an imagination infused with denial and anger.

Where's my daughter? I asked myself, realizing I had to regain some sort

of composure. I'd never been on the Big South Trail, but I knew there were only a few more curves in the road and I would be there.

When I reached the trailhead, I leaped out of the Blazer. I don't remember turning my vehicle off or setting the parking brake. Noticing a few people standing around who had gone on the hike with my kids, I ran up to them. "Where's my daughter?" I demanded.

For a couple of years prior to Jaryd's disappearance, life had confronted me with several significant challenges. Many people face obstacles that appear large enough to destroy their will to live. Tragically, some even succumb to the challenges of living by taking their own lives. In spite of my own difficulties, I knew I had a lot to live for because I believe God works in mysterious ways; thus, I focused my thoughts on my daughter, Josallyn. She must be devastated because her little brother—her best friend—was missing. Even though she was growing so fast, Jaryd was just a little boy to her who loved to play. He was so full of life and he always tried to play with her; sometimes much to her chagrin, but I know she loved him without a doubt. I desperately wanted to see her and comfort her as best I could. We were the only two on the mountain who were about to experience the shattering of our family.

Josallyn was up on the trail somewhere with Janet, one of the hikers said. The two of them were still looking for Jaryd. Both of my kids were crazy about Janet and she treated them extremely well. My kids had gone on the hike because they wanted to be with her.

With my radio in my pocket, I ran south past the wooden signs at the head of the trail, sure I would at least meet up with Josallyn. At first glance, one would never believe the trail was evil enough to consume my son, but after about a hundred feet, it was obvious the terrain could easily take on the role of predator. It's fascinating how something so attractive can actually lure people into letting their guard down. Then when it's least expected, the trap is sprung and the victim can only sit and wonder what caused the complacency. The trail narrowed and huge, unforgiving drop-offs silently waited for any hiker's mistake. There were a million things to attract the curiosity of a child, and a million things to extinguish a child awash in that same curiosity. The farther I ran, the more I questioned why my babies were on this trail. I would never have brought them here, and if by chance I did, I would never have let go of their hands even for a second.

"Jaryd!" I screamed. The sound of my voice carried through the canyon.

It was an eerie reality to hear my son's name being shouted in the wilderness, but I had no choice but to continue.

"Bro, where are you?" I waited for a response and was only greeted with deafening silence—a silence that squeezed a portion of my life out of me as each second passed unanswered. "Hey, little man, Daddy's here!" As I searched the forest for any sign of him, an excruciating anguish continued to push at the hope that had previously filled my spirit. I was gradually dying from a vanquished heart. *It was just too soon for Jaryd to be a memory!*

I hustled up the path, eager to locate anything or anyone who could aid me in my quest. After several minutes of probing and exploring, I heard voices coming from beyond where I could see. As they came into view, I immediately recognized three faces belonging to members of the hiking party. Although they had been attempting to locate Jaryd, they were now on their way back to the trailhead. They asked if the sheriff's office had been contacted. I told them no, recalling how I had asked Butch to refrain from contacting the authorities. A new wave of frustration washed over me. How could I have ever imagined I would be able to locate Jaryd in this vast forest region that seemed to grow each time I turned my head? I prayed that Butch realized I wasn't being rational and he contacted the necessary people who would initiate a formal search.

One of the hikers volunteered to accompany me back up the mountain so I could continue searching for Jaryd. I know I was chasing my son's vision as it came to rest at the forefront of all my thoughts. I wondered what he was doing that very moment. *Maybe he can see me, but is he injured and unable to call my name? Have I passed his still and lifeless body resting in the folds of the forest?* It would have been easy for him to vanish over the edge of the trail to the river below, or disappear into one of the huge boulder fields that lined many areas of the trail to the east. No matter what, I knew we would find him. There simply was no other option.

While the two of us talked, a broken voice came over the radio. I'm not sure what was said, but it was Butch and he was trying to contact me. As I removed the radio from my pocket, I could hear him yelling. "Hey, Allyn, are you there? Allyn, do you copy?"

I keyed the radio and held it to my face. "Yes, Butch, I can hear you. Please go back down the road and call the sheriff." The Trading Post store was a couple of miles away and they had the nearest phone. I knew Butch realized that was where I was asking him to go.

The news he shared with me made me happy that he was my friend. As soon as I was out of the store, he had sounded the alarm and help was already on the way. The local deputy in the canyon was a tall, friendly man who oversaw that area with a kind and considerate heart. His name is Jose Romero, and I was overwhelmingly relieved to learn he would soon be on location. God had looked into the troubled face of a desperate father and provided his first allotment of peace. It may have been small, but I willingly accepted it.

I radioed Butch and asked him if he thought I should continue up the mountain or wait for Jose. Considering the state I was in, his conclusion was I should return to the trailhead and let search and rescue do the job for which they were trained. However, there were other factors tugging at my heart, and they were as real to me as the ground I stood on. I couldn't set aside the fact that the temperature had already peaked and was now beginning to drop. To make things worse, the sun was racing toward the jagged edge of the abutting horizon and daylight was about to be squeezed from the blueness overhead. The eminent and approaching darkness would surely usher in a night of horrors that I was not prepared to deal with, nor was I sure I could survive the pain waiting to accompany it. As I looked around, I wondered again where my daughter was.

At that moment, I wasn't prepared to abandon my efforts, no matter how feeble they appeared, so up I went. I'm not sure if I thought I was racing against time or if I was running away from the army of demons that seemed to pursue me, but I was determined to locate both of my kids.

When I thought of the darkness and the dropping temperature, time seemed to race by uncontrollably. As I thought of Jaryd in the midst of my search, my mind was flooded with events of our past. I remembered talks we shared and how I used to tell him to always be careful so we could spend another day together. His smile exhibited happiness and his eyes gleamed in a way that caused tremendous warmth to overwhelm me. The way he held my hand each night as he drifted to sleep was a precious daily event to which I looked forward. I'm not so naïve that I believe our days together weren't numbered, but I never realized that yesterday might have been the last. As I reflected on our lives, time stood still.

The radio blurred out some sort of message again and interrupted my private moment of recollection. I knew it was Butch, so I asked him to repeat his last transmission. He said, "Allyn, Jose is here, and he wants some-

body to go back to the resort and get some of Jaryd's clothes for the dogs." I called back to Butch and told him to wait for me. I was on my way, and for some reason I felt I needed to return to the resort with him. The information greeted me with a mixture of excitement and distress. I was thankful the search was about to go to the next level, but it was still my son they were looking for. Dogs were coming to the forest to sniff out my child and the facts surrounding his disappearance would be known soon. A burst of chills exploded over me as goose bumps crawled down my arms.

With a brisk pace, I headed back toward the trailhead. The trip down gave me the opportunity to rescan the terrain from a different angle, but still no sign of Jaryd. When I emerged into the parking lot, I noticed Jose gathering information for the search, so I went to where he was and asked for Butch. Jose informed me Butch had already departed for the resort to expedite the return of Jaryd's clothing. We were about to wave my child's clothing under the noses of dogs, and although I knew this was the right thing to do, it made me sick to think about.

Curiously, I looked around and inventoried who was on site. As different groups came into view, I realized others had also noticed me, and I could feel their stares weighing heavily on me. I wasn't sure what to say or even how to react, but I quickly understood I was the "on scene" focal point to the others. Things were happening so fast, and the role I had been cast into was beyond anything I had ever imagined.

Then it happened. There she was, standing in front of me. Our eyes met and locked as we became fixated on each other. Janet broke down and wept uncontrollably as she ran toward me. Although I was glad to see her, I could feel waves of torment chewing at my insides.

When she reached me, she threw her arms around my shoulders. I could feel her body convulsing as she mumbled, "Allyn, I'm so sorry. I'm *so* sorry." For some reason, an aura of confidence seemed to engulf me as I held her. I'm not sure what it was, but I actually felt we were standing at the threshold of a marvelous event that only appeared to be sinister. It still amazes me how feelings can be so misleading. The troubling mixture of emotions had returned, and they were swimming through my head again, ready to dig in for the long haul.

In a reassuring voice, I told her, "Don't worry, we're gonna find him." I'm not sure where that came from, but my ability to be a comforter surprised me. I asked, "Where's Josallyn?" Janet told me she had taken her back

to the resort hoping to discover that someone had found Jaryd and taken him home. When Janet realized Jaryd wasn't there, she returned to the trail without Josallyn. It was a detail that would later trouble me as I attempted to put the pieces of Jaryd's disappearance together. The more complex the puzzle became, the more people retreated from it. I had fully expected to see Josallyn, and when I learned she was no longer around, another surge of depression fluttered through me. No matter what I did, I couldn't escape the tribulations that ensnared me. Once again, confusion and pain were on the move as they swirled through the confines of my mind.

A few months after Jaryd's disappearance, Josallyn informed me that Janet was tired while she was on the trail and she decided to lie down on a rock to take a small nap. Josallyn lay with her and she also closed her eyes for a few moments. When they awoke, Jaryd was gone. It pains me to think my daughter now understands this action could be the very reason her brother vanished. *How could someone take their eyes off a three-year-old little boy, regardless of how tired they were?*

After I spoke with Janet, Jose approached me and provided some much needed emotional support. He informed me that most situations like these were resolved within twenty-four hours. As the trained search and rescue members arrived on location, I also heard a comment that made a dramatic impact on me. One search member said, "Don't worry; if he's up there, we'll find him." I believed that person with all of my heart because he was experienced in these matters. In retrospect, I can now interpret that statement as "The only way we're not going to find him is if he's not up there." I have been told by several people that many of the searchers believe Jaryd wasn't actually there, but not the sheriff. The sheriff said Jaryd was dead on the mountain. It's the ultimate thing an abductor would want to hear if he or she had taken Jaryd. It would all but guarantee success.

I waited around the trailhead for a while to see what was happening. I honestly believed someone was about to walk off the trail holding Jaryd's hand, and I desperately wanted to be there to experience that! I wanted to hear the talented search and rescue team say, "We told you we'd find him!"

As I waited, I watched two fishermen exit the trail. They were swarmed by deputies and questioned about the now "missing little boy." I finally decided to head back to the resort and fill part of my void with the presence of my daughter. I also realized it was time to make the dreaded phone calls to relatives. The circle of pain was about to multiply.

When I arrived at the resort, I ran up to Josallyn and gave her a big hug. I held her tightly, feeling her brother through her because they were a team, formed perhaps by sharing the same womb at different points in time. I didn't want to let go after the reality of this temporal life had confronted me. I had taken hugs for granted, and I would have given anything to be hugging Jaryd again. I was going to experience this hug from my daughter for all the gusto it could produce. As I squeezed her small body, I broke down and cried. I believe this was when Josallyn understood the magnitude of the situation and that Jaryd was actually gone. She returned my pain with tears of her own as we both realized the two of us were possibly the only family we had.

The embrace finally ended and I slowly pulled away. I gazed deeply into the glistening brown pools of love that were fixed upon me. The eyes of small children are amazing places to become lost in, and at that moment I found so much comfort in hers. Our children see us for much more than we actually are, as they look deep into the shadows of our souls. Her eyes took me to a place that gave me the courage not to lose hope. I could feel strength beginning to percolate from somewhere deep within me, but I could not exactly identify the location of its inner source.



After returning to the resort, I mentally inventoried the things I needed to do. With my newly found courage, I grabbed my phone and headed to the bathroom. I knew I could close the door behind me and be in the only place that assured some type of privacy. I also knew there would be no way to control my emotions while informing family members about the tragic events of the day, and I did not want anyone watching as I broke down and cried. The closed door would afford me the opportunity to shed what dignity I had. I knew the alarm was sounding to the floodgates of my heart, and a tearful rage was on the verge of being unleashed.

I decided to place the first call to my mother in El Centro, California. My hands trembled as I punched at the number pad on the phone. A dull tone in the receiver signified her phone was ringing. It caused my heart and mind to race feverishly as I searched for the proper words to deaden the impact of my news. I wanted so badly to be the child again so I could be reassured everything would be all right, but the control of this situation

even escaped the command of my parents. I inhaled deeply, anticipating the voice of mother at the other end of the line. When she answered, her voice was happy. Hearing her caused me to weep in a manner I had never experienced. With a crushed spirit, one's sobbing is birthed from a painful moan that cries out from the soul. It is a deep-rooted, groaning sensation that searches for deliverance as the pitch of its bellow increases. Its only purpose is to purge the body of the horrendous grief afflicting it.

Several seconds passed before I was able to communicate with her. I'm not sure how I did it, but I barely whispered, "Mom...Mom, my...my son is missing." I want you to close your eyes and, if you have children, remember when they were three. Now imagine this happening to one of them. Whatever you imagine, it is a thousand times worse when it is real. Each word slowly stabbed into me like a dull dagger, and the sensation created the most unbearable experience I had ever known. I dropped the phone, crouched against the wall, and cried.

My mother's voice became a faint sound, as if someone were speaking to me from a radio with its volume turned almost off. Although scarcely audible, I heard her ask, "Allyn, what's wrong?" I'm not sure she really understood what was happening, but she waited for a second and continued. "Honey, are you okay?" It took all the energy I had to reach down and retrieve the phone from the floor, but I managed to pick it up and try again.

"Mom, they lost my son in the mountains. Mom, Jaryd's missing, and I don't know what to do!" I wasn't sure she could understand me because my words seemed incoherent. We tried to speak for several minutes, but anguish continued to steal my ability to put more than three or four words together. I held the phone to my ear and listened to the silence. If nothing else, it was nice to know she was there even though my words were trapped in my throat. I finally told her I needed to call my brother, Arlyn, and hung up.

I couldn't make it through one call, so I wasn't sure how I would make it through a second. I had no desire to relive the experience I had just shared with my mother, but I dialed anyway. Again the phone buzzed in my ear as I waited to hear a voice, knowing it could be a number of people. My nephew, Josh, who was seventeen at the time, answered the phone, and I told him I needed to speak with his dad. He told me his parents had gone to San Diego and that they probably wouldn't be home until Sunday afternoon. I briefly told Josh about his cousin. He questioned me in a loud voice of disbelief. The news hit him pretty hard, and he promised he would do everything he

could to contact his parents. Although he was never able to locate them, he called me several times during the first night.

It was time to make the call I dreaded the most. I needed to call Jaryd's mother, Angie. She had moved to San Diego about the time I relocated to Colorado. I had been teaching in the Imperial Valley, and my children and I needed a change. I had left her phone number back in my apartment in Littleton, not planning to speak with her from the resort. I wasn't sure how to contact her, so I called her mother and, for the third painful time, recounted the story of the day. Both grandmothers now had the news. I asked her for Angie's number, and then I told her I would call her later with hourly updates.

After speaking with Angie, I wasn't sure what her plans would be. I contacted my father and delivered the devastating news to him.

Several hours had passed, and with each step I took, I reassured myself God was in control. I know He doesn't give us more than we can handle, so I concluded He obviously knew me better than I knew myself. I would have never guessed I could survive an event like this involving one of my children. My heart goes out to all the people who have lost children to accidents and diseases, but to this day, I still don't seem any closer to knowing what actually happened or why. My faith tells me Jaryd is in God's hands, but not necessarily in heaven. I would like to think he was taken to heaven in some type of rapture. Now wouldn't that be a story!

After the phone calls, I headed back to the trailhead. My mind jumped around so much I was sure the pain was going to kill me, so I needed to be back at the site. The leader of the search and rescue unit was there when I arrived, and he was in the process of establishing some sort of command center. The people involved with the search were extremely concerned, and it was encouraging to learn the sheriff's department had taken charge of the entire operation.

One of the investigators continued to interview the people who had been on the trail during the day. After I spoke with the investigator myself, I questioned the sergeant in charge concerning the feasibility of having a helicopter on scene with infrared capabilities. I was told the helicopter they used had an infrared system that was inoperable and there was nowhere else to turn. I later learned, from several sources, that they would have been more than willing to use their infrared helicopters in the search for Jaryd, but they were never asked to render assistance. However, the sergeant did assure

me a chopper would be in the air by morning if Jaryd had not been located by then. He also told me they were trying to get a Huey out of Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming and that they hoped it would be airborne by eight the next morning.

What a blessing it was to watch as the search and rescue members prepared themselves as if Jaryd were their own child. The urgency displayed in their eyes was staggering as they grabbed their dogs and charged toward the trail. These people had no idea what failure meant, and their attitudes were contagious, encouraging, and full of confidence. I felt so proud they were on my team as doubt began to shrink in my heart. The challenge was theirs to overcome, and they were primed to meet all obstacles head-on. They created a healthy faith in me that my son would be back in my arms before any helicopter had the chance to get airborne.

“Go,” I whispered. “Find my son.”

As I waited at the trailhead, each passing second seemed to drag by at a lethargic pace. I couldn't imagine Jaryd alone in the darkness consumed by a raging fear that could only lead to delirium. It is not fair to expect a child to exist in a shroud of blackness that would cause his imagination to spring from one life-threatening apparition to another. The mental torment he was exposed to hovered above me and gnawed in to the inner places of my heart where I usually only found God's solitude. The thoughts that danced before me in a heinous cerebral waltz were crippling. The chill on my skin from the dropping temperatures was also maddening. Never had I realized the uncomfortable sensation of cold air as it encircled exposed skin the way I had that night. The cold was tolerable at first, but the longer it worked on me, the more I desired relief. If my son were out there, alive, the dark and cold had settled in as deplorable companions and they were set on robbing him of safety and comfort. It was a fact of which I could hardly bare to think.

I tried to convince Janet to return to the resort with me, but she informed me she wasn't leaving without Jaryd. I reluctantly climbed into my Blazer and started the long journey back. I drove at a slow pace imposed by my need to wipe the tears from my eyes.

That evening at the resort was difficult. I felt I was being born into a different person and the labor pains were fierce. The investigator had put the hikers in my apartment and he questioned them one at a time. I desperately wanted some privacy, and although I couldn't sleep, I was emotionally drained. I stayed out in the store away from everybody. I checked the clock

every fifteen minutes or so, hoping the sun was about to make its appearance in the east, but the night dragged on. Many calls came in, and with each new ring of the phone, I hoped it was the good news I had anticipated from the rescue team, but it wasn't. I still had confidence that if they didn't find Jaryd during the night, they would find the tough little guy in the morning.

I tried to sleep that first night, but the hurt was too overwhelming. Avery, my younger brother in Nebraska, told my mother that he was going to sleep outside without a blanket until they located Jaryd. I could relate to how he felt—the comforts of home only created guilt knowing Jaryd might be out there somewhere without the normal luxuries of the resort. Even my daughter kept waking through the night to hug me. The tenderness she showed me was good, but her actions could not take away the pain that was encompassing our lives.

I waited all night...and nothing happened.