

Chapter One

The Evangelicals Killed My Son

“Tomás, I think Robin drowned,” Yudie said.

Her words caused my head to snap back as if an invisible leash had suddenly yanked on my neck from behind.

“What?” I asked harshly, my tone of voice far from the “Christ-like” gentleness and compassion with which missionaries are supposed to carry themselves. The four words she had spoken were completely ridiculous; they made absolutely no sense to me. English was not Yudie’s first language, and I assumed she had chosen the wrong word.

“I think Robin *drowned*,” Yudie repeated, emphasizing the word as if I were the one who didn’t understand English. “He was over there snorkeling with Ty and now he’s not there. No one knows where he is.”

I looked at Yudie and the three Dominicans that were standing on the other side of her. I tried to read them. Was this *una broma*? A joke? Were they just trying to see how gullible I was? If they were, none was looking at me for a reaction. They were all just standing there staring out over the water.

“Ty is still out there, but we can’t see Robin anywhere,” Yudie said, trying to get me up to speed. She wasn’t pretending; that much I could tell. But I still didn’t at all believe that what she was saying was by any means a reality. She was obviously mistaken. Robin couldn’t have drowned.

“See, that’s Ty, there,” Yudie said, pointing to the snorkel and the white surface of a man’s back that were both protruding from the water about 100 feet out from the beach. He was moving around in the water out beyond the reef, as if he were looking around for something beneath the surface. The waves beyond the reef were strong compared to the relative calm of the water inside the reef. Ty’s body, if that was really him, was being tossed about by the motion of the waves.

None of the people in the water on the beach side of the reef seemed to have a clue that something terrible had happened, if indeed it had. The water was full of people from our group—Dominicans and Americans—and every one of them seemed oblivious to the possibility that a tragedy could be unfolding.

The guys standing beside Yudie spoke in Spanish and pointed to various places in the water. I couldn’t understand everything they were saying, but I could discern that they were discussing where they had last seen Robin. Like Yudie, they were all from the small town of La Victoria where Robin lived, the

stinky hellhole where my wife, Dana, and I had been living for the last nine months.

Each of the guys standing on the other side of Yudie was in his early twenties; Yudie was still in her late teens.

There was Edwin, the tall baseball player with chiseled abs who was enjoying his quasi-celebrity status as a new member of the St. Louis Cardinals' Dominican farm team.

Then there was Nelson, who some of his friends in La Victoria called *Mono*. Monkey.

Standing beside Nelson was Tito.

When I'd asked earlier that day why Tito was swimming in the ocean in jeans—not cut-offs but full-length jeans—Yudie looked at me with her classic *Are you really that stupid?* look. "He doesn't *have* a pair of shorts," she had said, as if it were obvious. "He's poor. I mean, everyone in La Victoria is poor, but Tito's *really* poor."

The fact that Tito couldn't afford a pair of shorts had been a shock to me; the fact that Robin might have drowned was too incomprehensible for me to even be shocked by it.

"Ay, Yudie," Tito said, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pronouncing her name the way she and everyone else pronounced it, like the English name Judy. "*Ay, Dios mío. Que pasó?*" Oh my God. What happened?

Yudie leaned her head on Tito's shoulder, and the two of them continued to stare out at the water.

I looked around for Dana and spotted her down the beach a ways, sitting on a beach towel and leaning back on her elbows. She was chatting with a couple of the other girls from our church back in Denver. They were talking and nodding their heads and laughing.

On that part of the beach, life was as it was supposed to be.

I debated whether or not to say anything to Dana or anyone else in our group about what I had just been told, and determined that it was too early to jump to any conclusions. Surely Robin hadn't drowned. He probably just swam off in another direction without anyone noticing and would reappear at any minute, strolling down the beach with that unbearable grin of his, that "I just got laid but can't tell you by whom" grin.

Word travels fast in the Dominican culture. Within the next five minutes, the group standing on the shore and watching for Robin grew to include everyone from all three busloads of Americans and Dominicans that had come from La Victoria and arrived at the beach less than two hours earlier. The group included about a dozen people on a missions team from Lookout Mountain Community Church, the Presbyterian church in Denver to which Dana and

belonged. The group also included the *hermanos* from our sister church in La Victoria, as well as a couple dozen *amigos* – young people from La Victoria who were either friends with some church members or had quickly made friends with some of the Americans that week. The church in La Victoria made a very clear distinction between the *hermanos* and the *amigos*. The *hermanos* were those who they knew to be true Christians – “brothers” in Christ, part of the true family of God. The *amigos* were just that – friends, not family – and were those that they considered not to be true Christians.

Edwin, Nelson and Tito were *hermanos*. Robin and Yudie were Catholic, and therefore considered *amigos*.

When Ty emerged from the water, he looked exhausted and concerned. Upon stepping out of the water he was inundated with so many questions at once he looked shell-shocked.

“What happened?”

“*Que pasó, Corbata?*”

“Where’s Robin?”

“*Se ahogó?*”

“Did you see anything?”

“Where did you last see him?”

“We think he might have drowned.”

“The last anyone saw him he was snorkeling with you.”

Ty was a guy from Lookout about my age. He spoke some Spanish, and had become friends with Robin that week after they discovered that they shared an affinity for chess. Robin and the other Dominicans had taken to calling him *Corbata*, the Spanish word for a necktie.

“We were swimming out by the reef, looking for interesting things beneath the surface,” Ty began to explain. “Robin had borrowed a mask, but didn’t have a snorkel. At one point I began swimming in a different direction, looking at the fish and the coral, and Robin and I drifted away from one another. At one point I heard some guys yelling and pointing out in the water beyond me. I turned and saw Robin floating, but without his mask on, which I thought was odd. I got worried and tried to swim out to him, but between the waves and the undercurrent I got disoriented. I tried looking around for him, but eventually I got kind of worried that I might not make it back into shore, as the undercurrent was making it harder and harder to swim. I’m not sure what happened to Robin. Do you really think he drowned?”

This was getting to be too much. I felt like I’d just had one too many drinks, and the dizziness was growing increasingly heavy.

Things rarely went according to plan in the DR, but this was definitely not something that had been on our itinerary. As the “missionaries” from Lookout –

oh, how I cringed whenever anyone called us missionaries – it was Dana and me who had organized the week’s events, including the trip to the beach. It had been a busy week, occupied mostly with the task of building new pews for the church in La Victoria, a task which I considered to be a poor use of time and money but which the church in La Victoria had pushed to be the main activity for the group.

I had tried to get the church to take on some kind of community service project that the two churches could do together for the benefit of the whole community, like going around town picking up all the trash. Pastor Bello, pastor of the church in La Victoria, didn’t care for that direction, and swayed the group away from that. He knew that the group coming down had money in the trip budget for a project, and to me it seemed that the only ideas he was open to were ones that involved using the money to make the church nicer. If I sound a little cynical, it’s because I was.

Working into the itinerary a trip to the beach, on the other hand, was easy for me to go along with. La Victoria was under an hour’s drive from the coast, and it would be a shame for the group visiting from Denver to travel all the way to the DR and not have the chance to experience the turquoise waters and white sands of a Caribbean beach. Not only would it be great fun for the group from Colorado and a nice excursion for the people of La Victoria, Dana and I could use the sand time as well. Any opportunity to get out of La Victoria was welcomed.

Today was Friday, the last day of the group’s visit. The next morning they would board a plane and fly back to Denver. We would be sad to see them go; they had provided a welcomed diversion from our frustrating, uncomfortable life in La Victoria.

Various theories about what had happened to Robin floated around the group standing on the shore. Maybe he had gotten knocked against the coral and hit his head. That was certainly conceivable. While the water on the beach side of the reef was fairly calm – calm enough to snorkel – the water outside of the reef was rough, and seemed to be growing rougher as the day went on. The waves were strong, and were cresting just outside of the reef. If Robin had gone over the reef to the other side, it wasn’t hard to imagine what could have happened.

Everyone agreed that Robin was a strong swimmer, and that he was less likely than most to have gotten himself into trouble. A lean, muscular 23-year-old, Robin was both a student and a teacher of Kung Fu.

I had met Robin two years earlier in 1996, on my first trip to La Victoria. I was 32 at the time, and had never been on a mission trip before. I wasn’t even sure why I was on the trip. I hardly knew anyone at our church, and was sure that if anyone got to know the real me, they’d be greatly disappointed in what

they found. I didn't read my Bible very much, and when I did I found it to be more a source of confusion and frustration than inspiration. I didn't have a very vibrant prayer life, and when I did try to pray, it was impossible to keep my mind from wandering. Worst of all, I'd voted for Clinton in the last election, and, unlike Clinton, I actually inhaled. On a regular basis.

I'd developed a strong distaste and distrust of all things church in my twenties, and yet somehow Dana and I had found ourselves attending Lookout semi-regularly for about 3 years. It was a different kind of church than either one of us had experienced before, and was enough outside the box that I found it to be about as good as a church could be. One Sunday at Lookout I heard an announcement about a mission trip to visit our sister church in the Dominican Republic, and a few weeks later I found myself in a third world country for the first time in my life.

Just as had happened on the trip this week, the group on that first trip found themselves with no lack of amigos around; young Dominican men who spoke English to some degree and were eager to practice their language skills and befriend some Americans. As I spoke no Spanish at all on that first trip, I was happy to get to know Robin and the other guys. We would walk together around the streets of La Victoria, and I would point to things and ask how to say them in Spanish.

"*Como se dice?*" I would say, pointing to a house.

"*Casa,*" Robin would answer.

"*Oh, si, casa,*" I would repeat. Duh.

Robin lived in a small house on Calle Altagracia, one block over from the main street, Calle Duarte. Our sister church, an Assemblies of God church called *Encuentro Con Dios*, was located about a block and a half from Robin's house. In between the church and Robin's house was *Club Gallistico*, the local cock-fighting club. I'd been instructed by the local hermanos that the cock-fighting club was off limits for *evangelicos*, the word they used to describe themselves and other true believers. I was fine with not going to the club; not only did it not sound that enjoyable to watch roosters peck each other silly, I had also always been really uncomfortable with the term "cock fighting" and didn't want anything to do with it. Of course, I knew that the word in this usage referred to a rooster, but even so, I would reflexively squeeze my thighs together whenever anyone even mentioned the term.

After a half-hour or so of people standing on the beach waiting for Robin to appear, one of the Dominicans suggested that maybe an effort should be made to look for his body. A couple of Dominicans hurried off, apparently on a mission to do that.

Hearing that was like having someone throw an entire glass of *limonada frozen* at my face. Find his body? He wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead. Why on earth were people talking about finding his body?

Come on Robin, where are you?

I was still sure that he would show up at any minute, grinning, clueless that people were thinking that he might have drowned. My brain couldn't even come close to accepting that maybe Robin was really gone. We had just been goofing around earlier that morning.

Robin and I had developed a good friendship over the nine months that Dana and I had been living in La Victoria. While the novelty of many of the Dominicans – both hermanos and amigos – had worn off a few months into our time there, Robin was one of the guys that I still enjoyed hanging out with. He loved to laugh, and loved to give me a hard time.

We had had a long-running friendly debate over the importance of rising early in the morning. I was a night owl, and preferred staying up late and sleeping in to getting up early in the morning. Robin, on the other hand, was a morning person. I found it strange that a 23-year-old in a town as boring and smelly as La Victoria could find anything worth getting up for at five o'clock in the morning, but Robin apparently found plenty. He said he loved to get up early and go for a run, while things were quiet and there was still a slight chill in the air.

I had to admit, a chill in the air did sound nice. I had grown accustomed to beginning to sweat the minute I rolled out of bed, and having my sweat glands not shut down until well after dark each night.

"Besides," Robin had argued, "early in the morning is when you can hear God speak the most clearest." He said it with his grin fully deployed, raising his eyebrows like it was one of the greatest and most mysterious secrets in life.

After weeks of trying to persuade me to get up early and go for a run with him one day, I finally gave in to the pressure. At first he tried to persuade me to get up at 5:30. There was no way I was going to do that. I countered with 8:00, saying that that was early for me.

"8:00? No, that's not early! You're laaaaazy!" he said, enjoying the English word and pronouncing it in a way that made it sound like an onomatopoeia.

We settled on 7:00. He knocked on our front door right on time, unusual for a Dominican. I opened the door and there he was, big-smiled, dressed in a t-shirt and some cut-off jeans, and some very worn out fake Nikes. I was also in a t-shirt and shorts, but had on a pair of \$80 running shoes that had been used very little in the several years I had owned them.

We started jogging through La Victoria. Eager to show that I could still run at a decent pace even though I was eleven years older than Robin, I started off strong.

“No, that’s too *fahst*,” he warned. “You make yourself tired too soon. Slow down.”

I took his advice, not knowing how far he planned to take me. We jogged to the edge of town, and ended up on a dirt road that led into the sugar cane fields. My stamina was beginning to fade, but my mind was kept alert by the occasional rat that would dart across the road from one cane field to another. I had gotten somewhat used to seeing the rats outside; seeing them inside our house was still a bit hard to deal with.

The cane was high as we ran down the road, towering over our heads and limiting our visibility of the surrounding countryside. It was becoming harder and harder for me to maintain the leisurely pace at which we were running. Robin, on the other hand, was jabbering away the entire time.

Just when I was about to admit that I needed a rest, Robin stopped at a clearing in the cane. I bent over and rested with my hands on my knees, failing at my attempt to not look winded. We exchanged some small talk about the heat and the sugar cane, but I kept my speaking to a minimum in order to let my lungs recover.

“Tell me, Tomás, why do evangelicos hate catolicos so much?” Robin asked me out of the blue.

Other than the difficulty of being able to talk and breath at the same time, it wasn’t that hard of a question for me to answer. I’d had many discussions with the hermanos in our sister church about Catholics and Catholicism, and knew their position pretty well. In fact, they were pretty outspoken about it.

A few months earlier, the church had invited an apparently well-known evangelist to come and preach at the church. The church members promoted the event all week, putting up flyers and inviting people to come to the service.

In preparation for what they must have thought was going to be a powerful message, the church took one of the giant speakers from their PA system and placed it right in the front doorway of the church, pointed out toward the street. This way, they must have figured, God might use the preacher’s message to minister to people who happened to be passing by the church on the sidewalk or street.

There was no doubt that the guy could preach. He had the hermanos worked up in no time, and there were even more “amens” and “hallelujahs” from the congregation than usual.

About halfway into his message, he began to preach against Catholics and Catholicism. He said that Catholics were all going to burn in hell apart from

Jesus if they didn't repent from their idolatry of praying to Mary and the saints. He even went as far to call the current pope, John Paul II, the Antichrist. Dana and I squirmed, not just because the message made us uncomfortable, but more so because the church was projecting this message through the loudspeaker out into the street, in a community that was probably 80 or 90% Catholic. And yet, they couldn't understand why people slammed doors in their faces when they went door to door trying to tell people about Jesus.

As much as I was reluctant to answer Robin's question and open the whole can of worms, I figured it was better than running.

"Evangelicals, or at least a lot of them, think that there are some teachings in the Catholic church that are not good doctrine," I told Robin.

"*Por ejemplo?*" Robin asked.

"Well, like praying to Mary. A lot of evangelicals think that it's a sin to pray to Mary."

"How can it be sin to pray to Mary?" Robin asked, incredulous. "She is the mother of Jesus!"

"Yes, but she was a human, not God," I answered. It wasn't hard for me to recite these points of doctrinal differences. It wasn't just a Dominican thing; the church I'd grown up in taught the same thing. "Evangelicals believe that it's a sin to pray to anyone other than the one true God."

"Or Jesus?"

"Yes, but Jesus was God, too. The trinity. La trinidad. God in three persons."

"So it's ok to pray to Jesus, but not Mary."

"Right. That's what most of the evangelicals here believe, anyway."

"Do evangelicos in the US believe that too?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Most of them, probably."

"Is that what you believe?" Robin asked.

I sighed. I wasn't sure. It was certainly what I'd been taught to believe, but I was beginning to wonder if it really mattered. "I don't know," I admitted.

"But Mary has, *como se dice, 'el favor de Dios'?*"

"The favor of God."

"Si, si. Mary had the favor of God more than any other human born," Robin said. "The Bible says that, no? We pray to her to ask God to help us. We hope that if Mary goes to Jesus and ask something for us, Jesus does it because he loves her."

I nodded. Not in agreement as much as understanding.

"Que mas?" Robin asked.

I sighed. "Well, I think that most evangelicals believe that praying to the saints is wrong too," I said. "They were just men and women, not God, so why

should we pray to them? They were just humans, and now they're dead. Most evangelicals would probably say that is not right to pray to them. And probably even worse is praying to a statue or a painting or an icon. I think lots of evangelicals think of that as being just like the idolatry of the people in the Old Testament, when they worshipped a golden calf and things like that."

"But how can it be – what?"

"Idolatry?"

"How can it be idolatry if they are *Christian* saints?" Robin asked with genuine curiosity and a big smile. He was genuinely perplexed and perhaps slightly amused by the position I was explaining. "The saints are our...*modelos, los que* lived their lives like the best Christians. They loved Jesus more than anybody. So how can asking for their help be wrong?"

I had to think about it. I wasn't really clear on the theology of that.

"And why do evangelicos have so many different kind of churches?" Robin asked. "There are so many different kind of churches of evangelicos: *Asambleas de Dios, Bautistas, Adventistas...* why there are so many?"

"Well, at different points I guess the churches started to argue about different matters of doctrine, and different denominations stress different things theologically," I said, knowing that it wasn't going to be a very good answer for Robin.

"But it's *stupid*," Robin said. "If we worship the same God and love the same Jesus, isn't it stupid to let things like *doctrina* make us separate? Aren't we all part of the same church? Aren't we all brothers and sisters?"

Robin was preaching to the choir. It was one of the things that frustrated me the most about the church – the division inside it. From my perspective, too many people had spent too much time trying to define theology in exact terms, using their definitions to decide who was in and who was out. Whenever I tried to read the Bible for myself to try and figure out theological questions, things always seemed pretty ambiguous and I frequently encountered contradictory statements in different parts of the Bible. I could never understand why so many Christians could be so black and white about things that to me seemed really, really gray.

I had been taught essentially the same thing that our sister church in La Victoria was teaching, only I had been taught it from a different angle. The commonality between what I'd been taught in our family's fundamentalist evangelical church and what our Pentecostal sister church in La Victoria taught was that Catholics weren't true Christians. The irony was that I was also taught growing up that Pentecostals weren't very good Christians either, or at least were way off track from where God wanted them to be, what with all the Benny Hinn stuff and speaking in tongues and all. And here I was, trying to get a

Pentecostal church in the Dominican Republic to broaden their definition of what a Christian was by including Catholics. The irony wasn't lost on me.

"Ay, Tomás," Robin sighed. "Why can't we all just get along?" he asked. I didn't know why, but the question sounded oddly familiar.

I shrugged and shook my head. "I don't know, Robin. I wish we could. The animosity and mistrust between denominations is one of the things that frustrates me most about Christians."

I saw no trace of any of that now, as I looked down the beach and saw Pastor Bello and a group of hermanos from the church holding hands in a circle, praying for Robin.

In typical Dominican Pentecostal fashion, they prayed with fervor. They prayed with unity. They prayed with volume.

Their prayers were very unlike the form of group prayer I'd grown accustomed to as a child and a youth. In those settings, people would politely take turns praying out loud, but in a soft, calm and humble tone of voice. Everyone else remained quiet while one person prayed, presumably so that we could hear that person's prayer and agree with it silently in our spirits.

When the hermanos from La Victoria prayed, it was like a symphony. One person would start out, setting the tone for the prayer. But as he or she prayed, others would slowly join in. At first they would just pepper the first person's prayer with a "Yes, Lord," or "Thank you, Lord." Gradually, others would start praying their own prayers, out loud and simultaneously. The whole thing would build in volume and intensity to a crescendo, at which point everyone in the room or the circle would be passionately crying out to God at once, individually but somehow united in spirit and theme. Then, just as slowly and naturally as it had built to a climax, it would calm to a trickle, sounding just like it had at the beginning. It would end when everyone had stopped speaking except the last person, who would ultimately end it with just a whisper and an "Ah-main" – Amen.

The group prayed for Robin. We prayed for a miracle. We prayed for his safety. We prayed for God to show his power and bring Robin back.

God would not grant our requests.

By mid-afternoon, a couple of rowboats with guys in orange t-shirts – the *Defensa Civil* – would go out in search of Robin's body. But the waves had only become even more intense, and the boats couldn't stay out in the water for long before the men became fatigued with trying to control the boat and keep it from smashing into the reef. By five o'clock, the guys who seemed to be the most senior of the various Civil Defense volunteers announced that they would have to call off the search for Robin's body. The water was simply too rough. They would go out again in the morning, when hopefully the water would be calm.

Pastor Bello approached me. "Tomás, I think we need to go back to La Victoria. There's nothing we can do here anymore. We need to go back."

I knew that he was right, and nodded my head. I couldn't speak. It had all seemed so surreal up until now. But now, we were forced to take some action based on the facts of the situation, and to me the action we now needed to take seemed completely unimaginable.

We would get back in the buses and return to La Victoria. Without Robin.

My eyes filled with tears. Pastor Bello squeezed my arm. He could tell I was shaken up. I nodded at him in appreciation, and he went to round everyone up.

Dana was standing by my side, and she grabbed my hand and held it tight. I looked at her. She was holding up, but I could see a look of great concern for me in her eyes. I saw that look and lost it. She held me as I sobbed, rubbing her hand slowly up and down my back. I needed her comfort. It was the only thing that felt good about the whole world at that point.

The trip back to La Victoria was a quiet one. Where usually there would be laughing and singing, the only conversations taking place were subdued. An anxious despair hung over the group, like a storm cloud looming over an outdoor wedding.

The buses pulled up in front of the church and everyone climbed out. But rather than the group dispersing to go home and get cleaned up for the *despidida* party the church had planned as a farewell for the group from Denver, everyone lingered. I saw Pastor Bello exit the bus he'd been riding in, and then proceed to walk directly to the shack-like police station that was across the street from the church.

He came out of the police station a few minutes later, accompanied by two uniformed policemen. He approached me and grabbed me gently by the elbow, guiding me to a place where we could speak discretely.

"We need to go over to Robin's house and speak to his parents," Pastor Bello told me.

I couldn't imagine doing that. Maybe I had misunderstood his Spanish. "Que?" I asked.

"We need to go over to Robin's house and speak to his parents," he repeated. "*La familia*. We need to go there. The policemen will go with us."

"Who should go?" I asked.

"All of us," Pastor Bello explained.

"All of us...the whole group from Denver?" I asked.

"Si."

Shit. This was gonna be hard.

I gathered our group together and explained the situation. “Pastor Bello wants us all to go over to Robin’s house and give our condolences to his parents.” I could see the dread sweep across the faces of everyone in our group, Dana included. “I don’t know why he wants us to do this,” I said, “but I think we need to do it. We need to assume that he knows what’s best in this culture and this situation.”

“Why the cops?” someone asked softly.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

We all walked as a group toward Robin’s house. We walked past the Club Gallistico and turned the corner onto Robin’s street. I was not prepared for what I saw. There were already dozens of people in the street in front of Robin’s home. Word had spread.

We got to the front of the house and stopped. The tension in the air was even thicker than the humidity. The people who were gathered in front of the house stared at us, whispering to one another. Some pointed directly at me.

Pastor Bello motioned for me to accompany him. The policemen followed behind us as we entered the home.

Robin’s family’s house was a small shack comprised of rough, uneven boards for walls and rusty corrugated tin sheets for a roof. The house was right up against the curb of the street, but for whatever reason the front door was a big step down from the curb. As in many towns in the DR, at some point the government had poured concrete curbs along the sides of the street, but had never gotten around to actually paving the street. So the road itself was a rutted, potholed dirt road, lined on both sides by a concrete curb. Robin’s house was located in a place where the road started going downhill, and the terrain off to the side of the road on Robin’s side of the street quickly dropped off below the grade of the road. Robin’s house sat somewhat precariously on the side of this drop. Apparently, when the curb was poured, the engineers decided that it wouldn’t have made sense to have the whole road dip down to the level where Robin’s house was situated. So instead, the curb was simply placed about a third of the way up the front wall of the house. This meant that you had to step over the curb and then take a big step down to the threshold of their front door, ducking your head so you didn’t smack it on the door frame as you entered the house.

There was lots of noise and crying and chaos inside the house, but as we entered the noise level dropped dramatically. Pastor Bello led me to Robin’s mother, who was standing in a ratty housedress next to what I assumed to be some of Robin’s sisters.

She looked at Pastor Bello, at me, and at the policemen. She started to sway, and her eyes fluttered. I thought she was going to pass out.

Pastor Bello approached her and began to speak softly. I could only make out bits and pieces, partly because of my limited Spanish, and partly because of the quietness with which Pastor Bello was speaking.

“No,” Robin’s mother moaned. *“No, no puede ser.”*

No, it can’t be.

As Pastor Bello continued to speak, apparently trying to gently explain what had happened, her response grew louder.

“No! No puede ser!”

Her moaning grew louder and louder, until it was a full-on scream.

“Donde está mi hijo? Hijo, donde estás?”

Where is my son? Son, where are you?

Robin’s mother became more and more distressed, screaming at us, screaming at Pastor Bello, screaming at no one in particular. The policemen went forward and attempted to calm her down. She was flailing about, and they tried to grab on to her arms just to try and get her to relax. Grabbing her only made her more upset. The policemen backed off, trying to give her some space.

Pastor Bello turned to me, giving me a look like, “Well, we’ve done all that we can do. Let’s go.”

I couldn’t just walk out of there. I needed her to know that I hurt for her and that I was not being flippant about what had happened. I knew that there was nothing I could say in my limited Spanish that could adequately communicate how I felt. *“Lo siento,”* was all I could manage.

I’m sorry.

I tried to give her a hug, but she pushed me away.

“Donde está mi hijo?” she screamed again. *“Donde está? Que hiciste a mi hijo?”*

What did you do to my son?

Not knowing what else I could do, and feeling like I was just making things worse, I turned toward the door. Pastor Bello was waiting for me. Others in the group from Denver had followed us in to pass along their condolences to the family, but upon seeing how well it had gone for me, some turned around and walked back outside. A few brave souls filed through and offered their own “Lo siento” to members of Robin’s family, before ducking their heads and exiting through the front door.

Our group stood outside the house on the street, quiet, not knowing what to do. Pastor Bello was engaged in a conversation with the policemen. By now there were nearly a hundred people in the street outside of the house.

Robin’s mother came out of the house. Her look had changed from confusion and despair to anger. She began screaming again. At first I couldn’t

understand what she was saying, but after she repeated it a few times, my stomach started feeling sick as I grasped what she was saying.

“Los evangelicos mataron a mi hijo! Los evangelicos mataron a mi hijo!”

The evangelicals killed my son.

Oh God. This isn't really happening, is it? What the hell? I know she's upset, but blaming us for her son's death?

The crowd began to buzz. The stares we were getting were icy cold. I wanted to explain what had happened, to defend ourselves, but I realized that there was nothing that could be said that could deflate the situation. Especially not with the language barrier. Trying to defend ourselves would only make things worse, I was sure. Dominicans can be very argumentative and get very fired up, and the last thing I wanted to do was escalate the situation even more.

The sadness in the Americans was being pushed aside by something else: Fear. What was happening? What could happen? Emotions were running high. The tension in the air was becoming toxic.

It was time for us to leave.

I spoke with Pastor Bello about the plans for the evening. He agreed that, obviously, it would not be appropriate to have a farewell “party” for the group as had been planned. The Americans would go back to their rooms at Hotel Rossy and clean up, and then we would reconvene at our house for a very low-key supper of cheese sandwiches and juice.

Dana and I left the group at the hotel to clean up and walked the several blocks down Calle Duarte to our house. While La Victoria was a very poor community and had no small amount of crime, it had never felt dangerous or threatening to us. Although it was home to the largest and most dangerous prison in the country, where the most violent criminals were held, the town itself seemed fairly safe. I'd heard several La Victorians say that because of the high number of policemen and soldiers who were employed by the prison and lived in the community, the town was actually much safer than many others in the DR. The theory had made sense to me, and I had always felt more or less safe in the community.

Walking home this night, however, the town seemed strangely hostile.

The four-block walk from the hotel to our house had never seemed longer. We held hands and walked in silence, not knowing what to say to one another. Once we were inside our house, alone, Dana began to sob.

“I can't take it here anymore,” she said, her voice rough and choppy. “I hate this place. I just want to go home.”

I knew how she felt. Hell, did I ever know how she felt.

I held her as she sobbed into my chest. That afternoon before we left the beach, I was the one who had lost it and she was the one who had comforted me.

That seemed like the way our whole year had been going; when one of us was down, the other was there to provide comfort and encouragement. We alternated duty as the one to pull the other out of the inevitable periods of depression and misery and self-pity. We'd recognized this and given thanks for this, and wondered out loud what would happen if we both bottomed out at the same time. Maybe this would be the time we would find out.

"I don't think I can handle seeing the group leave tomorrow," Dana said through her tears. "I'm not sure I'm going to be able to make it through this."

I hadn't thought about it since earlier in the morning, back when everything was as it should be. But Dana calling it to my attention hit me like a coconut dropping from a tree and landing squarely on my head. The group was going back to Denver in the morning, and we would be left in this armpit of a town for another three months to deal with everything.

I didn't know if I could handle that either.

Dana and I took our cold bucket showers, as we'd done each evening for the nine months we'd lived there. As our home had no water heater and the water only came on for a couple of hours each day, bucket showers were the way that we and most everyone else in La Victoria bathed.

After we'd cleaned off the sand and the sunscreen and put on fresh clothes, the rest of the group started arriving at our house. The mood started off very somber for the most part, but as the hermanos and amigos from La Victoria started to show up to say their goodbyes to the Americanos, the sadness began to lift ever so slightly. New friendships had been made between Dominicans and Americans throughout the week, much like the friendship between Robin and Ty had so quickly developed. But even as these new friends shared stories, exchanged addresses and vowed to write or call, a heaviness kept things hushed. There was laughter here and there, but only the kind of self-conscious, quiet laughter like the kind when funny stories about the deceased are shared at a funeral.

The sound of our telephone ringing startled me. Although we'd been very glad that our rental house had come with a telephone, it had gotten little use. Communicating to Dominicans in Spanish over the phone was extremely challenging for both Dana and me, and the outrageous tariffs for international calls kept our friends and families in the US from calling us, save for special occasions.

I went into our bedroom and answered the phone.

"Hey, Tom, it's Peter. I heard about what happened today. I just wanted to call and tell you how sorry I am and to let you know that the church is praying for you guys."

Peter was the senior pastor of Lookout, our church back in Denver. Just hearing Peter's voice was enough to burst my emotional dam. I began to bawl.

"Are you ok?" Peter asked.

"I hate this place," I said through my tears and my snot. "I'm so sick of it. I just want to come home. I can't stand it here anymore."

Peter was silent for a while, and I began to calm down. It felt good to just say it. Finally, Peter spoke. "Well, I guess that now you know how Jesus must have felt."

What? What kind of religious bullshit was that? I was surprised that Peter would say something so empty and religious-sounding at a time like this. The thing I had always appreciated about Peter, and what had drawn us to Lookout in the first place, was how non-religious his approach to Christianity seemed to be. That he would say something like he just did took me by surprise.

"What do you mean by that?" I said.

"Well, imagine how Jesus must have felt," Peter tried to explain, "coming from eternal paradise with God the Father to this shitty world of pain and suffering and murder and betrayal and death. Imagine how he must have longed to 'go home.' He probably felt like you're feeling in La Victoria right now. It probably sucked, big time."

I understood the words, but the concept was far from something I could relate to in the moment.

Peter said some other nice, pastoral words to try and help me feel better. Interestingly, I did begin to feel better.

Until the next morning, anyway.

The group had to get up pretty early to get to the airport on time. I don't think any of us got much sleep that night. When it came time to load the luggage into the bus to head off for the airport, I was glad for the early start. At least at this hour most of the town was still sleeping, and we didn't have to deal with the Robin stuff again, at least not until Dana and I would get back from the airport.

We got the group to the airport, got them checked in at the ticket counter, and walked them to the security checkpoint. This was it; this was as far as Dana and I could go with them. We would be alone again in a few minutes.

I think every single person in the group told me to "hang in there" as we hugged and said our teary goodbyes. I think every one of them also said "we'll be praying for you," but it hardly seemed encouraging to me. Prayer was a big mystery to me, and I didn't comprehend what their praying for us would accomplish. We were just going to have to hunker down and get through this.

It was especially rough saying goodbye to Ty. I hadn't even met him before the trip, but we'd become friends, and in the last 24 hours we'd been

through hell together. We'd both lost a friend, a new friend for Corbata and a slightly older friend for me.

Dana and I watched as long as we could, until the last person in the group walked through security and turned the corner out of our line of sight. We definitely weren't ready to go back to La Victoria, so we took the escalator upstairs and got something to eat at Wendy's. We weren't really hungry, but we felt like we ought to buy something if we were going to sit in the air conditioning and look out the window.

We watched as the workers loaded the baggage onto the silver American Airlines jet. We watched as it pulled away from the gate. We watched as it taxied down to the end of the runway, turned a 180, and took off roaring down the runway. We watched until it disappeared into the thick Caribbean air.

"Don't make me go back there," Dana said, still staring out the window. They were the first words either of us had spoken in a long time.

"I know," I said. "I don't want to either. But we have to."

"I know," Dana said. She took a long sip of her Diet Coke, and I could see the tears welling up once again. "This just sucks," she said, her voice being pulled down inside of her.

Yes it does.

We'd been sure that God had called us to move to La Victoria, but for what? I'd been hungry to experience God in a deeper way, and to be of use to him somehow, and to serve the poor and the suffering somehow, but as far as I could tell, none of that was happening. After years of doubt and sin and addiction and failure and self-contempt, I'd finally come to a good place in my faith, a place in which I was actually "serving God" as a full-time occupation, and this is what it amounted to? We'd been there for nearly a year and we hadn't accomplished a thing. Far from being the spiritual mountaintop experience I had envisioned our time there to be, our simple day-to-day existence was a struggle. The living conditions were miserable. The cops harassed us every time we got in our car and drove through the city. All of the people who understood us were thousands of miles away.

No, living in La Victoria had been anything but a spiritual high. It had taken me years to claw my way out of my legalistic, fundamentalist evangelical upbringing. And yet here we were now, stuck in a crappy little town and working with the most fundamentalist and legalistic evangelical church I'd ever even heard of. Not only were drinking and smoking taboo for the Christians there, as they were when I grew up, but the church in La Victoria took legalism to new heights. They taught that Christian women shouldn't wear make-up, jewelry or slacks, but only dresses. While Dana is blessed with a face that looks beautiful even without jewelry or make-up, she'd gotten to where she could

barely stand to wear the “missionary dresses” she’d been wearing for the last nine months. She’d even talked about burning them in some kind of memorial bonfire if we ever made it back to the States.

Had we made a terrible mistake? Had we been fooling ourselves when we’d sensed God calling us to leave our lives in Colorado behind and come to La Victoria for a year? We’d been so sure of it a year earlier. But looking back on what the experience had been, we couldn’t imagine that it would have gone like this.

Dammit, God. What the hell? Where are you anyway? Is this what you brought us here for? How can you be letting it happen like this? Are you serious? Is this your plan? Is this what you have for us?

How did we end up here in the first place?

Dana was right. This sucked, all right.

I needed a beer.