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Foreword

Siblings have a unique relationship. They share a secret language—a private code that unlocks common experiences. They are family, tied together by kinship throughout life. Yet unlike most family relationships, sibling relationships are more equal and less hierarchical. Siblings also are part of each other's identity. Part of who I am and who I will always be is how I was defined while I was growing up: as Franky and Dot's kid brother.

Siblings stay important. Throughout life, we tend to share problems and seek each other's assistance and advice. And when we lose a sibling, we grieve that loss. This is true even when relationships are strained, distant, or even nonexistent. Psychologist Helen Rosen has described sibling relationships as having a number of dimensions, one of which she called closeness-distance. Some siblings are in constant contact with each other. Others seldom speak. Another dimension is warmth-hostility. Some siblings have warm, supportive relationships, whereas others argue constantly or consciously choose to limit contact. Helen Rosen noted that the more relationships veer toward either end of these continuums, the more intense the grief. So it isn't just the close, warm relationships we grieve. In fact, people often have a lot of remorse and grief about losing a sibling—even when there was conflict.

We grieve the loss of a brother or sister at any stage of life. It doesn't matter whether a sibling is nine, nineteen, or ninety years old. When a brother or sister dies, we still miss that person and grieve the loss. For teens, however, grief can be complicated. As you approach independence, it may be more difficult to reach out to the adults around you, whether parents, teachers, coaches, or clergy. You may even be reluctant to share with your friends. After all, you may want to fit in—to have an identity beyond the kid whose brother or sister died. So your grief may stay inside. In addition, as you try to work out what your own spiritual beliefs are as part of your identity, you may find your old beliefs don't fit with your new reality or offer the comfort they once did.

Whatever your situation may be, I think you'll find Erica Goldblatt Hyatt's book *Grieving for the Sibling You Lost* so helpful. It does an excellent job of describing the different ways you might experience grief. This book also offers sound advice, useful exercises, and tools for coping with your loss—and most importantly, the hope that you can do so, perhaps with support from family, friends, a counselor, or other trusted adults.

Ultimately, *Grieving for the Sibling You Lost* will help you acknowledge and recognize your loss and grief—something we all need to do when we lose a loved one. You've lost a critical part of your identity. You've lost someone who may have shared your deepest and earliest memories, who probably knew all of your nicknames, and who may have been among your closest friends. In these pages, you'll find support in honoring your brother or sister, adapting to your loss, and even finding meaning in it.

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Introduction

I'm a professor now, but I used to be a social worker. I felt called to do the work many people shy away from—in the field of death and dying, helping both adults and children facing terminal illness. It wasn't easy, but I loved it and have retained a passion for the area to this very day. I believe that while I may play a small role in each person's life journey, the patients and families I've worked with have left a far greater mark on me. One family touched me so deeply and changed my life so profoundly that they inspired the book you hold in your hands.

I met Wren, a lovely fifteen-year-old with a rare form of leukemia, when I was a pediatric oncology social worker at the hospital where she received her treatment. Although Wren's father, Jackson, claimed his daughter was an ordinary teenager, from the moment I met her I felt otherwise. My first impression of Wren was of a soft-spoken, sweet girl with an artistic and eclectic sense of style; even when she was feeling at her worst, she wore cowboy boots, and when radiation left her with a bald spot and thinned her hair, she shaved it into a Mohawk. Still, Wren was like most teenagers in many ways: she liked coloring her hair, writing poetry, and spending time with her pets. She'd send her boyfriend secret videos of herself silently dancing in the bathroom after her family had fallen asleep. She was funny, compassionate, and bright. But beneath the surface of all that, Wren was an old soul, a deeply spiritual and special young woman.

Wren was quiet and we never spoke much, but she caught my attention because of her love of poetry. I gave her a book of love poems by my favorite author, Pablo Neruda, and I felt deeply connected to her in ways I still cannot explain. Perhaps I saw so much of myself in her as she searched for meaning, delving into the works of poets and scholars who pondered love and death. In my office at the college where I work today, I still have a framed lithograph of her poetry and art by my desk.

Wren bravely battled cancer for two years before losing her life shortly after she turned seventeen. I'll never forget the morning I read about Wren's death in the online journal her father used to keep Wren's fans informed about how she was doing. I was sitting at a friend's cottage on a beautiful, peaceful day. My heart sank and I felt sick to my stomach, knowing the world had lost a special person. I wondered how everything could simultaneously feel so beautiful, with birds chirping around me and a gentle breeze blowing through the window, and yet so hollow without Wren. I felt as though time should stop and the world should stand still—life simply couldn't be the same. Driving home, I cried and just existed in the sadness of the day, wondering where Wren was now and what she was doing. She's still very much a living presence in my life.

Soon after Wren's death, something unexpected emerged from her story: the healing process her younger sister, Amaya, went through. Amaya was mostly at school when Wren was in the hospital, and like her sister, she was quiet, so I didn't speak with her much. But I sometimes saw her at the hospital and, later, at memorial events for her sister. In the aftermath of losing Wren, I spent a lot of time talking with Jackson about how Amaya was coping with losing her sister. Though I didn't know Amaya very well, I knew the death of such a close sibling would be hard. Amaya went through a very difficult time, and as Jackson and his wife, Lindsay, continued to reach out to me for advice and support, I looked for resources to help Amaya cope.

I was shocked when I couldn't find anything for her. No self-help book was available for a teen grieving the loss of a brother or sister. In fact, there was no book on this topic for anyone: parents, teachers, therapists, or professors. I couldn't believe it. Yet day in, day out, teens are experiencing the death of a sibling. To add to this, teens are much more aware of death than adults give them credit for. In fact, awareness of death begins in childhood. I recall my five-year-old nephew telling me once, out of the blue, "Every day, people are dying."

Loss is hard for everyone, and also different for everyone. The loss of a sibling during adolescence can shake your sense of self just as it's beginning to develop. Siblings are our partners and rivals, our first friends, and our first enemies. Being a

teenager is hard enough without having to cope with this kind of loss. It's a time when your whole life is changing and your world is opening up as you start creating some distance from your family and begin to ask yourself, *Who am I?*

If you're a teenager and you've lost a brother or sister, this book is for you. You may be feeling fine, you may be hurting badly, or you may find yourself somewhere in between. Wherever you are, it's okay to be there. My hope is that, in the pages of this book, you'll see that others are going through what you are—even though there's no one else exactly like you in the world. This book is a safe place for you; it will help guide you through your grief, teach you ways to cope, and explore ways you can memorialize your brother or sister. It will also help you adjust to your new “normal”—life without your sibling. In these pages, I offer you space to cry, reflect, celebrate, and find some meaning in your loss.

There are many valuable messages for you in this book, but one of the most important is this: how you cope doesn't have to turn into who you are. You aren't alone; you don't have to struggle by yourself. And although coping with grief is hard, there are ways to do it.

Part 1 of this book offers an introduction to grief, grieving, and how a brother or sister's death can affect your understanding of who you are. In part 2, you'll learn about different coping styles that are common among teens who lose a sibling. Finally, in part 3, you'll learn many specific techniques that will help you in your journey toward healing. You don't need to read this book in order. Each chapter is meant to stand alone so that you can learn at your own pace, in whatever way works best for you. My hope is that, eventually, you'll work through the entire book, but only when the time is right for you. One word of advice: Keep a journal or paper and pencil handy for doing the exercises, and so you can jot down ideas that come to you as you read. (Just to keep things simple, in the book I'll usually say “journal,” but you can use any kind of notebook or just separate sheets of paper for the exercises.)

This book is Wren's legacy to me and her gift to you. I hope you find it helpful.

PART 1

GRIEF, GRIEVING, AND BEING A TEEN

chapter 1

Grief

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of what grief is. Since it's sometimes easier to learn from examples than descriptions, let's take a look at three different teenagers who lost a sibling and what their experience of grief was like.

William

William is fifteen. His brother, Michael, died four months ago at the age of seventeen. Ever since Michael died, William hasn't felt like himself. For one thing, he notices that he feels very tired, even from the moment he wakes up in the morning. "I have to try really hard to get out of bed," William says. "I feel like I didn't get a good night's sleep, even if I went to bed early. Sometimes the earlier I go to bed, the more I wake up in the middle of the night, and sometimes I just totally pass out and don't wake up until my alarm goes off, but I still feel like I didn't get enough sleep." William's mother keeps asking him if he feels depressed, but he doesn't notice feeling sad. In fact, he feels abnormal because he hasn't cried over the loss of his brother. He misses Michael a lot and thinks about him frequently, but he hasn't been able to cry. He says, "I worry that my mom thinks I didn't care about Michael, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It's just that I feel so empty about the whole thing."

William and Michael used to spend lots of time together, especially playing soccer and basketball. Now that Michael is gone, William doesn't have any interest in playing sports. His body feels both hollow and heavy at the same time. His joints feel achy, he's rarely hungry, and sometimes he feels as though he's in a daze. William has difficulty finding the words to explain how he's feeling in his body. He just feels different, and he's afraid that things will never be normal again.

Ariel

Ariel is fourteen years old. Her sister, Myra, died a year ago at age eight when she hit her head after a fall on some playground equipment, passed out an hour later, and never woke up. Ariel is just starting high school, and she fears leaving the house in the morning to go to school because she worries that something bad might happen to her. Ariel says, "Nobody thought Myra was going to die. It happened out of nowhere, and since then, I feel scared that I'm going to die all of a sudden too." Ariel no longer feels safe. To her, it seems like her parents are paying extra close attention to her, and she worries about what would happen to them if she were to die too. In addition, Ariel thinks that because she was the older sister, she somehow let her parents down when Myra died. She feels guilty for not doing a better job of protecting her.

During the day, Ariel tries her best to be brave and smile when she interacts with teachers and friends, but at home she cries frequently and feels sad and lonely, even when she's surrounded by family members. Ariel thinks about Myra a lot and wonders if she felt any pain when she died. Ariel also says, "I never really thought about dying, and now I can't stop thinking about it. I want to ask my mom and dad questions, but they're already upset, so there really isn't anybody around to talk to about this stuff." Like William, she worries that this is her "new normal," that she'll feel sad and alone forever. And given that it's been a year since Myra died, Ariel wonders if she should be doing better. What makes her feel even worse is that there are times when she's so angry at Myra for dying that she can't focus on anything else. Yet there are other times when she's doing something, such as homework, and doesn't think about Myra at all. Ariel feels very confused. Ariel doesn't know what to think, what to say, and how to act in this new life without her sister.

Jordan

Jordan's older sister, Emily, died eight years ago. Jordan is

now sixteen years old. He's remembering less and less about his big sister, and that makes him feel guilty. Emily died of a very long illness, so she wasn't home very much in the last year of her life. Jordan feels he never really got the chance to get to know who Emily was outside of being his sick sister. What he does remember about Emily is that she was frequently hospitalized and that his parents often left him with his grandmother so that they could be with her. Jordan says, "I spent a lot of time with my grandmother from the age of six to eight. She was lots of fun and I really felt like she was my mom. I was always excited to go to her house because when I was with Grammy, she went out of her way to make sure I was having a good time. It was so different when I was at home with my parents. If Emily was home, they bent over backward caring for her. If she was in the hospital, they spent all their time talking about going to see Emily, calling her doctors, or arguing about her treatment. They expected me to shut up and be good. There was never any time when it was just about me."

When Jordan looks back on all of that, he feels resentful. As a child, he watched the world revolve around Emily, and he feels he hardly had any chances to make happy memories with his family. He says, "I missed out on things like having a mom and dad who took me to baseball games or showed up for parent-teacher meetings. Of course they loved me, but they just weren't around." Even after all these years, he feels forgotten, as though Emily is still more important than him. His parents continue to talk about Emily as if she's alive, and Jordan worries that they'll never get over losing her. He also feels that they don't understand him and, what's worse, that they don't seem to try to. And because of their focus on Emily, Jordan says he feels bad about himself, as though he doesn't matter. He doesn't speak to his parents much anymore and prefers to spend time with his friends. Yet even when he's happy, he feels uncomfortable, as though it isn't appropriate to feel good.

What Is Grief?

William, Ariel, and Jordan are all experiencing symptoms of grief after the loss of a brother or sister. And as you may have noticed, each of them is feeling, thinking, and acting differently after losing a sibling. It's important to know that while each teen grieves differently, everyone's grief is very real.

"Grief" can be defined as a collection of feelings that result from the death of somebody important in your life. Grief can take many forms and is different for each person. The process of experiencing grief, also called grieving, can have many effects, mostly in three main areas:

- Your physical body
- Your emotions and thoughts
- How you relate to others

The experience of grief actually has symptoms, just like a cold or virus does. It's common for people to fear that grieving means they're "going crazy" and something is wrong with them, but grief is almost always a natural process that people go through when they lose someone they love.

Years ago, people used to think that it was important to "get over" the loss of a brother or sister. Therapists, teachers, friends, and family members might have encouraged teens to "move on" and "deal with" death. These days, most people understand that grieving doesn't mean forgetting about your sibling and moving on; rather, it means learning how to live your life without an important person in it. It means taking your time and finding ways to cope with the loss that work for you, and maybe even finding some meaning in your loss. This can be hard, especially because people tend to have complex relationships with their siblings. Perhaps you fought frequently, or maybe there were times when you felt jealous of your brother or sister. Maybe the two of you were closer when you were younger, but as you became a teenager, you found that you didn't have much in common with your brother or sister anymore. Maybe your sibling was younger and you felt like a parent to him or her, or maybe your sibling was older and felt like the parent to you. Relationships are unique, so grieving your sibling will be a

unique process. No two people grieve the same way.

Exercise: Describing Your Experience

Before beginning the next chapter, ask yourself whether you're grieving, even if you're not sure of the answer to this question right now. Then, in your journal on a piece of paper, or using the worksheet available for download at <http://www.newharbinger.com/32493>—see the very back of this book for download instructions—jot down a few of your personal experiences related to losing your brother or sister, perhaps a summary similar to those for William, Ariel, and Jordan. Then, as you read on, you can refer back to what you wrote to see what it can tell you about your own grief process.

Concluding Thoughts

It's important to learn about the process and symptoms of grief. And if you've been judging yourself, try to let that go. Grief is a painful and difficult process—and one that's different for each individual. Whatever you feel is fine. That's your experience. By looking at your experience and understanding it better, you can facilitate the process of healing, without losing sight of how important your brother or sister was to you and will always be.