

“I CAN DREAM AGAIN” CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

CHAPTER 10 – A FRIEND THAT STICKS CLOSER THAN A BROTHER

Partners in Life

The common threads of my story are the relentless call by the grace of God on my life and the companionship of my best friend, homeboy, and brother, Billy Laan. When I met Billy on the basketball court when I was 10, we became inseparable—partners in crime, partners in love, partners in pain, and partners tempting death. After God’s miraculous intervention, we became partners in the gospel through Teen Challenge for 8 years. Unfortunately, Billy’s addiction had exposed him to the HIV virus. He contracted AIDS, and dynamics related to his affliction eventually took his life. We do not mourn his death, but we celebrate his life and ministry so we can learn from this dream cut short.

We’re Never Alone

Things seemed to improve for Billy. He moved back in with his wife and continued in ministry. One day when I was at the Teen Challenge Training Center in Pennsylvania ready to speak at a spiritual emphasis conference, an emergency phone call came for me. I was just about to begin to speak, but the messenger said, “It is urgent, you must respond now.” All of my children and Miriam were with me, so I was unsure what the emergency was. I picked up the phone and recognized the voice of Billy’s sister, Marilyn, even though it was broken and weeping. She was yelling, “Jimmy, Jimmy, you’ve got to come home. Billy’s dead. Billy’s dead.” I asked, “Where is he?”

“He was found in the city and the police notified me,” she told me. “You have to go to identify his body in the New York City morgue.” My heart was broken and I began to cry. Our love was genuine, out of the

I drove straight to the city morgue and told them that I was there to identify my brother, Billy Laan.

Out of the icebox they took a lifeless form, transferred it to a gurney, and wheeled it over to me. They pulled down the sheet and I looked at Billy’s lifeless, swollen face and broken, dead body. I sobbed. No bright eyes. No silly smile to make me laugh. Just a broken shell of the man of God who had gone from partying to laboring for the Kingdom by my side.

I silently cried, “Oh, my God. Billy, what did they do to you?” I had no idea what happened, although I suspected drugs were involved. His face looked like someone had hit him with a metal bar.

All of these things flooded my mind as I looked at him on that cold, cloudy Saturday in the city morgue. I combed my hands through his soft, black hair that he kept so neat. I leaned over and hugged him and cried, “Billy, I receive your mantle of ministry. By God’s grace, I will do double what I was called to do for the kingdom of God. The devil will pay for this.” I remember stumbling to my car, trembling and sobbing. I clutched the back of the car to hold myself up and reached out to God for some comfort, some solace, some reason for this.