

# My First Christmas ....alone.

A  
Husband's Path  
*through*  
Mourning  
*His Loss.*



D r . S t e v e n D . B a g l e y

This is the first chapter of Dr. Steven D. Bagley's book entitled **Never Alone**, available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). It is about his grieving the loss of his wife, Linda J. Bagley. Because grief, for each person comes in different shapes and sizes, colored by each relationship, every experience is personal and will be different, even if we have lost the same loved one.

Steve's second book, **Power of 4**, also available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), describes the men's support group he has met with for 19 years. "My brothers have walked through life together sharing what ever life issues each of us was facing. I think of them as my spiritual life line!"

## Chapter 1: My First Christmas Alone

There are two concepts so essential to how men grieve they deserve to be in this first sentence: men deal with grief very differently from women, and each man deals with grief differently from other men. This book is my story, a personal journey of accepting loss and learning we are never truly alone.

Linda J. Bagley, my wife of 43 years, passed away in her sleep on February 2, 2013. It was completely unexpected. She did not suffer a long illness and was in good health to our knowledge. We went to bed like normal and I thought we'd wake up like normal. Instead, my beloved was gone from my natural life.

In the months to come, I began to deal with my grief. What's unique about my situation is that more than most men, I *was* cared for. My son Todd slept at my house for the first 30 days, so I had someone to wake up to and to say good night. It so happens I am also connected with many men through groups like the **Power of 4**, World Changers, mentoring relationships, discipleships, and just having lots of buddies in general. What I experienced

was unusual for most men and truly wonderful — a different male friend met with me daily, whether for coffee or just to drop by.

This means the isolation didn't kick in. Not for months. Not until the Christmas season blew me apart.

In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, the spirit of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come confront Ebenezer Scrooge. I, on the other hand, confronted the spirit of Christmas Absence. Therefore, my true grief journey began ten months *after* my wife's passing. To understand why, you must understand her relationship with this holiday.

Have you ever heard an adult explain to a child too old to believe in Santa there is another way to think of him? "Think of Santa as the *Spirit of Christmas* as we approach this joyous time of year." Well, this describes my Linda perfectly. She was the queen of Christmas. The many lives she touched and memories she created stand as a testament to her life, and the hole left for me that first Christmas.

The following sections will help you understand Christmas done the "Linda way."

Let There Be Decorations!

A common complaint in American culture is how early the shops start their Christmas push. For Linda, the festivities could never begin too early. I think if she had lived another decade, she would have commenced celebrating just after the Fourth of July.

The festivities roared to life in our house well before Thanksgiving. That's when she would look at me with glee in her eyes and say, "It's time to bring down the decorations."

This was my time to shine. Just as soon as she uttered these words I'd get the ladder out, carefully bringing down her 14 storage bins of decorations from high shelves in back of the garage. (You read that right. 14 of them.) Those were the main decorations, but Linda kept more *everywhere*. Anywhere you could conceivably store items, Linda had a Santa — or two — secreted away. Every year she'd buy more for our home, because her approach to decorating was "whole house" — and not limited to the exterior or family room.

We'd also be the first people to put up a Christmas tree. Long before the lots were open for business, we'd have a beautiful Norway Spruce that seemed to fill the whole room, carefully trimmed to the top by Linda. More than once a confused farmer would ask Linda, "Lady, do you know how many days it is to Christmas?"

But putting a tree up early never phased her, because Linda had a plan.

Our live trees would inevitably dry up because we put them out so early, so on Christmas Eve, Linda would shrewdly source a local lot that had packed

up for the season to bring back one of their “left behind” trees. She’d transfer all her decorations between the two, and our family would wake up on Christmas Day to the beautiful smell of a fresh tree.

It was almost like Santa had brought it along with the presents.

Then, about 15 years before her death, Linda switched to artificial trees. She started with a medium one bought on clearance in January. Each year she would trade up to a bigger version using an ingenious marketing idea: She’d decorate it in her incredible style and offer it for sale in November on Craigslist, with the notice the sale did not include her decorations. Then she’d make enough on top of her purchase price to buy a bigger one. Eventually we had the largest artificial tree for sale in Southern California.

Returning to that first Christmas alone without Linda, I faced an incredible challenge. The giant artificial tree and 14 storage bins were stored away, and I didn’t have anyone asking me to get them down. I could never match a Linda Christmas, which not only included massive amounts of decorating but also one-upping last year by decorating even more.

Just thinking about decorating left me emotionally exhausted, like I had run a marathon with pairs of 100-lb dumbbells on each arm. But I didn’t only feel drained, I felt hopeless. I could never do justice to Christmas when compared to my wife’s efforts. She was not only an original, she was one-of-a-kind. I was elf to her Santa, now left with no one to give me a “honey do” list.

Instead, I had a task ahead of me that reminded me of rearranging the furniture in January after the tree had been taken down so the room didn't feel so empty. I had to rearrange my life while acknowledging irreplaceable loss.

### Gifts "Handmade for Angels"

In truth, early decorating wasn't the beginning of the season for Linda. She started shopping for gifts on December 26, scoring amazing deals on future gifts and decorations at the same time. She didn't only shop for presents though; many each year were handmade.

Linda was the very model of thoughtfulness. She didn't mind if it took hours spread across busy weeks to make the perfect present for the people in her life. Her goal was to make others feel special, and one story demonstrates this clearly.

The first year our counseling center was open, we had a new staff still in the process of coming together as a team. As Christmas approached, they got a hint of Linda's spirit as she decorated the office, but they didn't really know her devotion to the holiday and gift giving. Our group of seven counselors were about to get a true dose of Christmas spirit, courtesy of Linda.

We scheduled a holiday lunch for the whole office, including catered food from a nearby restaurant and a dish prepared by each staff member. This offered them a chance to share a little about themselves with their new

coworkers. Afterwards, I gave each counselor a down-to-Earth gift in the form of a modest bonus check, all our start-up could afford. (Counselors are used to living on tight budgets, and their gratitude was apparent.) But then Linda stepped forward with a mysterious box that would impact everyone more than a holiday bonus.

From her box, Linda removed a small gift bag for each counselor. As they opened them, Linda told the crowd, “I started making these as soon as the center opened its doors.” What each counselor withdrew was a handmade angel made from a dozen materials Linda found at the crafting shop. She continued, “Each of you is an angel handmade by God to comfort your clients, so I thought I would make you each one to remind you of that.”

A counselor is a tough nut to crack. They deal with tragedy on a regular basis, keeping their own emotions guarded. But let me tell you, there wasn't a dry eye in the room after Linda handed out her gifts. Long after their bonus was spent, our counselors kept their angels at their desk — some displayed it year-round. Upon her death, more than one counselor reached out to tell me they still had their “Linda Angel” and were praying for me.

Later in life, Linda turned her gift-giving powers towards our seven grandkids. Her mission was to make each feel special in turn. I don't think there was ever a year when a little one felt bummed out after their turn in Grandma's spotlight.

As for me, just like with decorating, I knew I couldn't fill Linda's shoes in the gift-giving department. For one thing, if I tried crafting, I'd end up gluing my fingers together. But now more than ever I had to be thoughtful of others as they have helped me with my loss, like the counselors who kept their angel.

Although I felt alone, I know I am never am. Not completely.

### Linda's Heavenly Cookies

The decorations and gifts weren't enough for Linda. She was a master baker when it came to Christmas cookies. I honestly believe if she took over a commercial kitchen, she could have turned her treats into a thriving business. As strange as it sounds, it was the Christmas cookies that sent waves of sadness through me after her death. They were a way to not only spread cheer to those she knew, but also to give them attention. We spent so much time together making them it was more of a memory-making production line than a cookie production line.

And just so you know, I'm not overselling Linda's Christmas cookie artistry. Our friends actually sent their daughters to our house to learn the art of baking and decorating perfect cookies, like a student visiting a Kung-Fu master. Of course, Linda shared her secrets willingly, because what made them special wasn't her recipe, but the little bit of Linda in every bite.



When I speak to family and friends about Linda's cookies, they sometimes close their eyes when describing them. Whether they know it or not, they are reliving the joy that biting into them brought. It's not hyperbole to say her cookies could transform a person's whole demeanor in real time. I have clear memories of watching a first-timer's face go from serious concentration to stunned surprise, then to ear-to-ear grin — all in the space of two seconds.

My favorite example of a cookie-lover was my close friend Ted. Health conscious and disciplined as they come, he was drinking green smoothies before it was trendy and never missed a workout. But he sure loved him some of Linda's cookies! Linda would make a plate especially for his family, but Ted and his son Charlie somehow turned it into a "manly thing" and would devour the batch just as soon as we dropped them off. (Once we figured out what was happening, Linda made a second plate for his wife and daughter, which Ted still stole whenever he could.)

After Linda's death, practically everyone in my life told me how much her cookies touched their lives. I was surprised to learn these little delicacies meant as much to their holiday as they did to mine. In a way I felt deep gratitude to these people, because I wasn't as lonely as I could be. On the other hand, I became conscious of the change in my standing with them. I was no longer the bearer of Linda's cookies, but rather the former cookie deliveryman.

Tis the Season (to Party)

After everything you've read about Linda's Christmas devotion, it won't surprise you that she loved Christmas parties. She'd happily attend those organized by others, but at heart she was a hostess. Linda kept her guest lists fluid, always adding last minute attendees. But a Linda party *never* ran out of food, because she prepared for several parties at a time. She'd even commandeer our neighbors' refrigerators to hold it all. They'd never complain, because not only would they get delicious food to keep for themselves, they'd also move up on Linda's cookie list, a precious commodity in our world.

The 1994 Christmas season sticks out most in my mind. Back then, Linda told me, "I want to schedule another party." I was a bit dumbfounded by this. I mean, we had already hosted not one, but *three* Christmas parties — each with huge guest lists. Linda knew how I'd react, so she had her arguments lined up. Applying "Linda logic," she explained that "more is more!" Then she said, "It would be a shame not to use up our party supplies."

Then she turned serious on me.

Linda said, "I've been looking at our party guest lists, and I figured out who hasn't attended. It's all those who didn't want to bring a 'plus one' along with them."

Linda had perceptively figured out a friend subset who weren't joining in the festivities — single adults. With my blessing, she put together a plan for a party specifically inviting singles, with no need to bring a companion. The highlight was building gingerbread houses with zany architecture and fanciful

decorations. Attendees created a story to describe the resident of each gingerbread house, and the therapy of laughter filled the night.

Memories of this first “singles only” party, which became an annual tradition, comforted me after her death. I know I’m not ready for a “plus one” evening, but to not attend parties would be out of character for me. This area of my life is hazy and confused without Linda, but I have attended singles only Christmas events and the restorative joy of that first party have brought me comfort.

I can only say “Thank you, Linda,” as I so frequently do.

### All in the Family

Christmas is a family tradition for most Christians. We celebrate the Jesus’ birth with joy in our hearts and family by our side. In ours, it was always Linda with her foot on the gas. I’ve described her as Santa and me as an elf, and I think that’s apt. In fact, I often felt I had to tap the breaks on our metaphorical family van so we’d make the next turn safely.

Linda wasn’t just the driving force behind our social activities but also our family traditions. My first Christmas alone, I had to take the initiative on maintaining some of these. And I couldn’t rely on her to push me anymore. This started with the annual tradition of visiting my 94-year-old mother in the Bay for thanksgiving, a trip I’d made with Linda many times. I did it solo that

year and had a different kind of talk with mom, who had been a single adult for more than 50 years.

Of course, I knew I wouldn't be hosting big Linda-style parties this year, but I did a little decorating, keeping it manageable. I felt it necessary in her honor if for no other purpose. I also made plans to gather all the grandkids for an afternoon activity, giving their parents a precious four-hour hiatus from the chaos of kids out of school for break. This also helped bridge the absence of Grandma Linda with all the kids.

As an "added bonus" introducing a wrinkle to my Christmas alone, my birthday falls on December 16, smack in the middle of the season. I had to discuss my plans with my family so no one felt I was rejecting their concern.

### Verizon and Grief in America

In this chapter I've explained how Christmas played an outsized role in my life with Linda, and how this made the season so difficult after her passing. It's such a serious connection you'd be forgiven if you believed she passed away during the holiday season. But she died in February 2013. A brief story of my experiences with two companies illustrates how complicated grief is in America.

Shortly after Linda's passing, I visited our bank to get our accounts in order. The teller on duty, Alice, knew me by name. As I approached the

counter, she said the standard, “How can I help you?” But then looking at me, she asked: “Dr. Bagley, are you *okay?*”

Little did I know the shock of my loss was written all over my face. As I explained what happened, Alice teared up, offering her condolences. I felt touched by her empathy. Weeks later, I was back in and as I came up to her counter, she pulled out an envelope and said, “I’ve been waiting to give this to you.” It was a sympathy card, in which she described a memory of Linda’s kindness. Alice’s kindness, coming from the most casual acquaintance, struck me deeply.

On the other end of the spectrum was my experience with Verizon. We had recently bought two iPhones and two tablets from the company and Linda had hardly used hers. My plan was to cut the service for her devices and donate them to Arms of Love, a Christian charity Linda felt strongly about. But the phone rep said I couldn’t handle the transaction over the phone. I had to visit a store in person to take care of it.

Arriving at my local Verizon, the manager on duty took me to the back room and put me through the corporate equivalent of an IRS audit. Incredibly, he even requested a death certificate, which I had in my brief case from attending to so many legal matters in recent weeks.

After more than an hour of navigating the banalities of phone contracts while trying not to lose my cool we somehow managed to sort out the plans. When it was all done, if you can believe it, the manager looked me in the eye

and said, “Have a great day!” (This after an hour of working through paperwork related to the death of my wife.)

I wanted to slap the guy with the stupid iPhone, I was so angry.

But then I processed my anger, realizing this young man was no more prepared to deal with grief than any other American male. Verizon and its policies were at fault in this situation, not the manager. Imagine, a major company completely unprepared to deal with tragedy amongst its own customer base. Or maybe you can.

It’s all too common in a country reluctant to discuss this fact of life.

### What This Book Will Teach You

My experience with Verizon illustrates the messiness of human emotion and the complicated way we treat one another. It’s certainly not all bad. For every Verizon in my life there has been an Alice at the bank. But grief is a touchy subject most people don’t understand. So many men especially, need a crash course on the subject to make sure it doesn’t derail their existence.

Still, I’ve learned through my experience that life is about valuing others. Linda was valued by everyone she knew all year, but especially at Christmas, when her spirit really kicked into gear. If our relationship struggled in any way, it was that I always valued Linda, but I sometimes felt unseen by her, lost in the corner (perhaps behind the giant Christmas tree).

It was love at first sight for me. I was hooked on Linda from day one. After meeting her there was no other woman I could imagine spending my life with. Linda, on the other hand, took years to fall in love with me. In fact, it almost never happened at all.

This book tells the unusual story of our love, while also sharing insights into how I've dealt with my grief. It's a journey into the past and the future, and I invite you to take it with me. Are you ready?

### **Grief Insight:**

My story is meant to remind us that grief doesn't possess a timeline. Feelings of sadness can be delayed, especially due to shock. Men will often compartmentalize for periods of time, that is, until something emotionally powerful, like the Christmas season, strips away our temporary armor.

### **Grief Exercise 1:**

You will never replace the special characteristics of your loved one, just as I will never match Linda's Christmas zeal. How can you pay tribute to their passions, honoring them to forge new traditions in their memory?

Steve's books are both available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com): **Never Alone** & **Power of 4**.