

FORGIVEN

# DISCUSSION GUIDE



SECOND BOOK OF  
"THE BIRMINGHAM CHRONICLES"

# AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

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My first novel, *Come September*, follows the story of four teenagers over seventeen years. It is a story about friendships: how they are formed, how they grow, how they are tested, how they strengthen, and how they endure over time. The story ends in September 2014, with each friend embarking on the next phase of their lives, in new marriages, preparing to raise children of their own.

*Forgiven* focuses on the complex relationships between adult children and their parents. Kip Reynolds, 34, is struggling to forgive his father, Dudley, for the dysfunction caused by Dudley's lifelong battle with alcoholism. Although Kip and his father had enjoyed a brief reconciliation at the end of *Come September*, when Dudley finally achieved sobriety, Dudley relapsed as he struggled to cope with the grief of losing his wife to breast cancer. Kip learns of some devastating decisions Dudley has recently made and must face the challenge of rescuing his father from financial ruin. Just as this is unfolding, Kip learns that the choices Dudley made when Kip was a child are the reason for his infertility, forcing him to explore other ways to start a family. Taken together, Kip must identify what's preventing him from finding forgiveness, realizing that until he does, he will never be able to have a healthy relationship with his father.

Kip is married to Claudia Kinzler-Reynolds, and Claudia's mother is Sophia Serrano. Sophia was born in Barcelona and, at 19, left for Geneva to marry. Upon leaving, her mother revealed for the first time that Sophia had been adopted. Sophia felt betrayed, believing she should have been told many years earlier, especially after her father's death when she was six. Although Sophia had briefly visited her mother on two occasions as a married adult and phoned once a year at Christmas to maintain some degree of connection, she realized she had never reconciled with her mother and had never forgiven her for what

she believed was a betrayal. Learning that her mother is dying, Sophia must now travel to Barcelona and bring closure to a lifelong, strained relationship.

*Forgiven* is driven by the storyline of the decades-long baby-stealing scandal in Spain. From the 1930s through the 1990s, over 300,000 babies were stolen by the Catholic Church's clergy and sold for adoption: Sophia learns she was one of them. Her family rallies to the cause and is determined to discover who Sophia's birth parents are. In the process, they must track down the priest who stole Sophia from her birth mother and sold her to her adoptive parents in Barcelona. A priest from Barcelona who had been living in New York since 1969 knows which priest sold Sophia to the Serrano family. When the family joins Sophia in Barcelona to confront the priest, they learn the history of the baby-stealing scandal and the role of the Catholic Church in perpetrating it, prompting the family members and the priest from New York to resolve the question: Can the sins of the Church and those who committed them ever be forgiven?

There is a theme pertaining to forgiveness that runs through the story: When we are faced with a dilemma or must make a difficult decision, we need to look at the circumstances before us, make choices based on what we're committed to for the future, let go of the past, and move on. Forgiveness allows us to break the chains that hold us to the past and move on.

Kip faces two dilemmas that require him to understand this: (1) Pursue writing a story about the baby-stealing scandal to advance his career as a journalist, or accept Sophia's request to let go of the story and allow her and the family to move on with their lives; (2) Ignore his ego, overcome his fear of failure, and move forward with adopting a baby, or play it safe and remain childless—robbing Claudia of the chance to enjoy motherhood.

*Forgiven* is my second book in *The Birmingham Chronicles* trilogy and sets up the protagonists for their final adventures in the third story. I hope you're enjoying their journey!

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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## KIP AND SOPHIA FACE SIMILAR DILEMMAS

- At the beginning of the story, Kip resents his brother Bradley for not helping the family during their mother's cancer treatments, and he is angry when Bradley suggests that Dudley move from Palm Beach back to Michigan. After Dudley's suicide attempt, Bradley takes a month's leave of absence from his job and moves to Palm Beach to care for Dudley. Once Dudley returns to Birmingham, Kip forgives Bradley and agrees that it might be time for Kip to finally have a loving relationship with his father. Would Kip have found it in himself to forgive Bradley if Dudley had not faced this crisis?
- Kip seems ready to forgive Dudley for his past after Dudley returns from Palm Beach, but we see that tension remains when they attend Jeremy's birthday party. Is it because Kip is jealous of Dudley's ability to recover from his downfall and start a new career as a high-end real estate broker, while Kip is now wheelchair-bound? Or is Kip grappling with a deep-seated depression about how his life has turned out, leaving him unable to show compassion toward anyone? At what point do we realize Kip has genuinely forgiven Dudley?
- At the end of the story, the entire family is in Barcelona and has learned that Monsignor Eduardo stole Sophia from her birth mother. They discover that the theft contributed to Alfonso's depression and his decision to end his life, and that Monsignor Eduardo spent the next four decades covering up the baby-stealing scandal while also being involved in a drug-smuggling operation. At that point, Sophia decides to move on with her life and asks Kip whether he would be willing to abandon his plan to write an article about the scandal and potentially revive his career. Kip's decision is strongly influenced by his newly declared commitment to adopt a child and his realization that 'family is everything.' What is the overriding factor that led to Kip's decision?

- Kip and Claudia had always planned to have children. After rescuing the little girl's ball from the park fountain and spending time with Ryan and Jenny's children, Kip is devastated to learn he cannot father a child. He says his ego will not allow him to consider using a sperm donor or adopting. His love for Claudia and his desire for her to know the joy of motherhood win out over his ego, and he declares he would like to adopt a child. Is that decision based primarily on his wish to give Claudia what she wants, or on his own desire to enjoy fatherhood?
- When Sophia learns from Maria that her father killed himself, the family expects Sophia to be angry again for not being told the truth as a child. However, she responds by embracing Maria and comforting her. Why was Sophia willing to forgive Maria so quickly?
- At what point does Kip realize that Adam is showing true friendship by encouraging him to let go of the past (the murder of his friends in Hong Kong and Adam and Claudia's insistence that he not go to Macau to seek justice) and to accept things as they are? Does Kip ever forgive himself for those murders?

## KIP'S EMOTIONAL STRUGGLES

- Kip has mixed emotions about Dudley giving all his money to Carlton, leaving Dudley destitute. First, he is angry—at Dudley for making such a bad decision and at Carlton for taking advantage of Dudley while he is grieving his wife's death. But then he realizes that Dudley is sick and needs help, and he feels guilty about his anger. At what point does Kip finally let go of his anger and empathize with Dudley's struggles? Is it when he is in Grandpa Chapman's living room, reflecting on how Dudley has never been accepted by Patty's family? Is this the true turning point in Kip's relationship with Dudley?
- When Claudia shares with Kip everything Adam has learned about Monsignor Eduardo and his illicit activities in Cardedeau, Kip resents Adam for taking the lead on what Kip sees as his project. That resentment fuels his depression, and that night he gets drunk and falls while getting into bed. Does Kip ever overcome his resentment toward Adam, and does he forgive Adam for convincing Claudia to talk him out of going to Macau?
- Kip becomes agitated when Claudia suggests he see a psychiatrist, and he refuses. After his accident, a psychotherapist is assigned to his care team, and he begins treatment. Kip eventually sees the benefits of therapy. Although he stops drinking and is coming to terms with his physical disability, he resists sharing with the therapist just how much he is struggling emotionally. Why? What is he afraid will happen if he opens up? Is it a matter of ego—seeming weak in his doctor's eyes—or something else?
- On the night of Kip's failed hippotherapy session, he drinks heavily, takes an overdose of sleeping pills and pain medication, and then goes to bed. His psychotherapist asks Kip and Claudia whether that was a suicide attempt, and they both assure him it was not. Given Dudley's history of drinking and his eventual suicide attempt, do you think Kip may have actually tried to end his life in the same way as Dudley? Kip has mixed

emotions about Dudley giving all his money to Carlton, leaving Dudley destitute. First, he is angry—at Dudley for making such a bad decision and at Carlton for taking advantage of Dudley while he is grieving his wife’s death. But then he realizes that Dudley is sick and needs help, and he feels guilty about his anger. At what point does Kip finally let go of his anger and empathize with Dudley’s struggles? Is it when he is in Grandpa Chapman’s living room, reflecting on how Dudley has never been accepted by Patty’s family? Is this the true turning point in Kip’s relationship with Dudley?

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# OTHER QUESTIONS

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- In Chapter 6, Kip and Claudia have dinner with Adam and Talia at their home. Kip talks about Dudley's relapse into drinking and says it is unfair that he should be the one to look after Dudley as he recovers. He declares life unfair, and Adam coaches him to let go of the past and make choices that will help build a new future. Kip reacts resentfully to Adam for having 'thrown a wrench' into his plans to go to Macau and seek justice for the murder of his friends. Kip doesn't think Adam is considering that, and he tells Claudia that Adam is being narrow-minded about the past and his role in it. Was Adam being unfair with his comments to Kip, or is he spot on and just being a good friend?
- Father Rodrigo asks Father David to help him find a way to forgive the Catholic Church and Monsignor Eduardo. Father David learns that Monsignor Eduardo may have been the bishop's son and was forced to remain in an orphanage until he entered the priesthood. This prompts Father David to remind Father Rodrigo that Monsignor Eduardo is a man like any other, with his own cross to bear. Would you, in their position, have forgiven Eduardo?
- Claudia unconditionally supports Kip through his struggles: his stalled career, his pain over being unable to bring justice for his friends' murders, repairing his relationship with Dudley after a lifetime of

disappointments, accepting his infertility, living with depression and the need to numb his pain with alcohol, and finally accepting that he may live out his life as a paraplegic. Throughout it all, Claudia is his Rock of Gibraltar. At one point, when Talia tells Claudia she may divorce Adam if he cannot make time for her and commit to having children, Claudia shares that she, too, is struggling in her marriage. If Kip had not found a way to let go of his past and move on to create a new life, would Claudia have done as Talia did and told Kip she would leave him if things did not change? Did Claudia's unwavering support appear to have a limit?

- There were clues along the way that Sister Felicitas was actually Gabriela Flores—Sophia's birth mother. Her eyes light up when she first meets Claudia, and she tells Claudia how beautiful she is. (When Javier visits Sister Felicitas at the chapel to warn her about Monsignor Eduardo, he tells her that Kip believes the grave dated December 12, 1962, may be empty. At that point, she believes she may be Sophia's mother and that Claudia is her granddaughter.) Before the clinic fire, Sister Felicitas is excited to learn that Adam is in Cardedeu and might meet him that day (knowing he might be her grandson). We also learn that neither Sister Felicitas nor Gabriela Flores has a cellphone and can't be reached directly. (Manuel Melendez tells them Gabriela Flores has no phone; Father Rodrigo tells Kip that Sister Felicitas has no phone.) Were there other clues that Sister Felicitas was Sophia's birth mother?