

ROOM FOR

*Two*



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Out of respect for their privacy, I have changed the names of some of the people who appear in these pages.



# DEDICATION

For Brent



## CHAPTER *One*

I don't remember the last thing I said to Krista that Saturday afternoon, but I know it was not "I love you." Even when I think long and hard about our final conversation, our last words to each other elude me, which is probably for the best.

The last time we spoke was on the phone. There was shouting. A lot of shouting. In hindsight it seems like it was all on my end. I don't remember Krista sounding angry or frustrated. Our conversation ended when I threw the phone down in disgust. When I arrived at our apartment twenty minutes later, I was furious. I slammed the door to the car, feeling the muscles in my arm clench.

In the pale light of the November afternoon, the four-plex had a dreary, mournful look. Brown leaves, having long lost their cheery autumn reds and yellows, were scattered over the matted grass. I looked up at the apartment window, hoping to see some sign of Krista. The blinds were closed and the lights were off. The place looked deserted. My anger began to morph into fear.

I took the concrete steps two at a time to our apartment. I paused and took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm down before opening the door. I didn't want to go into the apartment yelling. Maybe the whole day had been some kind of misunderstanding.

I inserted the key into the lock and opened the door. The apartment was in the same condition as I had left it. A pile of cardboard boxes lay flattened and stacked neatly in one corner of the living room. Other boxes, half-full of computer games and books, were stacked

against the far wall. Yesterday's newspaper was scattered on the floor; a color photograph of a police standoff was displayed prominently on the front page. The apartment itself was ghostly quiet, as if no one had lived there for years.

"Sweetie, I'm home." I tried to put as much kindness into my voice as possible. I didn't want to have another argument—at least not right away.

Silence.

"Sweetheart?"

A gunshot echoed from our bedroom, followed by the sound of a bullet casing skipping along a wall.

Everything slowed down.

I screamed Krista's name and started toward our bedroom. My legs felt heavy, like I was running through waist-deep water. As I entered the room, the acrid smell of gun smoke filled my nostrils. Krista lay slumped against unpacked boxes of clothing along the far wall.

I screamed and moved to Krista's side. This couldn't be real, could it?

Krista's blue eyes stared straight ahead. Her body trembled as if she was suffering from a mild seizure. My Ruger 9mm handgun lay next to her body on the corner of a white packing box. A wisp of blue smoke floated from the barrel.

I grabbed the cordless phone from the nightstand and dialed 911.

Krista's body shuddered violently. Blood began flowing from the back of her head, down the boxes, to the floor. The sound of the blood as it hit the boxes reminded me of water coming out of a squirt gun.

"Krista!"

I kept expecting to hear a ringing sound on the other end of the phone, but there was only silence. I pulled the receiver away from my ear. Had I dialed 911? What was taking them so long to answer?

I was about to hang up and dial again when a faint female voice broke through the silence. "911. What is your emergency?"

"Send help!" I screamed into the phone. "My wife just shot herself!" My voice shook as the words tumbled out of my mouth. I pressed my hand against Krista's seven-month pregnant belly, hoping for some indication that our unborn daughter was still alive. I couldn't feel any movement.

"What is your address?" the operator said.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. We had moved into the apartment a week earlier, and I hadn't memorized our address. Then, amid all the chaos, there was a moment of clarity. I remembered the landlord had written our address on the back of his business card when I signed the lease. I pulled the card out of my wallet and relayed the information to the operator, my voice sounding calm, as if I were giving her directions to a party. Then the moment was gone and panic returned.

"She's pregnant," I sobbed into the phone. "She's pregnant."

The 911 operator asked if I knew CPR. I did. I knew what to do—breathe into the mouth, push on the chest—but instead I did nothing. I just sat there horrified.

Krista's eyes now had a dull look to them, as if the blue had suddenly turned gray. Then her body stopped shaking. The pool of blood continued to grow. The operator's words faded into white noise. I knelt at Krista's side for what felt like hours, waiting, hoping to feel the baby move.

At some point I became vaguely aware of the distant wail of a police siren. It grew louder until it sounded like it was right outside the door. Then everything was quiet. I stood, frantic that the police had driven past. I took several steps toward the living room when I heard a quick knock followed by the sound of someone opening the front door. A moment later a police officer entered the bedroom. His eyes went from me to Krista to the gun lying near Krista's head. He stood in the middle of the room, as if he wasn't sure what to do.

"Help her!" I screamed.

The officer moved to Krista's side and put his fingertips on her neck to check her pulse. I took a step toward him, wanting to help. His eyes darted to the gun.

"Get out of the room," he said firmly. He said something into the radio that was attached to his shoulder and then brought his ear to Krista's mouth to see if she was breathing. He pulled her legs, as if moving a piece of delicate china, so she was lying flat on the floor. The box where Krista's head had rested was soaked with blood.

"Get out," he repeated. This time he looked right at me and pointed to the door. I took one step back.

"Go!" he said.

I took another step back. It was like I was in a dream, running toward a cliff. Even though jumping off was the last thing I wanted to do, my legs kept moving until I toppled over the edge.

I took a third step when I heard a noise just outside the bedroom door. I turned and nearly bumped into another police officer. He rushed past me as if I didn't exist. The two officers talked quickly, quietly. I could not understand what they said. All I could hear was that one gunshot over and over. Its echo blasted the walls inside my head.

The first officer started chest compressions while the second breathed into Krista's mouth. I stepped back into the living room. A third officer brushed past me on his way to the bedroom. He returned a moment later and told me to sit on the couch.

I sat down. The third police officer stood between me and the bedroom. He was young with blond hair. Most of his attention was focused on whatever was happening in the other room. Occasionally he glanced back at me.

It was then that I realized I was still holding the phone to my ear. The 911 operator was asking me questions. Her voice was still calm and collected. It pulled me away from the chaos inside the apartment.

"Are the police there?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Are they performing CPR?"

"I don't know. They told me to leave the room."

"Has an ambulance arrived?"

The living room window was located directly behind the couch. I turned and peeked through the blinds. Three police cars were in the middle of the street, their red and blue lights still flashing. A dozen people had gathered on the far side of the street and were pointing to the apartment, shrugging their shoulders. I could hear other sirens growing louder in the distance.

"I don't see an ambulance," I said.

"I'm going to stay on the phone with you until it comes," the operator said.

The blond police officer took a step toward the bedroom. He spoke with the other officers and then said something into his radio. I heard the words *ambulance* and *quickly*. The rest of his words were drowned out by the approaching sirens.

More police arrived. Soon the apartment was filled with blue uniforms and silver badges. The air was a cacophony of wailing sirens. One

of the officers said something about getting the crowd to remain on the other side of the street, and immediately two officers headed outside. Another siren, this one different from the others, grew loud and then abruptly ended. I pulled the nearest corner of the blinds aside just as the ambulance stopped in front of the apartment. Without another word to the 911 operator, I hung up the phone.

Two paramedics, black bags in hand, ran to the apartment. An officer directed them to the bedroom. A minute later one of them quickly exited. Through the blinds I watched him retrieve a stretcher out of the back of the ambulance. The sight of the stretcher gave me hope that Krista was still alive.

“Is she going to be all right?” I asked the officer who was still standing watch. His attention wasn’t on me when I spoke. His head snapped back at the sound of my voice.

“What did you say?” He seemed surprised that I had spoken.

“My wife. Is she going to be all right?”

The officer squatted in front of me so we were at eye level. His pale blue eyes told me everything before he spoke. “I’m sorry,” he said. “She died a few minutes ago. We did everything we could to save her. But there’s a chance the baby is still alive. We’re going to transport your wife’s body to the hospital.”

I took a deep breath and looked at the floor. I told myself that at any moment I would wake up screaming. I waited for everything around me—the apartment, the police, and the voices in the bedroom—to fade into blackness. But the noise and color and the smell of gun smoke remained.

I looked up at the officer, hoping he’d tell me it was all a joke, but he wasn’t looking at me anymore. His attention was focused on the couch. I followed his gaze. Next to me lay a gun case and a plastic bag filled with 9mm bullets. The lock to the gun case lay between them. The bullet casings sparkled like gold coins.

“Why don’t you sit over here?” the officer said. He pointed to a glider rocker next to the couch. I sat in the chair, the one Krista and I had bought so we could rock our new baby, but I wasn’t able to take my eyes off the gun lock and the bullets. In my mind, I pictured Krista kneeling clumsily next to the couch, her protruding belly in the way, unlocking the case, and then methodically loading the clip with bullets before walking back to the bedroom.

The phone rang. The sound was piercing. Someone had set the ring on high. The police ignored it. I waited for the answering machine to pick up. It didn't. I waited for the person on the other end to hang up. The phone continued to ring. A police officer came back from the bedroom and said something to the blond officer. The ringing drowned out their conversation. I stood up, half expecting to be ordered back to the chair, but the officer's attention was on whatever was happening in the bedroom. I walked to the phone, picked up the receiver in mid-ring, and hung up.

The next thing I knew, the blond officer was standing by my side. I thought he was going to say something about the phone. "I need you to move to the kitchen," he said. "They're going to move your wife's body to the ambulance. You don't want to see this."

I didn't want to go to the kitchen. I wanted to ride with Krista to the hospital. I wanted to see my baby daughter brought into the world alive and healthy. I tried to remember how many minutes an unborn baby could survive in the womb without oxygen from its mother.

"Sir," the officer said. He motioned with his head in the direction of the refrigerator. My body obeyed the command and walked to the kitchen.

The small kitchen was in the far corner of the apartment and set up in such a way that I was shielded from the living room. I leaned against the electric stove and stared at the floor.

Grunts emanated from the living room as the stretcher made the tight corner to the front door. There was a metal clang as the stretcher bumped against the wall.

"Careful," someone said.

*Yes, be careful, I thought. You can save the baby. Maybe, by some miracle, you can save Krista too. Modern medical science can perform miracles.*

The stove was beginning to dig into my back but I didn't move. The officer looked into the living room and then back at me. The sounds of the people carrying the stretcher faded away, and then the front door closed. Silence filled the apartment. A minute later, the ambulance siren roared to life, then quickly faded into the distance.

I returned to the glider rocker. I tried not to stare at the objects on the couch when I walked past and instead focused on the conversations of the police. One of them said, "What are we going to do with him?" and motioned toward me. The other officer shrugged.

The remaining police milled about the apartment. No one spoke to me. It seemed like I sat in the rocker for hours until one of the officers said, "I need you to come with me." I looked up. There were only two officers in the apartment now. The officer who spoke to me was thin and had curly brown hair. His eyes were hidden behind a dark pair of sunglasses. I thought it odd that he was wearing sunglasses indoors. The other officer held a large roll of yellow crime scene tape in his hands.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"The hospital."

I followed the officer outside. I half expected to be greeted by the crowd and flashing red and blue lights. Instead, there were only two police cars parked parallel to the curb; the lights on the top of the cruisers weren't flashing. The crowd I saw earlier had returned to the surrounding apartment buildings. I wondered if I'd seen any people at all. Maybe my mind had been playing tricks on me. With the exception of the police cars, the street looked just like it had when I arrived. The officer opened the passenger side door of his vehicle. I looked back at the apartment and watched as the other officer taped off the door with crime scene tape.