

THROUGH

Hell

— AND —

High Water

A POLICE WIDOW'S STORY OF
TRAGIC LOSS AND REDEEMING LOVE

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TRAGIC LOSS AND REDEEMING LOVE

April Katherman-Redgrave

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P R E S S

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Dedication

For my first love,
my husband in heaven, Mike.
I loved you yesterday. I love you still.
Always have, always will.

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the strength to put those broken pieces back together and to live life in honor and remembrance of your dad. You are each like him in so many ways. I know with all my heart he is so proud of the two of you. I couldn't be prouder myself of the strong, wise, and resilient young men you have become.

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Chapter 1



The Last to See Him, the First to Say Goodbye

The escort to the hospital seemed to take forever. No matter if we were driving Code 3, lights and sirens, I was never going to get to my husband fast enough. In my mind, I knew if I could just get to him in time, he would be okay. Nausea set in as we pulled into the hospital parking lot. We parked the car, and I suddenly began to shake and felt like vomiting. I wanted to get there so quickly, yet once we arrived, fear paralyzed me. I took a few deep breaths and nodded to the officer in the driver's seat that I was ready, even though I could never be ready for what I was about to face. I gripped the handle and opened the patrol car door to what was about to become my worst nightmare come true.

I slowly stepped out of the front seat and onto the asphalt parking lot of the hospital where my husband lay inside. My

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head was spinning. Panic overwhelmed me. Even though I knew in my mind he was already dead, my heart was not ready to confront my new reality. I had no clue what to expect once I had finally arrived. I still had no details as to what happened to him. I only knew he crashed on his police motorcycle. Was I going to see his body a mangled mess? Would there be blood? Where was he exactly? All I knew was I needed to get to him.

I shut the car door behind me and immediately noticed this was not the typical hospital parking lot scene I was stepping into. There were no people walking to and from their cars. In fact, there were hardly any other cars in the parking spots around us. Virtually no people to be seen anywhere. It was eerily silent all around me. I never felt more terrified, not knowing what I was about to face. I began the eerie walk, which will forever be etched in my mind, as if I were having an out-of-body experience watching a scene from a movie, with me as the main character.

The rest of the Regional Medical Center parking lot was filled with patrol cars. So many patrol cars. Like there was a big police emergency or event taking place. It took some time for me to realize the emergency, the event, was my nightmare. A perimeter of more patrol cars and officers set up around the hospital kept the media at bay. The media was waiting to get every detail they could on this breaking story taking place right before their eyes. What was a breaking story to them was my very life.

Derek, Mike's police academy mate and dear friend of our family, drove me to the hospital. I was grateful he was with me in that moment. The comfort and familiarity of his presence helped me to courageously face what I was about to walk into. I could almost feel the silence; it was thick in the air. It seemed to get thicker as I approached two walls of police officers in uni-

form. A sea of dark blue, San Jose Police Department patches, black boots, and shiny badges created a path to guide me into the side door of the hospital.

I walked through the officer-lined path, and not one officer gave me any sort of eye contact. It was as if I were on a conveyor belt, drifting past each officer one by one. Men and women, who were ordinarily strong and tough on the exterior, now stood with heads hung, tears streaming down their faces, whispering, "I am so sorry." Once I arrived at the end of that tear-stained path, the side door of the hospital was opened for me. I walked through the door like I was entering another realm where time stands still. It felt as if everything and everyone stopped that moment I crossed the threshold. The cold and sterile hallway was frozen in time for me to make my way deeper into my nightmare.

Nurses stopped and remained still at their stations. Officers in uniform and some in plain clothes stood at attention as I gradually moved down the hallways. So many officers had left their beats or families to pay respects to their fallen brother. Friends and family members lined the hallway as well. As I walked through the door, they froze. All eyes were on me. Deafening silence roared between beeps of hospital machines.

As I continued down the path toward the room my husband was in, I walked through a sea of silent sobs and whispers, which led me to a curtain. The only thing keeping me from finally seeing my husband was a white curtain hanging on silver round hooks. I remember hearing those metal hooks scrape against the metal bar they clung to as I slid it open, looking up to see the horror right before my eyes.

My legs shook and gave out beneath me, and I collapsed onto the cold, linoleum hospital floor. I was stuck. I couldn't

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move. I couldn't stand up, nor did I want to. I didn't want to look at him. I was afraid of what I was going to see. While on the ground I thought, *Why are there so many people here? How did they get here so quickly? So many people are staring at me, feeling sorry for me. Were they all told before me? Why am I the last one here? Wasn't I the first to know? How come everyone is already here surrounding Mike except for me?* This was the moment when I realized, *This is bad.*

Eventually, after what felt like many paralyzing minutes, my mother-in-law tenderly helped me to my feet. She walked me over to the side of the bed where my husband was. My beloved, my love, my life lay right there in front of me. He looked like he was asleep but in complete uniform. I wanted ever so badly to shake him awake and take him home. I wanted so badly for him to just be hurt and not dead. But he was already gone. He had been gone for hours, and I didn't make it in time for his last breath. I didn't get to hear his last words. He was already gone, yet he was right there in front of me.

So many people continued to enter the room; it was caving in. I wanted to crawl on the bed with him and make everybody leave. "Everybody, get out! Leave us alone! What are you even doing here?" I yelled in my head, but it didn't come out of my mouth. Instead, I just stood there in silence with all eyes on me.

There in the quiet, I placed his cold hand in mine and kissed it. I touched his pale, cool face with the back of my hand and stroked his cheek. Family members, officers, nurses, police command staff, my pastors—all of them tried to comfort me. Their hugs were suffocating; their words fell blank. All I could do was stare at my sweet husband lying lifeless in front of me. *Why are there so many people here?* I kept thinking.

Never letting go of his hand, and constantly stroking his

arm and kissing his forehead, I stood on his left side as my pastors and police chief stood on his right. The disheartening reality of what needed to come next was brought to my attention while I caressed my dead husband's dried, bloody hand. The media was waiting to release his name to the public. It needed to be done by the 8:00 p.m. news. *But I just got here! Everyone else had been here for God knows how long, but I just got here, and the media already gets to take control?* This meant I had to leave. My boys were at home unaware of what was going on. All they had to do to find out that their dad—their favorite person in life, their hero—was lying in a hospital bed dead and never coming home was turn on the news, get on their iPad, answer the phone of a frantic family member calling, or open the door to someone who rushed to our house. I would be damned if that were to happen. *Hell no!* The media wouldn't be releasing Mike's name on the 8:00 p.m. news without our precious sons knowing from me first.

It was a little after 7:00 p.m., and I wouldn't make it home by 8:00 p.m. even if I wanted to. No one in the room knew how furious I was for being the last to arrive, and now the first to have to leave. I wanted someone to flat out tell the media "No, you can wait." As much as I desired to shout out loud to everyone in the room, I calmly asked them to at least give me a few more minutes with Mike and time to get home to my boys. We agreed it would come out on the 9:00 p.m. news instead. It was not like the extra hour allotted me much more time, but it was a battle I had no energy to fight, nor did I even know how to at the time. It still didn't give me much more time with my husband either. How could they think a few extra minutes were enough?

I have never felt so torn. I wanted with all my heart to stay in that room next to him and never let go of his cold, rough,

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callused hand—the hand that was always warm, the hand that would engulf mine, the hand I had held since I was eighteen years old. I wanted everyone to leave so I could be alone with him. I hated I couldn't just throw myself on that hospital bed with him and sob in his arms. There were too many people shoved into every corner of the room and spilling into the hallway. I knew I needed to get home to my children soon, very soon. It is what he would have wanted me to do. He would have wanted me to get straight home to our boys.

Still with all eyes on me, I kissed his forehead wishing, just like the fairytale story our love was, my kiss would wake him up. I slowly let go of his blood-stained hand. I looked around at all the people who were getting to stay with my husband. *My* husband. I was mad. I was jealous. I didn't know at the time how bad leaving him that night would affect me.

My biggest regret was not speaking up and demanding more time with him. I wish I would have asked everyone to leave the room so I could have a moment with him alone. It wasn't fair. He was my everything, my world, my life. I had to leave my everything lying in a hospital bed so I could get to my children and beat the media. It will never be fair that I was the last to see him and the first to say goodbye.