

MARCUS HAWKE

STAY
WITH
ME

"How bad is the bleeding?"

"Where is the smoke coming from?"

"Is he urinating on himself right now?"

"Sir, could you speak up please?"

"Ma'am, could you stop yelling?"

"Okay, help is on the way."

These stray words all mingled together with the rapid tapping of computer keys throughout the call center. There were always a few incidents this time of year: mostly noise complaints and vandals, a few fights, a car accident, the occasional report of clowns lurking in the dark trying to scare people. But so far it was a pretty quiet night for Halloween.

The incoming call could have gone to anyone. Had it been made a millionth of a second earlier, it would have gone to Ron, currently speaking to a distraught mother whose son hadn't come home from trick-or-treating. A millisecond later and it would have gone to Janice, who had just finished a call and was logged out for a break. But instead electricity shot through the wires connected to the phone of Nina Wallace.

Her monitor blinked to life.

OPERATOR: *Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?*

CALLER: *Yes, um...*

Male. Not a deep voice, not high either. Age and race were hard to determine over the phone, but not impossible. That was about all she could make out, other than that he sounded like he was trying not to be heard.

CALLER: *I'd like to report a murder.*

Oh god. This was it. The call Nina had feared she would receive one day. The one she'd had to make herself, once.

She took a deep breath to steady herself.

OPERATOR: *Okay, just stay with me alright?*

CALLER: *Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere.*

OPERATOR: *Can you give me a location?*

CALLER: *Ten thirty-one Darrow Street.*

Nina's fingers flew across the keyboard.

OPERATOR: Is that a house, or an apartment?

CALLER: A house.

He was calm. Way more than she might have expected. Shock could do that to people sometimes, she had seen it before. But why was he whispering?

OPERATOR: Can you see the assailant right now?

CALLER: Not at the moment, no.

OPERATOR: Are you somewhere safe?

CALLER: Oh yes, I'm safe. Perfectly safe.

OPERATOR: Good. One moment. Just stay on the line. You're doing really well.

CALLER: Thank you.

Nina sent for the nearest unit to respond immediately.

She never forgot the sight of her sister laying there on their living room floor, the back of her head bashed in. So cold. So... gone.

OPERATOR: Alright, the police are on their way. Is this a friend or family member?

CALLER: Neither.

OPERATOR: Then how do you know them?

CALLER: I don't. **inaudible** I was just passing by.

OPERATOR: Are you inside the house right now?

CALLER: No, I'm outside. At the moment.

OPERATOR: Can you see the victim right now?

CALLER: Oh yes. I can see her.

OPERATOR: Can you give me a description?

CALLER: Brunette. Late thirties, early forties. Size seven, I think. **inaudible** Lovely throat.

No response, from either end. A moment which dropped the ugliest chill right in her gut.

OPERATOR: Sir, I need you to tell me exactly what happened.

CALLER: What happened?

OPERATOR: Yes.

CALLER: What happened is a man with a knife found an unlocked door. That's what happened.

OPERATOR: When did—

CALLER: Tonight, of all nights.

OPERATOR: Sir, when did this happen?

OPERATOR: Sir?

All she could hear from the other end was a few short clicks, muffled footsteps, and a scream cut short by gurgling sounds Nina wouldn't be able to forget as long as she lived. They went on for longer than she expected. And when they finally stopped...

CALLER: Just now.

He still sounded calm.