

Throw the Key

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In memory of E.W. Volkert

*One to another, the dream we shared,
“Spread your wings and fly,” you dared.
Though you left this world, dreams unfulfilled,
The fire still burns, your spirit instilled.*

Chapter One

August 5, 7:00 p.m.

My husband didn't even greet me when I answered the phone. "I'm coming to get you and the kids." He sounded rushed, almost panicked and his deep voice squeaked as if puberty had returned.

My three-year-old son sat on the kitchen floor in front of me, banging on a stainless steel pot with a wooden spoon. I pulled my cell from my mouth and cupped it with my hand. "Please be quiet, Jack. Mommy is on the phone."

He kept beating the pot, his head jerking from side to side as he belted out a made-up song. "I want to play all da-a-ay, I want to play all day..."

I plugged a finger in my ear, paced to the French doors, pulled them open, and stepped onto the cobblestone patio off the kitchen. “Eric? Sorry, Jack is...”

“Jenna, just listen.” Prickles stung my skin, tiny pins jabbing my flesh. “We need to go away. For a while.” His words were clipped, the steadiness in his voice forced.

“What? Why?” My heart crawled into my throat. “What is wrong?”

Eric paused. “I need you to pack everything we’re going to need for the next couple weeks or so. Whatever you can fit into four suitcases. No more.”

“A couple weeks? I can’t. Lucy...” Even though I quit my job as a speech pathologist a few years ago, I continued to work with Lucy a few times a week. She needed me in so many ways. I couldn’t just leave her.

“I’m sorry, Hon. We have to.”

I could hear my own breath huffing over the line. “Why?”

“Lock the doors and the windows. Turn on the security system. Stay in the house and keep the kids with you. Don’t talk to anyone. Do you understand?”

Why wouldn’t he answer my question? “Eric...you have to tell me what’s going on. You can’t just...”

“I’m sorry. Really. Lock up, turn the security system on, and pack.”

“But...”

“I’m in the Lance, getting ready for take-off.”

His plane? Had we grown so far apart that I didn’t know my own husband left in an airplane that morning?

Then again, he hadn’t known where I’d gone either.

“I’ll be home in a couple hours. Be ready. Stay inside until I get there. Don’t even come out to the hangar.”

The hangar was so close, right across the street. “Eric...”

He hung up.

I stood on the cobblestone with the phone still pressed to my ear. My heart pulsed in my throat, constricting it, allowing only wisps of oxygen through. I stared past the patio, the potted geraniums, and the fire pit into the forest.

Lock the doors and windows...don't talk to anyone.

A violent shudder rattled my body. I scanned the forest twice. Was someone lurking in the shelter of the trees? I didn’t know who or what to be afraid of - or why I should be afraid at all - yet I felt cold despite the sticky August air.

Why hadn’t Eric given me an explanation? He should’ve told me something, given me a clue.

I jerked the phone from my face and examined it as if I expected a rabid creature to slither from beneath the screen. Maybe Eric didn’t explain because he couldn’t. Maybe he feared our phones were bugged.

My stomach flipped and my ears rang. I wanted to toss the phone across the yard, get the device and whoever may have been listening as far away as possible.

I tried to calm my mind, think logically, breathe. My cell was always with me. Except for Eric and the kids, no one could’ve done anything to it. I allowed my arm to relax at my side, the phone still in my hand. If anyone’s phone was bugged, it was Eric’s. But why?

I checked the forest again. I didn’t see anything, just the soft shadows of evening settling over the foliage. If anyone was out there, they couldn’t be too far. The wooded land only ran so

deep before butting up to the Newman's property. It gave us enough privacy and distance, but they were close enough that I never felt alone. Until now. Miles seemed to stretch between my home and the nearest soul. I swallowed hard, looked to the ground, but even the yard took on a life of its own, breathing in hushed tones.

I shot my gaze next door. Greg Callaghan, an old friend of my father's, lived beyond a row of Arborvitaes and through a patch of mature maples. At night I could sometimes see bits of light poking through the branches, but it was still too light out. Was he home? Could I even call out if I needed him?

Don't talk to anyone.

I stood alone on my wedge-shaped corner lot, a row of green to my left and forested outcroppings to my right. Prime property for Chicago's North Shore, but it suddenly felt like an island, its natives on the hunt for me.

I chewed on my lip, the deep green of the forest fading, images blurring together like a Monet. Think...

Realization pulsed through me, an electric zing through my veins.

Eric had mentioned that he was onto a major story that would give his career a boost. He'd bragged that it would take him from suburban reporter to the *Chicago Tribune*. Had he uncovered something that put him in danger? More specifically, had he uncovered something that put the kids and me in danger?

I glanced behind me, through the French doors that led to the kitchen. I could still hear the muffled banging of wood on steel. Jack and Emma. Why was I standing out here staring into the woods?

I strode toward the glass, catching my reflection. Just those few minutes in the humid air had managed to wilt my hair, the brown mass as lifeless as my spirit. I pulled the door open, stepped inside, locked the door behind me, and set my phone on the counter.

“I want to play all da-a-ay...” Jack sang at the top of his lungs, accompanied by his makeshift drum. I walked over to him and squatted beside him onto the Brazilian cherry flooring, my legs weak and my hands trembling.

It didn't matter that I knelt right in front of him, he bellowed as if he needed the volume for me to hear. The banging of the pot throbbed behind my eyes. I reached for the wooden spoon and lifted it from his chubby hand. “Okay, that's enough for now, buddy.”

His mouth puffed into a frown, his dark hair slightly disheveled from swinging his head about. I ran my hand over it to smooth it. “But I want to play all day.” He crossed his arms.

I cleared my throat, hoping to steady my voice. “I need you to help me with something, okay?”

“Help with what, Mama?” He looked down at the pot still propped between his legs.

I slid the spoon across the floor behind me, pulled my hands together in a shaky steeple, and forced a wide smile. “We're going to go on a trip!” I didn't mean for my voice to slip, but it did. Jack didn't seem to notice.

He cocked his head. “A trip?”

“Yes, a vacation. Daddy is on his way home to pick us up in his plane. We're going to leave tonight.”

Jack smiled widely and pushed himself to his feet, kicking the pot aside. “Tonight?”

“Yep, tonight!”

He jumped up and down and clapped his hands. He tugged on my hand as if to pull me from the floor. “We tell Emma?”

My fake smile started to hurt my cheeks and the deep breaths did little to calm my heart rate. I didn’t want the kids to sense a problem. There was no point in causing them panic.

“Sure.”

Jack tipped his head to the side, studying me. His smile straightened. “Mama sad?”

I blinked. My eyes stung and a tear slipped onto my cheek. I hadn’t even noticed, had been too busy avoiding hyperventilation. I squeezed Jack. “Of course not. We’re going on a trip!”

Jack smiled and jumped. “Tell Emma!”

I got up off the floor. “Yes, let’s go tell Emma. I just have to check a few things first.” I picked up the pot and spoon, absently setting them on the counter. I held my hand out to Jack.

“Come with me.”

Jack grabbed on tightly and toddled beside me in more of a dance. “I’m going on a tri-i- ip. I’m going on a trip.” His voice boomed as loudly as before.

I moved as quickly as I could with Jack bopping beside me. I checked the window over the kitchen sink. Locked. I stepped past the cherry cabinets to the sliding patio door at the other end of the kitchen. Not locked. I flipped the lock, tested it, and made my way to the family room, past a family portrait taken just after Emma’s birth. Eric had insisted on that photo.

“Come on, hon,” he’d said. “We’re a family now.” He nodded to our engagement photo on the wall adjacent to the fire place. “We need a new picture.”

Eric referred to me as a photo fiend, but even I thought a smiling, pudgy face would make a better portrait than a limp bundle of blanket in my arms. “Don’t you want to wait until she can smile or at least keep her eyes open for more than a few minutes?”

He only shook his head, his smile wide, his eyes shimmering with pride at his daughter and love for me. How I missed that Eric and those days.

I steadied my hands to flip the lock on the family room window, Jack’s song still bouncing between the walls. I suspected a story at the root of Eric’s call, but I wasn’t sure if he told me what he’d been working on. He could’ve shared every detail and I would’ve simply nodded, my eyes not meeting his, too many other things rushing through my mind. He brought it on himself when he didn’t put his family first. He said I didn’t get it, but it was Eric who would never understand.

Jack drifted from my side, pulling my arm as we approached the living room window. His song stopped as he looked from the television to the couch. I tugged him back, hoping the motion would be enough to get his focus back.

I checked the latches on the windows, and moved toward the dining room. With a jerk, Jack pulled his hand from mine, his bare feet pattering over the carpeting, carrying him back to the window. “Jack...come on.” I walked over to him, reached for his hand. “We have to pack.”

He pressed his nose against the window, his finger pointing. “I want my ball.”

I looked out the window. On the opposite side of the sidewalk, Jack’s large red ball sat beneath the branch of a bush.

“Not now. We have to hurry.”

He wiggled away from me, his feet stomping, cheeks reddening. “I want it!”

I didn't have time for a tantrum. *Lock the doors and windows. Turn on the security system.* My heart pulsed with urgency. "Daddy is going to be here soon. We have to pack your things."

"I wanna pack my ball!"

"It won't fit in your suitcase, but if you're good, maybe we can grab it on the way out." I reached for Jack, but he squirmed away and ran toward the foyer. "Jack!" I called, taking off after him. My heart beat faster, harder. Was he running into the hands of danger? I didn't know what lurked around each corner, yet alone beyond the doors.

At the front door, Jack twisted the knob with both hands. I scooped him up and propped him on my hip, despite his kicking feet and blood curdling shriek. "Do you want to go on the trip?" My words rattled as they escaped my throat, must have relayed my frustration. Jack nodded back at me, his arms crossed, eyebrows knit.

"Then you need to stay with me. Do you understand?"

He surrendered with a grumpy nod.

I bounced him slightly. "Okay, good. Let's finish up down here so we can go tell Emma."

I backtracked to the library and then made my way through the dining room, the television room, back to the foyer... Still three more rooms to go, and it was only the first floor. I loved this big house. It had been a second home to my dad before he signed it over to us because of lack of use. I loved it so much that I kept it over his mansion after he died. Suddenly it seemed too big, as if there was no way I'd make it to every room in time.

But in time for what?

I moved faster, hefting Jack higher on my hip as I headed for the staircase. He started singing again, his mouth much too close to my ear. Song or no song, I was not going to set him down again. I grasped the banister and headed up the stairs. My feet moved in a labored jog, my memory attempting the same. What had Eric been working on?

Maybe the danger could be over something else? It didn't have to be a story. My pace slowed, my legs heavy, rubbery. Could Eric have been involved in... What? Eric was as straight-laced as me, maybe more. But he had been gone a lot lately. I wouldn't have known where he was; I didn't even know he'd left in his plane this morning.

Thoughts buzzed through my mind like a swarm of bees in a shaken hive. I thought of an angered mistress' spouse, a vengeful reader who thought Eric portrayed them in bad light, even possible involvement in a drug ring.

I continued up the stairs, Jack's feet bouncing against my thigh, his weight burning my arms. Nothing criminal fit Eric, but could I be so sure he wasn't having an affair? The thought made me cringe, betrayal, loss, and even guilt colliding in my heart. It wasn't the first time it crossed my mind.

I bit my lip, didn't want to think about it. I doubted it had anything to do with the danger we faced anyhow. That was what I needed answers to. I wasn't sure what good the information would do, but the need to know surged inside of me as if it alone could save our lives.

I paused and shifted Jack to my other hip. It had to be a story and it angered me to even think about it. He didn't need to work. We had the inheritance from my high-profile, defense attorney father to live off of. Eric could've spent his days doing the things he loved, but instead he insisted on working.

"I need to make my own way, Jen," he'd told me.

Whatever.

I understood the need to do something worthwhile. I did that too, continued as a speech pathologist in a very part time, volunteer capacity. I had satisfaction and freedom, a balanced life that Eric was suddenly jerking me away from as if I had no responsibilities at all. Lucy needed me. I couldn't just disappear. I shook my head. I really needed to focus, get up the stairs.

“I'm going on a tri-i-ip.”

At the top of the stairs, I gently turned Jack's face to mine and put my finger to my lips. “Shh, you're going to ruin the surprise for Emma.”

Jack threw his hand over his mouth and nodded dramatically, chocolate eyes wide.

I rounded the balcony and headed to the master bedroom. I'd finish locking the windows upstairs before I went to Emma's room. At seven-years-old, my examination of the house would cause her to suspect something that Jack wouldn't. The French doors in my bedroom leading to a small balcony had been left unlocked, so I flipped the lock into place.

I moved quickly through each bedroom, but in the guest room I hesitated. I must have stopped more suddenly than I thought because I felt Jack tense. The window hung all the way open. I know I hadn't opened it. The air conditioning had been on for the past week and there was no way I'd have given the excessive humidity an inlet.

Jack couldn't have opened it. The window was over the bed. He would've had to have climbed onto it to reach the window and the comforter sat undisturbed. Emma? She couldn't reach either.

I glanced over my shoulder, shifted my eyes fast enough to make me dizzy. Had someone slipped into the house?

My heart leapt into my throat as Jack started singing again. I held my free hand to my chest. “Jack, the surprise,” I reminded him, once again raising my finger to my lips.

“Oops!” He slapped his hand over his mouth.

I stepped closer to the bed, hefting Jack higher on my hip as I examined the cream colored carpeting and nightstand near the window. Nothing seemed out of place and the carpet still looked freshly vacuumed. I squinted, inspecting the window. The screen was locked in place. I reached up, slapped the window shut and secured the latch. No one could’ve come in. If they had, I’d at least have seen a footprint. Maybe Eric had opened it before I last vacuumed and I didn’t notice.

The logic did nothing to slow my hammering heart.

I stepped into the hallway and made my way to Emma’s room. I wished my hands would steady before I got to her. Surely, she’d notice.

I tapped on Emma’s bedroom door and then slowly pushed it open. She rested against a pillow on her bed, her fingers running over a tablet. Princess, the white Persian kitten we’d given her for her birthday, snuggled on her lap. Emma looked at me as we stepped inside.

I set Jack down and he ran over to her and jumped on the bed. “Emma, we’re going on a trip! Daddy’s coming to pick us up right now!” Startled, Princess hissed and then jumped to the floor.

Emma started to reach for the cat, but turned to me, her smile wide and eyes shining. “Really, Mom?”

I tried to act excited and hoped the red had faded from my eyes. “Yes, really!”

Emma sat up straight and held her hands together, her shoulder-length blonde hair bobbing. “Where are we going?”

Good question. *Just play the game, Jenna.* “I have no idea. Daddy said it was a surprise!”

Emma squealed. “Maybe Disney World?” She’d wanted to return to the happiest place on earth since we left there two years earlier. Jack would have no memory of the trip, having been just a year old and spending the week in a stroller. We’d planned to return there someday, but I doubted Eric was whisking us off to any such place. By the way he sounded on the phone I pictured a secret hideaway in the middle of nowhere.

I cocked my head. “Well, I don’t know about that. Wherever it is, I’m sure we’ll have fun.”

“Can Princess come?”

Another good question. If I couldn’t talk to anyone, how could I arrange for someone to take care of the cat? We couldn’t just leave her here for two weeks. I nodded to Emma. “I don’t see why Princess can’t come.” Eric wouldn’t be pleased. I didn’t care.

“Yay!” Emma slipped from her bed to the floor, straightened her pink flowered t-shirt, and gingerly limped toward the kitten. “Did you hear that, Princess? We’re going on a trip and you get to come, too!” It triggered another round of song from Jack.

“Okay, Jack. Enough. We know.”

He smirked at me.

Emma ambled toward me, dragging her left leg. Her hip always bothered her most after she’d been still for a while. So many tests and Irritable Hip was the only diagnosis the doctors could come up with. Nothing seemed to be wrong with Emma. They said she’d outgrow it. I hoped it would happen soon. She’d been dealing with it for five years now.

“Okay,” I said, holding my hands up to get their attention. “I need both of you to listen carefully. Daddy is planning on being here in just a couple hours. We need to pack fast.”

Jack ran for the door. “Where are you going, buddy?”

“To pack my stuff.”

Keep the kids with you.

I waved my hand, motioning for him to come back. “Let’s make this fun. Why don’t we take turns helping each other pack?”

“I wanna go first!” Jack squealed.

I glanced at Emma. She rolled her eyes, more hazel than brown like mine. “Just let him go first, Mom.” She leaned into me, held her hand next to her mouth as she whispered, “Maybe then he’ll shut up.”

I nodded and winked at her. “Okay, Jack gets to go first.” I still needed the luggage from the basement storage room. I also had to flip on the security system from the panel in the master bedroom, but I couldn’t do that until I knew that everything was locked in the basement. I should’ve thought to check that before coming up here.

“Before we can help Jack pack, we need to go downstairs to get our suitcases. Why don’t you both come help me?” I turned to Emma. She might not be ready for a trip down the stairs.

I glanced to the window and then back to my daughter. “Do you think your hip is okay or should we wait a minute?”

Emma walked back and forth across her room a few times. “I’m okay.”

“You must have been up recently?” She never moved quickly this soon. It could take up to an hour before she felt capable of taking the stairs.

Emma nodded, squeezing Princess in her arms. She followed behind me with Jack marching behind both of us. I moved slowly in case Emma had problems. She gripped the railing, taking each step slowly, favoring her hip while hugging Princess to her chest.

I paused. I could've left her in her room, let her walk it off for a bit while I checked the basement. I'd be able to move faster, make sure the house was as secure as I could make it.

I thought of the open guest bedroom window, my skin prickling.

It was better that she stayed with me. Just in case.

I moved slowly down the stairs, allowing her time to recover after each step. We made our way to the main floor and then down a second flight of stairs to the finished basement. We passed through the recreation room, past the air hockey table, and to the storage room. I flipped the light and quickly retrieved our bags.

Jack took his own suitcase, and Emma reached for hers with her free hand. Princess dangled from her other arm, seemingly oblivious to her position. I closed the door to the storage room, both kids behind me. "I just need to check the locks down here. Gotta make sure everything is locked up tight before we leave."

When I felt confident that every lock was latched, we made our way back up to Jack's room. "Okay, Jack, pick out your favorite clothes. As many as you can fit in your bag."

I paused, looking at my kids. The security system still had to be turned on, but I couldn't let Emma see that. She'd know something wasn't right. I normally only turned it on before I went to bed or when we left the house, if I remembered to turn it on at all.

There was a panel in my bedroom at the other end of the hallway. I'd be fast. I'd been through the whole house and no one was here. "I just have to check on something, okay?"

Jack didn't answer. He scrambled to his dresser, tossing aside different shirts in search of his favorites, his song beginning again.

Emma plugged her ears. "Mom, can you tell him to stop?" She dropped onto the bed with her kitten.

"Jack," I held a finger over my lips. "Let's do this quietly, okay?"

"Okay," he whispered loudly. And then in the same loud whisper he resumed singing.

Emma rolled her eyes. At least it was a little less annoying. I moved across the hall to my bedroom. I'd move fast. I knew I had to. Despite my rush, I welcomed the break from the kids, the moment to stop my fake smile and excited words.

As I stepped into my room, the anxiety bled from me. My heart pounded as if I'd just run a marathon and my breathing returned to quick gasps. My arms hurt from my efforts to keep them from shaking in front of the kids so for the moment, I let them go, watched them tremble at my sides.

That moment was all I would have. I stepped to the wall beside my closet, searched the security panel, selected the right setting, and punched in the code. Now I just had to keep Jack and Emma away from the windows and doors. Easier said than done, especially without scaring them.

Despite the four windows in my bedroom, it began to darken in the eerie orange sunset. An amber glow highlighted the down comforter on my bed. Just that morning, I'd woken beneath it with Eric by my side, each of us in a hurry to get away from the other. Well, I know I had been in a rush and whoever called Eric at the crack of dawn must have convinced him of the same.

It took little to separate us, so unlike when we first met in a creative writing course at Northwestern. Back then, we looked for every excuse to spend our free time together. “Do you have some time to help me with a stanza tonight?” I’d ask him, really just wanting to be with him, but also enjoying the inspiration for my poetry.

He never declined and it wasn’t like I had to ask often. Eric usually beat me to it. “Coffee tonight? My plot is weak and it would really help to bounce it off you.”

We fell for each other fast and hard, each of us no longer needing an excuse to spend time with the other.

A slight shadow on the wall sent sharp tingles through my body, but it was only mine. I lifted a hand to my forehead. Now it felt as if nothing could keep Eric and me together. I looked away from the bed. It was time to get back to the kids and play calm again.

I paused. Silence. Jack was never quiet for long.

The next sound I heard was my heart pulsing in my ears.

I sprang for the door to get to my kids, but stopped with a start.

A rumble.

And then a shrilling scream. “Mama!”

Jack.

