

I survived the worst year of my life...and it's time to tell the real story. I've let my name be dragged through the mud for 365 days while grieving the loss of someone I thought I was going to spend forever with. So here it is:

The Day The Stars Fell

I work as a paramedic in a high volume city...so let me preface this with saying, I absolutely LOVE my job. This field has brought so many ups and downs, as well as new perspectives on life, amazing people with even bigger gifts of wisdom and encouragement. It has been one of the best decisions I have ever made.

Some days we get to relax and enjoy the bright and rewarding moments this life has to offer, and there are times the city turns into pure chaos and we are pushed to our breaking points every hour.

The life of a first responder isn't for the weak, and it takes an even stronger person to be by our side and love us through the rollercoaster of our careers. I was one of the lucky ones that found a man that adored me through all of this. He was also a paramedic and the understanding and compassion and love that flowed through our relationship was unmatched. I was given a gift I never expected to walk into my life.

Nolan and I became friends shortly after he came to work at the same company, and we hit it off. Both of us were going through some hard times and became a quiet support system checking in on each other regularly. The laughs and inside jokes came almost immediately and there was a genuine bond formed. We talked about life, the job, fears, dreams, and our own personal struggles. Mental health check ins became a regular part of our routine. Our relationship was strictly platonic and a beautiful friendship was formed.

December of 2023, I got a call from Nolan pretty distraught about a bad situation he was dealing with at home. I offered to help in anyway. A few days later, we were sitting on my bedroom floor both in tears making a pinky promise that we would reach out if our own brains became our worst enemies and we would get each other through it to avoid the worst possible scenario. Come to find out, without telling each other, that night we both set the others contacts to an emergency bypass so that it would ring through the do not disturb setting so we were always available in an emergency.

Shortly after, Nolan got the keys to his new apartment, and our relationship developed into a romantic one. We were inseparable, and never spent a night apart. He was one of the few men in my life to show me true genuine love and care with a gentleness I never could have imagined existed. I wanted for nothing, and he treated me like a queen while simultaneously loving my 3 kids on top of it. Selfless and kind with a heart the size of Texas doesn't even begin to describe the man

I was building a life with. His blue eyes could light up an entire room on the darkest days, the mischievous grin he threw out often was one that was contagious. Our relationship is what I would still call "perfect", he spoiled me, I catered to him, and we never argued. It was the kind of example of love I always wanted for my kids.

On the morning of March 19th, we had our first argument. We were both devastated, and it resulted in Nolan packing his stuff up and leaving our house to head to his apartment in the mindset that our relationship was over. I called Nolan's partner, and one of our best friends to check on him.

Our argument carried over to March 20th, and Nolan was making comments that had me concerned for his mental state. Unfortunately I had nothing I could show the police that would force their hand to take him in to be evaluated. I just KNEW something was wrong and did my best to keep talking to him while I was on shift. Early that afternoon I received a text that was more than just concerning, I immediately reached out to a manager and said that I needed a favor and it was for one of our own. I got no response. In a panic, I reached out to his partner and he raced up to Nolan's apartment. Our texts continued, and shortly after I received a phone call from his partner reporting that FWPd was there and that Nolan was barricaded in his apartment with firearms. In that moment I felt like the air had been violently sucked from my lungs and I was in pure shock.

I immediately called our supervisor on duty that day and begged him to put my ambulance out of service and clear me to go to Nolan's apartment. I explained that I was the one he had been reaching out to for help and I was more than likely the only person that would be able to deescalate the situation. I was told that I could be put out of service to get him on the phone but that was all they could do.

I called Nolan several times before he finally answered. The minutes felt like an eternity until I heard his voice. He was very clearly intoxicated and expressing some heavy emotions about the harder aspects of life and not feeling good enough. My heart was shattering into a million pieces listening to the man I loved so whole heartedly tell me he was giving up.

I grabbed my partner's phone, called our supervisor back and pleaded with him again to send me up there to get him. I argued the fact that I am a credentialed provider in the system and run these calls all the time. He denied my request again.

I explained to Nolan I was doing everything I could to get to him and that we would get through this together. While still on the phone with me, I heard him yell through the door to the police officers "Kayla is the only one I'll leave here peacefully with, she's a paramedic and she's on shift right now, get her here!"

Shortly after I was receiving calls and texts from a close friend that was speaking with CIT because

they were asking her who I was to him. I sent her a text back explaining he said he'd only go with me to the hospital and that I needed PD to convince my supervisors to clear me in, all while keeping Nolan on the phone and listening to him fall apart for over an hour. Shortly after, Nolan switched our call to FaceTime. I watched him lay on the floor in the fetal position sobbing and apologizing with his phone propped up against something. I promised him I'd stay with him no matter what and that we were in this together. Watching the man I was building a life with and saw my entire future with at his breaking point is something I cannot even begin to describe.

A third call to my supervisor was made, and at this point I couldn't keep my emotions in check. I yelled through the phone about dropping the ticket on me as the primary medic if they had to and that PD was asking for me. Within seconds the call was dropped on my unit and we were en route running lights and sirens faster than we could blink.

Nolan rolled to his stomach and laid on the floor, and his physical and mental exhaustion was visible. I told him I was on my way and I needed him to hold on just a little while longer. He said "babygirl you're not gonna make it" and it felt like time slowed down the way it does in movies. I begged, bargained, and pleaded with him to stay with me and that I couldn't do this life without him.

Meanwhile my amazing partner had turned into Mario Andretti and was doing everything he could to weave through rush hour traffic to get us to Nolan.

I couldn't take my eyes off my phone screen. Nolan barely lifted his head, and his last words to me were "My soul is tied to yours, and I'll find you in the next life. I'm sorry I failed you."

At 1644 on March 20th he pulled the trigger and ended his own life, and my entire world stopped in that moment.

I remember feeling like my heart was being crushed by an iron fist, the entire outside universe fell away as I listened to the other end of that call. I counted 7 snoring respirations, and one final sigh. That was Nolan Fansler's last breath as I took my first in what felt like years. That first breath was followed by the most terrifying scream I've ever heard leave my own body.

It felt like time sped up to normal again. I was crying, and yelling, and begging him to wake up. I remember trying to crawl out of the passenger seat with nowhere to go, kicking the dashboard, and clutching my chest trying to ease the pain. My phone kept ringing with an unknown number, then my partners phone rang, and the rest of the ride to Nolan's apartment is a blur. I screamed the entire 30 min drive until my throat felt like sandpaper.

When we arrived at the apartment complex we were met by a supervisor vehicle and escorted to where the incident command was. My door was opened and an officer began asking me questions. I

relayed that I had witnessed the fatal shot fired and confirmed he was deceased. The officer asked if I was still on FaceTime and gently took my phone. I pleaded with him not to hang up the call because I promised Nolan I wouldn't leave him. Other officers helped me out of the ambulance and I immediately asked where my best friend was that had been sent to check on Nolan earlier that day.

I began walking through the parking lot and I felt like I was treading knee deep through molasses. My entire body felt foreign, my vision began to tunnel, and I could sense the panic rising like water on a sinking ship. I spotted Aaron right as he was running towards me. My knees buckled as the only familiar person caught me seconds before I hit the ground. I screamed, and sobbed, and begged him to tell me it wasn't real. I remember him easing us both to the concrete and grabbing my face telling me that I had more info than he did. He held me tight enough to keep me from shattering into a million pieces right there while I continued to sob.

Roughly an hour went by, with several other things taking place that I only remember bits and pieces of in my shocked state. At some point I had made it to the back of the ambulance and sat there with nothing but silent tears and a glazed over expression from what I've been told.

My supervisor stepped inside the box and approached me with caution asking questions like "do you know where you are" and "do you remember what happened", he knelt down next to me and grabbed my hand with tears streaming down his face. I was so confused and hyper aware at the same time. He told me they had done everything they could, but Nolan was gone. All I remember saying was "I know."

Matt from OMD arrived on scene and stepped into the truck with me. Seeing a man I've have looked to as a friend and mentor since my time began at this company was a wave of relief and comfort. He hugged me and let me cry into his shoulder and told me I was going to be okay. That HE was going to make sure I was okay.

Some more time passed, and an officer brought my phone back down from the apartment. He had kept his word and never ended the call. To that officer...I can't thank you enough for that small gesture, you helped me keep one of my final promises to my other half.

I blankly stared at my phone and told Aaron I couldn't do it. I couldn't hang up the phone, it felt too final. My best friend looked me in the face and said "I got you", he gently pried the phone from my hands and ended the call. That was it. That was the moment it was final. Nolan was gone.

At some point my phone started ringing and it was my dad. Aaron took over and explained the situation to him. I was handed the phone, and while Matt hugged me, I'll never forget the desperation coming from my dad, begging me "please tell me you're going to survive this." I assured him I would, even though I never admitted to him that in that exact moment I felt like I was actually

dying. My heart felt so heavy and so painful I thought it was going to give out at any moment, but as a parent myself I decided to spare him that devastating detail.

Shortly after a few members of our upper management team arrived on scene and I was met with what felt like inconvenience and annoyance. I was told I needed to report back to our deployment center in the ambulance and check in my narcotics. When I pushed back on this and begged to go home since I was literally a 15 min walk from my house, the argument ensued with the manager and I was denied my request due to having narcotics on me, I was still on the clock, and a debrief was required. At that point Matt stepped in and informed the manager that he was a mobile safe and that my medications could be signed over to him and he was also capable of clocking me out so I could go straight home.

I was faced with more push back and informed I needed to report to the north deployment center for the debrief. I once again requested to go straight home. And by "request", I mean more so told them I was going home regardless whether they approved it or not and I would deal with the repercussions later. Was I correct in my response? No, I was still in shock and an emotional mess. We came to a compromise and decided the debrief could be done at my house with everyone involved and every one of our closest friends showed up with a vibe of storming the castle to wrap me up and keep me grounded. Kaitlin, my sweet baby girl, arrived on scene at some point and made all of this happen to take what stress she could off my already overflowing plate.

While we figured out the game plan to get everyone to my house, I was approached by a second manager and he offered his condolences with a softness I appreciate more than I could express. When he asked me what I needed, my only response was "I need Nolan's mom's phone number. She deserves to hear this from someone that loved him and not a random officer." The manager hesitated, but began to look up Nolan's emergency contact info. He looked up from him his phone and said "Kayla I'm so sorry...", before he could finish the statement I raised my voice saying "What?!?! What now?!?!" I watched his sadness cross his face like a wave. "Kayla, Nolan made you his emergency contact." Pure disbelief is the only way to describe the feeling. My knees buckled and Kaitlin grabbed me before I hit the ground for a second time that day.

Let me preface this next part with some insight...as first responders our humor tends to lean on the dark side. It's a coping mechanism that some perceive as cold hearted. Nolan had a very dark sense of humor, just like the rest of us. It's how we make it through the hard stuff.

Surrounded by FWPD, and two of my closest friends on either side of me, someone made a comment about Nolan and how heartbreaking the situation was. The filter from my brain to my mouth malfunctioned and I just looked up and sighed, followed by "Jokes on you Nolan, you're not getting out of this relationship that easy, I'll Amazon a ouija board and have that b***h here by tomorrow." When I realized I had accidentally used my outside voice I looked around to a sea of

shocked faces. At that point I broke. I had no tears left and the pain was so surreal...I laughed. I hysterically laughed until I sobbed and the panic began to hit me like a freight train. I'm fairly certain, everyone around me was convinced I was having a nervous breakdown. There's a solid chance they were right.

At some point Kaitlin took me home, how I got there is still a bit hazy. I walked in to my best friend/ roommate and she dropped everything to hug me while we both sobbed. I still couldn't believe this was happening. Meanwhile, my teenage son was in his room oblivious to the fact that I was about to rock his little world. Aaron walked me down to my son's room and we sat with him and told him that Nolan had been in a work accident. I wasn't sure how to explain the concept of suicide when my children had only ever seen him happy and loving and basically acting like a big kid. My sweet baby boy looked at me with shock, and the pain I felt for him as his mother is immeasurable. Nolan was his buddy, his confidant, his protector, and the only positive male role model that had spent every day with him. My son wouldn't speak to anyone for days following the news of Nolan's death.

At some point, Matt arrived at my house and had food delivered for all of us. Shortly after, another upper level manager showed up and the debrief was underway. More so, chaos erupted with so much emotion, anger, sadness, and for some of us pure unadulterated rage. We were asked something along the lines of how we felt our leadership team handled situations with employees. Everything we all had been holding back for months was released from a cage in a way our manager was pinned to the chair and forced to hear our cries for help and change. Not only was the way Nolan's situation handled utterly absurd to all of us considering I personally had a timeline of roughly 3.5 hours of begging for help for him, but every indiscretion towards field employees was laid out. From sexual harassment, to unsafe ambulances that had wheels fall off on the highway during transport, to working us into the ground no matter the cost to us physically or mentally. The tears were not just of grief, but that of anger and mistreatment that has been ignored and swept under the rug for countless years...it all came to the surface that night. We were PISSED. All of these things had also taken a serious toll on Nolan's mental health, as well as our own.

As the room went quiet for a moment and we all just processed the situation as a whole and how drained every one of us was, the most powerful comment echoed through the room. The man it came from has always been cool, calm and collected. He clearly had enough at that point..."How many more f**king paramedics have to die for y'all to give a s**t?" The silence following that was deafening. We sat there and watched our manager scrambling for words on how to respond, and ultimately ended up defending the company and stating how much they valued their employees. Honestly, I tuned out the rest of what she was saying and went into a daze ignoring the surrounding chaos that was riling up again.

When things began to calm down, Matt came over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He asked me if there was anyone he could call for me, or if I had a counselor I was already seeing. I handed

him my phone with my absolute angel of a counselor's info pulled up. He stepped out to arrange to have me seen immediately.

There was a conversation with the manager about me having bereavement time and I was told that because I was not legally Nolan's wife their hands were tied. It didn't matter that I was on shift, didn't matter that we had a whole life together, and sure as hell didn't matter that I had actually WATCHED him die. Without it being said, what mattered was protecting the company. I stated that I was supposed to be teaching the next day and that I needed to go in to keep myself from losing my mind at home. The manager vetoed that idea and I was informed they would let me know when I could return to work.

I requested PTO donations from my work family, and was told the CEO is requiring me to file for FMLA, and informed that if it was denied I essentially could lose my job due to attendance. My stress level increased and I was sure the world was literally going to come crashing down around me at any moment.

My dad arrived the next day. When he walked through the door I watched his heartbreak for me in way only a parent could recognize. I watched this man bury his wife a few years prior and never in a million years did I think we would be able to understand this pain in each other on a personal level. While it has strengthened our relationship in an extremely sad way, I know he now worries about his first born child on a different level that terrifies him. He tells me all the time I'm the strongest person he knows, but he has no idea how many times I've sat alone in my room breaking and trying to figure out how I was going to make it to the next sunrise.

I picked up my girls from their dad, which Nolan usually did with me, and they immediately asked where he was. When we got inside the house, I broke the news to them that he wasn't coming home. My middle daughter (9) rarely gets emotional, the tears and visible pain as the reality of what I was saying set in took my breath away. My youngest daughter (5) was a lot more difficult to explain the situation, when Nolan is brought up now she tells people "he's my best friend and he's in heaven with the angels".

Before my FMLA had been approved, it was agreed that I would not return to work until after Nolan's funeral. The days leading up to the service were a rollercoaster to say the least. My birthday came and went, along with Kaitlin and Aaron's, we still had the big party that was intended to celebrate our trip around the sun, but instead we celebrated the life of the amazing person that became a part of our chosen family. I spent time with my dad, hugged my babies a little tighter, enjoyed the presence of all the people that showed up to take care of me, and prepared to say my final goodbyes to a big piece of the puzzle that made up my life that was now missing.

My home was full for almost two weeks leading up to the services. Some of the nights blur together,

but a few significant memories stand out. It was a hard realization that I wasn't the only one falling apart and these amazing individuals were doing their best to take care of me while also grieving the loss of their friend. Aaron and I sat at the foot of my bed, he held my hand and promised to get me and my kids through this nightmare. Later that night while I was taking time to process alone, I heard the song "You Should Be Here" playing, I peeked around the corner and I see Aaron sitting at my dining room table with a beer in front of him, and one across in front of the other chair. He cheers'd his to the one in the empty seat, took a sip and my heart broke even more.

Then...For my birthday my girlfriends got me a record player, sat me down on my bedroom floor and Kaitlin told me she had 3 songs that reminded her of me and Nolan in some way. The album is "Smithereens" by Joji, and the first song she played was "A Glimpse of Us". She explained it was how she pictured our relationship starting, we were both with other people and the situations were awful but we leaned on each other as friends. The second was "Before the Day is Over", she told me it was how she pictured me talking to Nolan in those final moments begging him to let me help him. The third was a song called "Die for You", all 4 of us were in tears within the first 45 seconds of the first song, but this was the true undoing. I sat there with tears that felt like they were on the verge of drowning me, looking around at 3 of the most amazing, badass, strong, and caring women I've ever come across...and their hearts were breaking right along with mine.

The day of the funeral came. Nolan's dad had me get there early and held my hand all the way to the casket so I could privately say my last goodbyes. As I got closer and stared at what was left of the man I loved, my knees began to shake like they were going to give out from under me. Once again, Aaron was there to hold me up and keep me from hitting the ground. The panic started to creep up and the flashbacks to his final moments came like a tidal wave and I all but ran out of the funeral home trying to breach the surface for air.

There is no way to describe the feeling of meeting Nolan's mother for the first time in person with his fire engine red casket in the background. As a mother I can't even begin to imagine her pain. Standing there simply being the woman who fell in love with her son, words cannot begin to express the amount of gratitude and admiration I had for the woman in front of me. She was the life force that created a person that loved me in ways I never thought were possible. Putting a face to the woman I heard so many stories about from a man that held her in the highest regard not only as his mother, but as a woman that created such a foundation for her sons still feels surreal. He had compared me to her in so many positive ways in my own journey of motherhood I couldn't help but have the upmost respect for her even before I knew her name.

I was also contacted by a couple fire wives from the department Nolan had previously worked for. This was shocking to me since our relationship wasn't public knowledge. One of these beautiful women told me "I know who you are and your grief deserves to be acknowledged". She then put me in touch with her husband who had mentored Nolan while he was a rookie firefighter. Their genuine

care and support means so much to me and I am forever grateful for their kindness although I was a complete stranger to them.

The service was held on a Saturday and I returned to work on Monday. I was able to work Nolan's shift with Aaron my first day back. I'm so grateful to have someone I trusted with me to get me through it. When I returned to work, I was met with coldness. My coworkers looked my way with casual distant greetings, and I could feel the stares as I made my way through the building. Multiple supervisors walked by me without so much as a hello or a second glance. At first I assumed it was because no one knew what to say, but it continued for weeks.

I believe it was my 3rd or 4th shift back on the box, I ran a call that will haunt me almost as much as losing Nolan does. We were dispatched for a psych patient and the call notes were far too similar to my personal nightmare. It was a 17 year old girl barricaded in her room threatening suicide. The problem with these calls is we never know if they have a weapon and we usually wait for PD to clear us in. I immediately grabbed the radio and told dispatch we were making scene without PD. I raced into the house, was met by her mother at her bedroom door with the handle broken off. I used my pocket knife to pry the latch open and saw the most heartbreaking thing at my feet. This baby girl was curled in the fetal position sobbing. The only thing I could picture was Nolan's last moments on this earth. My knees gave out and I hit the ground, pulling this sweet girl into my lap and crying with her. Once we both could catch our breath, I told her Nolan's story. By the time I finished, we were both in tears again along with her parents, while my partner and PD stood there stunned. I asked the girl if she would let me take her to get help, she grabbed my hand and didn't let go until we got her into the ER. We talked about life, and her dreams and goals. When I went to leave she told me "you were supposed to be here, and I'm so happy I met you". The rest of the day became a blur. As I was finally coming off shift and heading to my car, a supervisor walked by and greeted me like he always has. He did a double take and asked "how are you really doing?" I broke down in tears and all but ran to my car as the now familiar panic was rising to the surface.

Weeks passed, rumors flew, and my mental health was spiraling. I hid my breakdowns from my friends along with how much I was drinking on my days off. I snuck the empty liquor bottles out when I'd leave for work so my best friend would continue to think I was still handling the situation in a healthy manner. The nightmares were progressively getting worse and I was sleeping less by the day. I stopped going to counseling due to the fact I've had to pay out of pocket for my sessions and I was ashamed that not only did I let Nolan down, but also how out of control over myself I was. In my mind, as a paramedic, it's literally my job to save lives and I lost one that was so incredibly important to me, and with that parents lost their son, boys lost their brother, my tribe lost their friend...I failed them all.

Fast forward to 3 months after Nolan's death. My leadership was still avoiding me, and I found out that they had all decided to keep their distance after I made it very clear there was a conflict of

interest with the supervisor that refused to let me go to Nolan's apartment that day. I reported to upper management that not only did that supervisor send me inappropriate pictures through Snapchat while on shift, he had previously stuck his tongue down my throat while I was resupplying medications at a post. Our supervisor team collectively decided to keep their distance due to something along the lines of "Kayla is going out swinging and she's going to drag us down with her." Now, this is third party information, but knowing the things I do about a lot of people I work with, this information was not surprising in the least. I didn't have a lot of time or brain power to care after receiving an email stating I was to report for a mandatory "After Action Review" with a panel of people that were complete strangers to me. My entire friend group was also required to attend along with several others.

I was not happy about this due to being told they waited months to do this review because the fire department was taking over our company and they just didn't have time with the merger. I had lost all trust in my company and leadership at this point. I requested to have my friends and I go together for support and was denied. I requested that Nolan's fire mentor be with me for support since we had become friends and I trusted him. I also requested another friend to accompany me who is a retired police officer that is now a first responder chaplain. Again, my requests were denied and I was given a corporate style answer as to why I had to go alone. I spoke with several people and made the decision to just walk in and lay out all of the truth no matter if it cost me my job or not. Nolan deserved to be fought for and I was willing to go to war for him.

About a week before the after action review I was pulled into the office by the manager I had originally reached out to for help. I had considered this man and his wife friends of mine. They had invited me for Thanksgiving knowing I didn't have family here, we had gotten together for drinks, and had trusted them both. In his office he made a statement about how he heard I was angry with him and he was sorry it took him so long to reach out to me. Mind you, I passed his office everyday at work so the opportunity to talk to me was very present. I started crying immediately and he pulled me into a hug. We talked for a while before I went on shift and I thought we had made amends. Until I realized how convenient the timing was considering my meeting with the review panel was roughly a week away...and none of us knew if we would for sure have jobs once we merged with the city. The heartfelt talk now feels more like a chess move to save his own ass.

I later found out from Nolan's dad, the same manager reported to our legal department that he ignored my texts for help because I'm "constantly asking for favors". Those favors entailed me offering to come in early or extend my shift to provide extra coverage in an already understaffed system. It was another slap in the face of how far they're willing to go to protect the company and themselves.

A couple days before my meeting, a lieutenant reached out via phone call after she heard I was very skeptical about this review. She wanted to put my mind at ease and assured me no one from my

company would be in attendance and that what I said would remain confidential. By now I was so angry, hurt, sad, and lost that I probably would have said everything to my higher ups with a megaphone if they had let me.

The day of my meeting rolls around and I show up as mentally prepared as I could get myself. This would be the first time I told the details of that day in depth to people I have never met before. I was on edge to say the least. The lieutenant and assistant chief I sat across from showed me nothing but compassion and kindness. I laid out every detail to them, and when I told them the last words Nolan said to me with tears streaming down my face, I saw the pain in their eyes and what looked like tears ready to fall for us. We wrapped up the meeting and the lieutenant walked me out, she told me to call her if I ever needed anything, and when I went to shake her hand she pulled me in for a hug that I can only describe as a "mom hug". It was so tight and full of care I almost cried again.

I immediately called the manager that had instructed me to let her know if I needed to decompress before going on shift. She informed dispatch and kept me out of service, telling me to go grab some food and collect myself. My partner and I grabbed dinner and about 45 mins later, while I was still in tears another supervisor called me and told me I had been out of service long enough and I either needed to go available or I'd be sent home with a possible attendance point if I was not able to work.

It was clear the only choice I had was to get to work.

As the weeks went by, and the chaos calmed down a bit, the coldness subsided somewhat and I just continued to go to work and live my life the best that I could. I was still having rough days and went to my leadership for extra time at the hospitals after calls that hit too close to my personal hell. Several times I was met with responses like "okay, but make it quick because the system is busy." There were a couple days I called off work when I could barely drag myself out of bed because the weight of the grief was so heavy I could barely breathe and got little to no understanding with it complete with write ups. I've spent countless nights waking up after rolling over to feel Nolan's spot empty and getting sent into a fear fueled panic. I've spent every shift at this company since that awful day riding in essentially the same seat I watched him die in. To say this has taken a toll on my mental health would be the understatement of the year, but I was given no other choice but to suck it up and keep going.

I was never truly offered resources for my PTSD from my company even though I was on shift and Nolan technically became my patient the second I pulled into his apartment complex. If my supervisor hadn't been there, I would have been the highest credentialed provider, meaning I would have more than likely have been the one to pronounce his death. Not once was it taken into consideration that this call would have been tough for any first responder because he was one of us. Let alone the fact that we were friends, but add in the fact that we were in a relationship and I

watched him pull the trigger, then witnessed his life literally end...how anyone thought I would be okay in less than two weeks before returning to work is beyond me.

Nolan's birthday passed, and I attempted to get the day off, I bargained with a supervisor offering to extend two shifts that week to make up the hours or I would go help teach the trainees like I do regularly. I was told no almost immediately and asked what my plan was for his next birthday and the one after that and the one after that. He told me PTSD doesn't go away and essentially I needed to figure it out. We ended up coming to a compromise after I couldn't hold back my tears, and he mentioned how I was doing great and less angry than when I first came back. Was I not allowed to be angry?? Or hurt?? Or devastated?? Or traumatized??

To my leadership team that looked down on my grief...I'm sorry this was such an inconvenience for all of you. I'm sorry that my emotions were too much for you to handle. But mostly...I'm sorry that this company thought yall were the best options to lead us through an already tough career.

Now here I am a year later...the flashbacks still come in waves, the panic attacks will hit me out of nowhere, I'm still looking for any way possible to cope whether it's toxic or unhealthy or not.

I am just one example of PTSD in first responders. I'm just one example of how we are left behind when we need help the most. Nolan Fansler is just one example of a precious life cut short due to mental health and the price we pay in this line of work.

I've heard several people say things like "you CHOSE this career"...you're right. I absolutely did choose this career. I choose to go to work every day knowing there's a chance I'm going to hold someone's hand as their soul leaves this world, hold a daughter while she sobs because she came home to find her father dead and has no one to call, explain to a mother that we're doing everything we can while compressions are being done on her child, and every other horrible thing you can fathom. I choose to come to work knowing I increase my own chances of dying and not making it home to my own children in exchange for trying to save the lives of someone else's loved ones. I do it at the cost of my own physical and mental well being some days.

And I wouldn't trade it for the world if that means I can keep someone else from feeling the pain of loss I've become all too accustomed to.