

# Chapter I

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## *Erin*

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“Erin, wake up! You gonna miss your first class!”

I opened one eye. My best friend Nevaeh was standing over me. I blinked at the sunlight coming into the dorm window. The heat in the room stung; my clothes now melted to the skin with sweat. Fuck.

I felt like I had slept for 5 minutes, and I already had to get to class. I stretched and felt the pop and crack of every tired, hungover bone in my body. I needed to take a shower, change, and get my whole life together. I squinted at the clock, trying to focus on the time that was displayed in a dim red light that still managed to hurt my eyes. I sat up. The room was littered with swisher sweet wrappers, takeout bags and liquor bottles. We were truly living up to the college kid party stereotype. I should've stayed my ass home last night.

Nevaeh had called around 10 o'clock to come help her study, but I knew better. She wanted to talk my head off about one of her niggas, get me drunk, call some other niggas over to get her mind off of it and then smoke and drink when they left. A typical weeknight. It usually ended with me being annoyed with the goofy niggas she'd brought over, one of which was usually a tag-along designated to me. They would end up calling me “bougie”, be mad that they weren't gonna get any, then leave, and me and Vaeh would end up sitting there alone smoking.

Nevaeh had been my best friend since pre-school, and I knew her like the back of my hand. Not only did that mean I could call bullshit on any and everything about her, but it also meant I knew she was toxic. Don't get me wrong, I'd literally kill about my girl, but a lot of her problems were self-inflicted. The men she dated, the things she did, the situations she'd always found herself in... she knew better but seldom did better. Honestly, as we got older, I got weary of it, but she was my best friend. It was my job. I was just along for the ride and there to help pick up the pieces.

This week's drama was due to this nigga named Chase that we grew up with. She had been dealing with him for a year or so now. It had been non-stop bullshit since the day she linked with his trifling ass on one of our trips to Fat Tuesdays on South Street. It was messy, to say the least. He had two baby mamas; Ashley, who we had to fight on several occasions and Logan, who stayed out of the way. Logan was a quiet, good girl, who had made a clear mistake and tried her best not to dig a deeper hole. Ashley, however, was a dirty, ghetto mess who insisted on proving it at every turn.

I warned my friend about him on multiple occasions, but she was dick-whipped. I couldn't understand why she couldn't let him go. Nevaeh was drop-dead gorgeous. She had golden brown skin, glowing green eyes, and full lips. Her hair was jet black and fell midway down her back, but she usually kept it either braided or wore bomb ass custom wigs that she made herself. She was a hair stylist and full-time fashion student, so she always had a look together.

She could have any man she wanted, and even though she dated plenty and had men jumping just to take her out, she was always very much in her feelings about Chase. Seeing him in passing around the neighborhood was one thing, but knowing him, in the biblical sense, the ay Nevaeh did? It was a whole different monster. I couldn't even pretend I liked them together after the first situation he put her through.

It was about 3 or so months into them dealing with each other when we found out who he really was. The two were exclusive at this point, posting each other on Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat, and they were together every chance they got. Shit, they even had a whole ass pregnancy scare. They were definitely still in the honeymoon phase, and it was evident in how Veah was handling him.

Nevaeh had pulled up outside of Chase's mom's house, which was right next door to her own grandma's house and across the street from my grandma's. She was waiting for him to drop some money off there for Ashley, who he supposedly only dealt with through their mothers, and strictly about their daughter Kennedy. I was sitting on my grandma's porch playing cards with my cousin Butch when I saw her pull up. I got up and jogged across the street, circling around to the driver's side of her jeep.

"Yurrrp. What are you about to do?" I tapped my nails on her window. She turned her music down and rolled her window down. She was wearing a really cute dress, a fur coat and shades, so I figured they were about to go out.

"We're about to go to Ocean Prime. He's droppin' some bread off for bitter baby mama." She rolled her eyes and nodded toward the house.

In the years that we knew Chase, he was private and reserved, but the moment he started dealing with Nevaeh, Ashley made her existence known. Kennedy was 4, and he and Ashley had never been together as a couple. Chase had cheated on Logan, the mother of his 5-year-old daughter Cassidy, with Ashley, so it was messy from day 1.

Nevaeh eventually got out of the car, and we stood there for a little while before the commotion came spilling out of Chase's mom, Ms. Gloria's house.

"So, you can fuck me, and your bitch and then act dumb when I ask you to give me more money? You can have extra pussy, but I can't have extra money!?" Ashley threw open the screen door to Ms. Gloria's house and stormed onto the front porch.

Ashley was tall, lightskin and teetering the line between thick and fat. She had long, sandy brown hair that was pulled into a messy bun. She had big, buck teeth and big, round hazel eyes that darted around like she was always on the run from somebody. She was loud, obnoxious and

dressed exactly how she acted; tacky. She wore a thin, cheap neon green cutout bodysuit that barely fit. Her nasty ass toes hung over the edge of a pair of Tory Burch sandals, decorated with chipped red polish and a corn or bunion for every toe. Looking at her and Vaeh, you'd have no clue what that nigga's type was.

"And the bitch don't look better than me no way." Ashley smirked, cutting her eyes in Vaeh's direction. I was stuck. The second I turned my head to see Nevaeh's reaction; she was hopping off the hood and on her way over to where Ashley was standing.

I attempted to grab her, but she was already flying. I jogged after Nevaeh. Chase came charging out of the door, his sisters and his mom in tow. Before another word was said, Ashley was turning around to Nevaeh's fist. The first hit landed across Ashley's mouth, sprawling her across the lawn. She sprung to her feet, attempting to grab Nevaeh. Nevaeh maneuvered her leg behind Ashley's foot, tripping her and landing her on the lawn yet again and began pummeling her.

"You think you funny bitch!?" I could hear Nevaeh say between grunts and punches. I attempted to stop the fight, when I felt a hard yank of my hair, forcing me to my knees. Ashley had a handful of my hair as Nevaeh began choking her. I jammed my knee into Ashley's chest, and she released my hair.

"Vaeh! Yo, chill out!" Chase had the audacity to say. He tried to grab Nevaeh, but his sisters and mom started pushing him toward the front door. I struggled to my feet for a second before grabbing Ashley by her hair, pulling her from under Nevaeh and pushing her hard enough to knock her over. I could see Butch running over and grabbing Nevaeh.

"Nevaeh go head! Go in the house!" Butch pulled on Nevaeh, trying to force her into my grandma's house. I let go of Ashley's hair and she immediately sprung from the ground and charged after Nevaeh. She darted across the street, I followed at full speed, tackling her onto my grandma's porch. She went to grab my hair again and I landed 3 hits. Who did this bitch think she was? I had stopped the fight for her own sake.

I landed 3 more punches, this time on the sides of her face while she kept turning her head trying to avoid the punches. Her arms were flapping everywhere, not even fighting back, now just attempting to protect her face. It was too late, and I could feel her blood on my knuckles and see the splits on her eye and her cheek. Her lip was busted and bleeding into her teeth. Before I could snap out of it, I felt multiple people pulling me from on top of her. I was winded and eventually, I stopped. She laid there on the lawn, a bloody fucking mess.

"Go in the fucking house now! You know these neighbors play with the cops!" Butch grabbed me so forcefully by the arm, I almost hit him too. I stomped into the house, flustered and hot. Butch slammed the front door, following me up the steps into the back room where I found Nevaeh trying to calm herself down. She was shaking from head to toe and tears flowed down her cheeks. Her fists were bloody and bruised and her dress was ripped.

"I can't believe this bum got you out here acting like that!" I was pissed. At Nevaeh, at Chase, at Ashley. I was out of breath and spent the next hour telling Nevaeh that Chase wasn't shit and

that if Ashley came anywhere near my grandma's house, I would fight her again. Chase ended up at my grandma's door that night and Nevaeh's dumb ass disappeared with him until the next afternoon.

After that incident, I didn't waste my breath lecturing her. She would keep giving him chances and beating his baby mama's ass until she was blue in the face. I couldn't do it. I distanced myself from the situation and made it known to Chase that I didn't like his ass. Ashley became a constant problem, but I only inserted myself if absolutely necessary because I had become so invested in school. Nevaeh understood that, but it didn't stop her from taking part in the drama. I felt like she began to thrive off it. She definitely loved the nigga, but if that was love, they could keep that shit.

I got dressed and gathered all of my things to get my day started. Nevaeh crawled back into her bed and fell asleep. Her classes were in the evening, and she wasn't due for her first client at the salon she worked at until around 11. I was jealous, wishing I could sleep in a little longer. I always had to be up at the crack of dawn and rush to class after class before my day was over. I knew it would all be worth it one day.

When I opened the door to exit Nevaeh's dorm, I was immediately blinded by the sun bursting through the buildings and shining into the tall windows. I shuffled down the hall, noting the extreme quiet of this dorm. It was dead silent and still. I didn't feel like I was in a college dorm. A sharp pain shot up my abdomen and my stomach growled fiercely. I went to sleep high and didn't eat anything. I was starving. The Dunkin Donuts down the street would have to do for now. I caught the elevator to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor.

As I walked out of the dorm, I was hit immediately by the cold air. My car was only a block away, but the walk felt infinite. There were flurries cascading across the pinkish-orange sky. The streets were so quiet and peaceful. For a minute I felt like I was the only one awake. It made me feel a sense of peace. Which was rare on campus. I scanned the streets. A few students scurried across campus to early classes, clad in whatever they considered warm enough to make it through the courtyards to the next warm building. The air scraped at my cheeks, cutting and tearing with the cold. The wind swirled the smells of nearby coffee shops into my nose, only heightening my hunger. I sped up my pace. I had walked in silence until I reached the street where my car was parked.

I could finally hear some form of life in the city. I climbed into my car and drove in silence and started thinking about everything I had to do. Not just today, but all of my requirements to graduate. I thought of my bed. I thought of things I needed to do at home. I thought of my mother, as I did quite often when I was alone. I thought of my grandma. My family. Everything. I hated getting up early every day, but I couldn't deny that it was the only time I could think clearly without a billion things interrupting. It was the only time I was truly alone with my thoughts and not jumbled up in my crazy ass mess of a schedule.

I arrived at Dunkin' Donuts fast. Fuck. I must've been on autopilot for at least 5 minutes. It always scared me when I zoned out like that then realized that I had arrived at my destination in one piece without the slightest idea how. I couldn't remember starting the car, I couldn't

remember obeying the traffic signals on the way here. I couldn't remember any of it. But, before I knew it, I was pushing the door open. Fortunately, it was warm and cozy inside. I placed my order then stood off to the side.

"176! Number 176!" The short, thick woman with a heavy Indian accent leaned over the counter and peered around the crowded store. I propped myself against the edge of the counter impatiently. "*Patience, Erin.*" I could hear my dad's voice in my head. He had lectured me a million times about my temper and my lack of patience. I had been here for 10 minutes or so. The smell of cigarettes, perfume, sweat and coffee had intertwined in the air and immediately gave me a headache. All I wanted was coffee and a wakeup wrap. Quick. Simple. And still taking entirely too long. I peered down at my phone, wondering if I could still make it to my apartment for a nap that would suffice before I had to be to class. I rolled my eyes.

"Number 176 please! Medium iced coffee and half a dozen donuts!" The cashier seemed about as impatient as me. She had a look on her face like she had been here for hours and still had hours to go. Every time I had the misfortune of coming into this particular store, she was at the register. She was rude and never seemed to smile. I assumed the place was short staffed. Customer service always sucked, and the employees obviously hated their jobs. But no matter how bad it was, Temple students thrived off the morning coffee and donuts. I hated coming into the Dunkin' on campus because it was always packed in the morning, but my energy level had only permitted me to drive down the street, and that would have to do for now.

This white girl standing beside me with two of her friends made her way around the counter to where the cashiers were. She was wearing these too-thin black tights, some beat down chestnut-colored fur boots and a Northface fleece that was clearly not built for this Philly winter. I adjusted my jacket. Just looking at her made me cold. It was about 26 degrees outside, and I was wearing a white fur jacket and my white Mongolian fur boots and a thick, knee-length sweater dress. I looked her up and down and chuckled thinking of my Nana saying, 'white people don't get cold.'

"Hiiiiii, what number was that againnnn?" She was one of those people who dragged their words out and sounded like she was high on something. I looked at my phone again. If this is home girl's food, I wish she'd take it and if it isn't, I was about to take it and go. What the hell could be so complicated about making a medium coffee and a wakeup wrap?

"It's number 176 sis, iced coffee and a box of donuts." I stood up straight and walked toward the counter. Something had to give. "And I wanna know what's taking my order so long." I nodded toward the cashier, stepping directly in front of the white girl. "I been here for 15 minutes, and all I ordered was a wakeup wrap and a coffee. I could've come back there and made it myself faster than this." I rested my hand on the counter, looking at my phone again.

The cashier placed the box of donuts she had been holding on the counter and the coffee next to it. She busied herself with something behind the counter that I couldn't see but I saw her roll her eyes at me. Of course, everything in my body wanted to act like a ghetto mess, but I opted for classy Erin at that moment. I actively avoided being labeled 'the angry black woman'. What a stereotype right? I mean, every other woman in the world could be angry and emotional. White

women were called brave and passionate for it. Shit, Latina women were even fetishized for it. But God forbid a black woman be justifiably upset at something.

“Are you number 178? I apologize for the long wait. We are a bit crowded” a tall skinny kid emerged from behind the counter where the coffee station was. His accent was as heavy as the other cashiers, but his demeanor was very different. He handed me my coffee and the small bag that my wrap was in. “Here’s your order and again I’m sorry you had to wait so long.” He half-smiled at me, exposing his braces, then quickly stopped. I’d never seen him before, but he looked a lot like the woman who was also at the counter, like he could be her dorky younger brother.

“Yes, thank you. I wish your coworker had the same manners that you do.” I smirked at the other cashier, knowing that she felt slighted. She blushed, embarrassed that I had called her out for being rude. “Have a better day homegirl.” I laughed as I headed for the parking lot because she was red as hell.

When I pushed open the door, I felt the full force of the 7am air assault every inch of my body. It had started snowing badly. I walked as fast as I could to my car. It was only a few feet away, but the air literally felt like it was stabbing at me. I’d left my car running, so fortunately there was a blast of warm air to greet me as I slung the door open. I climbed into my beautiful, black Range Rover, a gift from my father for passing grades at the end of last semester. My father had absolutely spoiled me, but I felt like it was only right. I was an only child. I was his princess. His pride and joy. And I could only imagine what gifts I had in store after graduation.

It was my junior year at Temple. I’d always maintained my good grades and strived to make my dad proud. I knew that if I held up my end, I could have whatever I wanted from him. He was THE Alonzo Whitfield. He had his own law office in Abington, and though his cases were basically some top-secret shit and I’d never heard much about them, he’d been making bank, and we’d always lived comfortably.

All I knew my entire life was my dad and his side of my family. I grew up in Philly, somewhere between the hood with my grandma and the county with my dad. My mom and dad had met, had a one night stand, and then she died when I was a baby in a car crash. That’s all I got. No pictures, no memories, just... nothing. Since then, it was just my pop and me. He kept me on the right path, even though I still ended up in a few scuffles. It was hard having a dad who was always working and a grandma who also raised damn near every kid in the neighborhood, but here I was.

I sat for a while, plotting out my day. I only had one on-campus class and one online class for today. My on-campus class was unfortunately in an hour, and I was running on 2 hours of sleep. Staying at Nevaeh’s dorm had set me back, and it had been a long night, but my ass was NOT gonna miss class this morning. I prided myself on perfect attendance and great grades.

Temple was a big school. I tried my best to stay local but after one year in student housing, I was sick of all the drama, so I talked my dad into getting me an apartment downtown. The commute was longer, but it was well worth it. I didn’t have to share a room, I didn’t have to worry about these hateful ass bitches on campus, and most importantly, I could smoke and drink

in peace, without the bother of dumb ass campus rules. Plus, the place I was staying in was swanky as fuck and had a great view of downtown. Plus, it tickled me how all the wealthy white people in my building looked so confused about the little black girl living in their expensive building. That was priceless.

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As I headed downtown to my apartment, the snow progressively got worse. The road was barely visible, and people were driving like idiots. I hated driving in this shit. I hated the snow and winter and the cold. It made me miserable. I wanted to stay home in my onesie pajamas and drink hot cocoa with my Yorkie, Ava, and watch murder mystery documentaries. But of course, I had shit to do.

*Ding!*

I glanced down at my phone briefly, trying to see who could be texting me at such an ungodly hour. I had gotten a text from an unfamiliar number. I opened the text, already annoyed because I didn't know who it was.

*'Please be advised that due to inclement weather, all classes on campus are cancelled for today. Pending the condition of the weather, classes will resume tomorrow accordingly. Travel safely and stay warm!'*

Thank God! I couldn't wait to get home, roll up and crawl into my bed.

The question was, did I feel like being snowed in on my own? I had been single for 2 months, but as soon as niggas caught wind of my breakup, they came flocking. David and I had been together since I was a sophomore in high school, and he was a senior. He had been set to graduate next year but ended up dropping out to go do dumb hood nigga shit. I'd loved him for most of my teenage life, we grew up together and I always wanted us to move out of Philly together after I got my degree, but it seemed like every year, he got less interested in school and more interested in being an insufferable idiot. The thought of him now put iron and metal in the pit of my stomach. I had witnessed this sickness in my family with some of my male cousins and my uncles. Although it wasn't what I wanted for him, I wasn't about to beg him to change. I would simply be by myself.

My dad was happy as hell when we broke up, he hated David and would constantly ask me to consider finding a "nice young man who was heading in the right direction." I understood where he was coming from, but it took a while for me to completely leave David alone. We would still fuck every now and then, but I had emotionally detached myself from him and he didn't know how to handle it.

I entered my building from the parking garage, dusting the snow off my coat as I double locked my car doors. I called the elevator and tapped my foot impatiently. I hoped I could catch up on some sleep. I boarded the elevator and pushed the 21<sup>st</sup> floor key, tossing my car key fob into my purse.

“Hold that door please.” A deep voice spilled into the elevator. An arm disrupted the closing of the doors and gently pushed them open. I peeked out of the corner of my eye at the leering figure. He was about 6’5” and his skin was the most beautiful brown complexion I’d ever seen. He was wearing a perfectly tailored suit and a fresh pair of shoes. His coat was thrown over one arm and he was carrying a messenger bag over the opposite shoulder. This man was fine. He was wearing glasses, and once he entered the elevator, his gaze dropped to his phone.

“21<sup>st</sup> floor please miss.” He slightly nodded toward the panel of buttons on the side of the elevator where I was standing, without looking up from his phone. I frowned. He didn’t even look at me. Men usually didn’t just ignore me. I know it sounds conceited, but I am very aware of the fact that I’m a pretty girl, and I almost always have to ignore men’s advances. I was standing there quietly when I realized he said that he was going to the 21<sup>st</sup> floor. I peered over and up at him. He was towering over me by about a foot and a few inches.

“You live in this building?” I looked over him again. He was so well put together. His posture, his stature – everything about him felt impressive. I wondered who he was and what he did. More importantly, I wondered why I hadn’t seen him around before. He looked down at me and stood up straighter.

“Do YOU live in this building?” he smirked. His eye contact was intense. His teeth were perfect and now that he was looking at me, I could see his eyes were a glowing hazel color.

“Yea, I do. I’ve lived here for a while, and I’ve never seen you around. Where are you from?” I was eager to find out who this guy was.

“Well, damn.” He furrowed his eyebrows. “Hi. My name is Ace. Nice to meet you.” He extended his hand to me, and I shook it. I felt my face flushed with red. Was I being too direct? Too assertive? Most guys took well to the fact that I was not afraid to take the first step and that I didn’t beat around the bush, so his reaction threw me off a little.

“I’m Erin, nice to meet you.” I felt nervous, as if I had just been chastised. His presence in this elevator was very commanding and his gaze never left me. He was standing up straight, his suit was perfect, and he had this manner about him that was very intriguing, unlike the guys I’d dealt with.

“And to answer your question, I’m from West Oak Lane. I just moved in last week. Where are you from?”

“I’m from North Philly. I moved here a year and a half ago to get off campus.”

“Campus? What school do you go to?”

“Temple. I graduate next year.”

“Perseverantia Vincit. That’s my Alma Mater.” He smiled. “What’s your major?”

“Double major. Law and Finance and a minor in business management. When did you graduate?”

As we were talking, the elevator came to an abrupt stop and the lights flickered. I paused and looked around for a few seconds. The monitor above the door was paused at 15. My heart dropped. I peered over at Ace and attempted to calm myself. He looked at his phone and up at the monitor above the doors. He quietly pushed the call button on the panel and cleared his throat.

“Hello? We’re stuck on the elevator. The middle car at the East entrance elevator is stuck on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor.” He was so calm and cool, while I was beginning to sweat and panic.

Static erupted from the call box. I could just barely make out the nasally voice of Mr. Greeby, the building’s manager. He was a sweet older white guy who was always helpful. He and my dad were good friends, and he’d always looked out for me.

“Mr. Greeby. It’s Erin. Erin Whitfield. What’s going on!?” I held the talk button down and spoke quickly, praying he could hear me.

More static. I sighed. I was so looking forward to getting some rest, and now I was stuck in a damn elevator. I wasn’t displeased with the company, but I did NOT want to be in this box. I looked over at Ace. He slipped his phone into his pocket and leaned back against the wall casually.

“You ever been stuck in here before?” He looked over at me with a furrowed brow.

“No! And I really hope we’re not gonna be stuck here all damn day.” I rolled my eyes, frustrated and getting hot. I huffed and pushed the call button again.

“Mr. Greeby! It’s Erin, the elevator is stuck!”

Static. Silence. The lights went off completely.

“Ughhhhhh!” I threw my head back in frustration.

“Do you have the number to the front office?” Ace chuckled.

Duh, Erin. I not only had the number to the front office, but if I called my dad, he could give me Mr. Greeby’s cell phone number. I unlocked my phone and called my dad. Twice. No answer. But that wasn’t uncommon. It was still early, he was probably working, like always, so I called the front desk.

“Thank you for calling The Rittenhouse, this is John speaking, how may I help you?”

It was Mr. Greeby. He was out of breath as if he ran to the phone.

“Mr. Greeby, its Erin. I’m calling you from one of the East elevators. I’m actually stuck in here on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor and the call box is just giving static. Is there anything you can do?”

I said a silent prayer that he could just push a button and fix it. It was so hot and close and small. Sweat started to tickle the nape of my neck. I felt like I was going to have an anxiety attack any moment now.

I vividly remembered being stuck in an elevator in one of the office buildings my dad worked at. I was 7 years old. I had begged my dad to go down to the lobby to a vending machine for some candy. He had told me no a million times. He said I had to wait until his meeting was over and that I had to sit in his office at his desk until it was time to go. Of course, I never took no for an answer, so I snuck out of his office and told his assistant at the time, Sarah, that I had to go to the bathroom. I got onto the elevator, and it got stuck before I even made it down to the next floor. I was alone and in a little box for the entire afternoon. I remember crying and sweating and screaming for my dad and thinking no one would ever find me. To this day, my dad reminds me that being sneaky and not listening usually leads to bad situations. All I think of is the fact that I hate being closed in small spaces.

“Yes, Erin! I was made aware of the problem, and we’ve actually been having electrical problems throughout the entire building and unfortunately, it’s because of the storm. I’ve been corresponding with my electrician, and it’s gotten so bad where they are that they won’t be here for another 2-3 hours.”

I could literally feel my stomach drop to my ass. Two to three hours?!? What the fuck? I could NOT be in this elevator for that long. Absolutely not! I could feel tears forming in my eyes, but I fought them back. I seriously did not fuck with this at all, but I was too embarrassed to cry right in front of Ace. I’d just met him, he would think I was a hot mess.

“I will keep in contact with you via cell phone and if anything changes, I’ll call you. I’ll give your dad a call for you as well.” Mr. Greeby tried his best to give me some reassurance, but it wasn’t cutting it. The sweat was now clinging to loose tendrils of hair, stuck to my forehead and neck.

“Okay Mr. Greeby. Thank you.” I hung up the phone, disappointed. How did he expect someone to sit stuck in an elevator for hours with no food, no water and no way to be comfortable? This was ridiculous.

“So, what did he say?” Ace’s voice disrupted my thoughts, and I came to the realization that I wasn’t only stuck in an elevator, but I was stuck in an elevator with a complete stranger.

“We’re gonna be here for two to three hours.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Ace smiled. What the hell could he possibly be happy about? I tilted my head up at him in confusion. He unbuttoned his top button, loosened his tie and sat on the floor of the elevator. I looked down at him, and he shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s gonna be okay. Might as well make ourselves comfortable.” He patted the floor next to him, signaling me to sit down. I was hesitant, but I sat down next to him. He observed me, I could feel him looking at me even though I wasn’t facing him. I tried to steady my breathing, turning to face him.

“You seem tense. Don’t like elevators?” He loosened his tie, never breaking eye contact. God. His eyes were the most intense I’d ever seen. They were pools of honey. I could stare at them for hours.

“Nah, they’re not my thing. I don’t like closed spaces. Crazy incident from when I was younger.” I shrugged, dropping my gaze to the floor. I instantly felt embarrassed. I never talked about things like that with anyone, not my dad, not Nevaeh, not David.

“I get it, I used to be claustrophobic. Got stuck in the elevator for almost a full day when I was a kid, it messed me up for a while, but I confronted it, and it got better. Just had to think of it as a place where I could feel comfortable and boom, I was over it.”

Wow. What were the chances that we’d gone through the same childhood trauma? I suddenly felt a weird sense of comfort. The heat in the elevator was intense. I took my coat off, then took my hat off and wiped my forehead. Ace removed his jacket, placing it on the floor next to him. I peeked over at him, noting how well his suit was tailored. It was a Hugo Boss suit, and he was wearing Gucci loafers. On his wrist was a very subtle Rolex, and I spied diamond cufflinks. I was slightly more impressed. He had some shit going on. I didn’t know if it was shady or legit business, but the nigga had money.

We sat quietly for a moment. So quiet, in fact, I could actually hear people in the hallways on the floors we were between. I was sweating profusely. He cleared his throat.

“Judging by your directness earlier, I think you usually have more to say. Do I make you nervous?” He smirked. I scoffed. The butterflies I felt earlier had disintegrated.

“What about yourself do you think makes me nervous exactly?” I rolled my eyes. He was undeniably fine, but at this moment I could sense he was full of himself. A major turn off. He busied himself by removing his cuff links before rolling up his sleeves. He placed his cuff links into a side compartment of his messenger bag and paused.

“Don’t take that the wrong way. I apologize. It’s just that you seem a little nervous. I’m good at reading people’s energy. There’s nothing about me that should make you nervous. I’m just some guy” he laughed, extending his hand for mine. I hesitated. It wasn’t the game I was used to, but it was game regardless. I placed my hand into his and faked a smile. He kissed my hand. I blushed and rolled my eyes.

“Hello!? Is everybody okay? It’s Mr. Greeby at the front desk.” I could hear between crackling static.

I pushed the call button repeatedly, hoping it would go through, but the intercom wasn’t even lighting up. It wasn’t working on this end. Fuck.

“Guys, if you can hear me … the storm has gotten worse, all of the roads are closed, and it’s supposed to reach 10 inches. We’ll do everything we can on our end, but the mayor has declared a state of emergency for the next 24 hours. Maybe longer. I’ll see if there’s any way to get food and water for you all. But that’s all I can do for now.”

I wanted to scream. I checked my phone to see if I could call my dad again… It was dead. Now, we were trapped for at least 24 hours. Great.

# Chapter II

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*Butch*

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The night after Erin and Vaeh started their usual antics, I dipped early. They had some random clowns sliding through, and I wasn't about to sit around for that shit. I'd been down that road too many times—hearing Vaeh whine about how much of a dog Chase was right after she let him back in. Same cycle, different night.

So, I slid back to my crib. Posted a couple boomerangs on IG first—me, Erin, and Vaeh laughing over Uno, taking shots before the dudes pulled up. Nothing special, but I guess it looked like a vibe.

Not even an hour later, Alexis was on my line.

That's Alexis for you. Never around when it's quiet. But the minute she thinks somebody else is on my body? She pop up like State Farm. State Farm with a liquor problem.

By the time she showed up at my door, I was buzzed, tired, and halfway regretting posting that story.

**“I don’t understand why you’re doing this extra shit!”**

I swung my desk chair around to face Alexis. She was wearing one of my T-shirts and sitting cross-legged in the middle of my bed. She was beautiful. Her jet-black pixie cut didn't have a hair out of place. Her deep brown almond eyes shimmered and pierced even in the dimly lit room. I had been enamored with her at first, but the allure faded dramatically over these past few months. She sat there, pouting, indignant. I wanted to blink and have her be gone from my room, my house, my life. She went from being this cool, chill lil chick I was kickin' it with to a vindictive, money-hungry source of all my stress. We had been arguing all night, as usual. It was a constant. She wasn't even my girl, but she had made herself big in my world, TOO big. Today I had to be honest, had to cut her loose, before it was too late for my wallet and my sanity.

“Alexis, you don’t want to be with me. Be honest with yourself. You come here when you wanna get fucked or you need some money. Shit, you only want me when you think somebody else does, let’s stop the cap.” I took a pull of my blunt and relaxed back in my chair, preparing to finish this conversation whether she wanted to or not.

She came over last night after seeing my story on Instagram. I already had to hear about that whack nigga Chase and all the bitching and moaning Vaeh always did after he fucked up. I hated it. The shit made my stomach turn. But who was I? I couldn't possibly mention another nigga

and how he wasn't right for her, when the closest I got to stepping up was an awkward kiss playing 'spin the bottle' in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. But she had always been the one. On some sitcom, slow burn type shit. Well, at least it would be if I ever made it known.

I had known her my whole life, seen her at her worst and her best. She was beautiful, funny, independent and smart. She could dress her ass off, she could fight, she could cook, and she rolled backwoods better than any nigga I knew. She was perfect... except for in the niggas she picked. And let's face it, I wasn't one of them niggas. And don't get me wrong, I wasn't no corny nigga, but she went for flashy, well known and frankly niggas that just did too much. I had my own money, my own crib and everything, but I didn't know if that would ever be what she was looking for, if it would ever be enough. So, I said fuck it and kept my mouth closed. She was my best friend though, right up there with Erin. And honestly, that was perfect.

"Butch, I don't understand what the problem is. I play you how you play me. I don't see you turning shit down, not my pussy or my company." Her pout had dissolved into a full-blown scowl. The smell of liquor on her breath was unmistakable. I was buzzed too, but not buzzed enough apparently.

"If my name was Nevaeh, you'd be foaming at the mouth every time I breathed."

Smoke caught in my chest, and I started coughing uncontrollably.

Shit.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? That's my family." I feigned offense and confusion, trying to clear the smoke from my lungs.

Alexis rolled her eyes, her long, thick lashes casting shadows on her face. I wanted to end the conversation right then and there, but it was best we got all our closure now. I had been through the cycle a few times at this point. A lot of women I'd been around weren't interesting. They didn't scratch that itch for me. And honestly, it wasn't like I was looking for something super serious. So, it kinda worked out better that way. Alexis was different. She was definitely interesting. She was artistic and smart and sure of herself. But she was also elusive, guarded and had a shitty ass attitude. Not to mention her clear fucking drinking problem.

"Erin, she's your family. Nevaeh is NOT your family! Sh-she's the one you're pining after." Her words slurred. She unfolded herself and stood up in front of me. Her short, thick, freshly waxed legs glistening under the light of my TV. She snatched the blunt from my hand, forcing my eyes to meet hers. Her annoying ass was still beautiful, that couldn't be denied. One of the prettiest girls I'd ever dealt with, if I'm being honest. She took a long pull from the blunt and held the smoke for a second before exhaling and passing it back to me. I sat there, unsure what to say. She chuckled. I stared at her. I wasn't sure what was so fucking funny.

"You wanna let me in on the joke?"

"You. You really convinced yourself you don't want that girl cuz she don't want you." She laughed again. I felt heat rising in my body. I stood from the chair, towering over her. I'd always

liked how short she was, barely 5 feet tall. It was almost comical how much our height difference was. I looked at her seriously, her eyes softening into this sexy stare. I bit back whatever words I thought I was about to say. Fuck. This was my problem when it came to Alexis. She stopped me in my tracks. Toxic as she was, once she gave me that look, I was powerless.

“Sit down.” She urged me softly.

“Alexis.” I said calmly, trying to protest. My dick didn’t get the memo though. He knew what she wanted. And whether I agreed or not, he wanted it too. I took a deep breath. Before I could blink, she was pressing her body against me. She was looking me directly in the eyes, tilting her head upward to meet my gaze. I shook my head gently, hoping that was enough protest. It wasn’t. Her hand pressed against my chest, tracing its way down my stomach, then into my shorts. Damn.

“Do you want me to stop?” She purred. Kissing my chest, then going up on her tippy toes as high as she could to kiss my collarbone, slowly kissing every inch of skin she could reach. She stopped suddenly, waiting for my answer. I could feel the blood rush so fast it almost knocked me over. I stroked the nape of her neck with my fingers, contemplating what I was about to do.

“Daddy?” She whispered. I trembled internally. Shit. This girl was masterful. She worked on me like she worked on my pockets. I sighed. Shit.

“Give it to me.” I growled. She smirked up at me, tugging my shorts down until they fell around my ankles. She found my dick in her hands, rubbing and stroking it softly. Her lips were so soft. She kissed and licked my neck, and chest. She teased me with her tongue, until my body felt like jelly. She was relentless. She was always a pillow princess until she wanted something from me. That’s where her power lied.

“Lay down baby.” She growled.

I pulled my shirt over my head then threw it across the room. I sat on the edge of the bed and just watched her. She was graceful, like a ballerina. She stood there, staring directly in my eyes. Her thick hips and legs curved like a winding road. She removed my long t-shirt, pulling it gently over her head, somehow keeping her hair intact. Her eyes never left mine.

She stood there for a moment, watching my eyes pour over her frame. Her titties were perfect mounds of smooth caramel, not too big, not too small, her pierced nipples peeking at me from across the room. She placed her French tips gently on her flat stomach, slowly sliding her hand down until it landed between her legs. She stood there playing with herself, biting her lip and moaning, never taking her eyes off me. She twisted one of her nipples gently with her free hand. Fuck, that shit was sexy. I was fighting with all my might not to jump up off this bed and tear her little ass up. But I waited patiently. I had let her be in charge of the foreplay, she seemed to like it a lot. But when we actually got down to it, I reminded her I was the man in this shit. And she loved that even more. I was damn near salivating at this point, as I watched juices trickle down her leg, leaving wet, warm traces trailing down those thick thighs. She was ready for me.

“Bring it to me.” I demanded. She removed her hand from her sweet spot and gently licked her fingers. I watched her with eagle eyes now, laser focused on what I wanted to do to her. I stood up, watching her eyes follow me and rise above her line of vision. I stood in front of her, grabbing my dick in one hand and her throat in the other. She grinned. I narrowed my eyes at her. She’d won again, but shit so did I. I scooped her up in both hands, cupping her ass in both hands. She had more than enough to grip on. Before she could get a word out edgewise, I was plunging in her pussy like I’d been wanting to do since she walked in. I planted my feet firmly, balancing myself enough to keep a rhythm. She was soaking wet, leaving splotches of moisture on my stomach as I pumped slowly. She whimpered gently, wrapping both arms around my neck and throwing her head back.

“I love you, Butch.” She whispered. I paused, unsure if I was hearing things. She dug her perfectly manicured nails into my back and repeated softly. I winced, more at the words than the pain.

“I know you do.” I grunted quietly. I laid her down on her back and got a good look at her. A tear slid down her cheek into her ear. She wiped it away quickly. I really looked at her, her eyes glazed over and red. She was drunk. She lifted both legs to my shoulders and urged me closer. I hesitated. She exhaled sharply.

“Give it to me, baby.” She whispered.

I don’t know what had gotten into her for her to say some shit like that for the first time right now, but shit I guess if she wasn’t tryna stop, neither was I. I dropped to my knees and pulled her to the edge of the bed, never taking her legs from my shoulders. I parted her legs more, giving myself space. I worked my fingers between her legs, til I could hear her whimpering over the TV. I found her eyes again, this time they were full of pleasure. I swirled my index and middle fingers around her clit, gripping her hips with my other hand like my life depended on it.

“Fuck me, like you want to fuck her.” She whispered. I flinched. What the fuck.

I froze there for a second. The gravity of what she said landed on me heavy. She was clearly still drunk and in almost an instant I felt my dick getting soft. I looked at her seriously, hoping she’d come to her senses before I put her ass out. Alexis had said some off-the-wall shit before, but this was kinda sick, even for her.

“Alexis, what the fuck?” I half whispered, not even wanting to address it.

“Come onnnn baby,” She moaned as if it was nothing. “Pretend like you love me, just for tonight.” I was stunned. She had no shame. I closed my eyes for a minute, trying to clear my own drunk ass thoughts. I saw Nevaeh. I couldn’t help it.

“She’s so pretty. Ain’t she?” Alexis purred. “I wish I could fuck her too.” I opened my eyes to look at her crazy ass. Her fingers traced a line down my navel as I stood there between her legs. She tickled me with her fingertips, finding my half-gone erection and putting her hands to the task. She rubbed and tugged and stroked me, all while seeing to her own shit. I closed my eyes

again, wondering how I got myself in this position, but there was Nevaeh's face again, taunting me.

"Look at her, them pretty ass lips," Alexis twisted her hips, lifting her pelvis from the bed to meet mine, "I bet they soft." My heartbeat sped up. She grabbed my dick, stroking gently and smacking the head on her clit repeatedly. I looked at her again, she was in the clouds, not a care in the world for the shit she was saying. Her expression twisted in pleasure. I couldn't help but bite my lips. She was still sexy, even in her insanity. Before I could give anything else thought, she had wrapped her legs around my waist and pulled me in even closer. The length of my erection sat on her stomach. She swayed me with her legs, coaxing me to lay down on the bed next to her. I obliged.

"You gonna ride it?" I looked at her.

"Only if you want me to."

My brain felt fuzzy, begging me to give in to everything she was saying, everything I was feeling. I forced myself to breathe. Looking at her pouty face was breaking me down and she knew it. She straddled me.

"Tell me you want me to ride it." She purred.

I placed my hands on her hips, looking in her eyes. They were soft, nothing like the usual fire that usually burned there. Her skin was buttery smooth and soft. She leaned over enough to reach the bottle of Don Julio on the nightstand and smiled. I watched her as she unscrewed the cap and held the bottle just above me. I leaned my head back knowingly. She poured a little more than a shot into my mouth, smiling like a madman. I swallowed the burning liquid, ignoring the fire in my chest. My eyes fell on her again. She looked downright angelic now. Like she was fucking glowing. She sat the bottle back on the nightstand and settled on my lap again.

"I want you to ride it." I looked at her seriously, studying her.

She was still soft, reserved to this docile aura. I wrapped my hands around her waist again, resting my fingertips on her skin. She kissed my cheek as softly as she could before wrapping her fingers around me again. She lifted herself onto her knees slightly and placed her wetness at the very tip of the erection she had so effortlessly caused. I fought back the urge to plunge myself into that water, and waited patiently. My skin was awake with electric tingles and sparks. She circled her entrance with my tip, like a finger around the ring of a martini glass. I bit my lip so hard that motherfucker almost bled.

"*Fuck.*" I managed quietly. I could feel the warm wetness trickling. She was going to explode and I wanted it so bad I could taste it. Slowly, but with a sureness that shook my entire body, she sank down onto me, burying everything as deep as it could go. She rested there for a minute, like she had reached the summit and needed to catch her breath. Before long, the room spun in an endless stupor of sweat, bouncing, twirling and pumping. Her body was in constant motion and so was mine. I was in a trance, for real.

When we finally collapsed beside each other, I felt like I had depleted enough energy to need rest for a full 48 hours. The room spun around me but I found focus on her face as she laid there, peering at me from beneath those big ass eye lashes. I stared at her. She was on her back, her chest falling and rising steadily. Her eyes fixed on mine. I found my hand on the nape of her neck and my lips against mine. She closed her eyes, even after we separated onto our respective pillows. My chest burned like a fiery, blistering flame. My stomach was a mess of knots and twists. She finally opened her eyes again, still soft, still yearning. I laid back, reclining into my drunken thoughts. The room grew quiet. He body went still as if she'd finally passed out. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“I love you too.”

# Chapter III

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*Erin*

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Time dragged by, there wasn't much to do aside from talk. So, we talked well into what I'd guessed was the wee hours of the night. I had no idea how much time had passed, but my body grew tired again and I assumed it was late now. We'd laid out our coats, his suit jacket, and scarf like an impromptu picnic blanket and got as comfortable as we could on the cold hard elevator floor.

We'd talked about each other's childhoods, our parents, school, past relationships, life, our political views, music. I talked to him for a while in a way I'd never talked to anyone before. There was no small talk, just very intense conversation. The kind most people wouldn't get to until years of knowing each other and being forced to tell the truth because of a blow up. He was blunt, which took me aback, but it was refreshing.

I told him about myself. I told him how I'd grown up, only having my father and my grandparents being instrumental in my upbringing. I told him about how difficult my teenage years were. The drama in my neighborhood, the yearning to know the other half of my identity because I didn't have my mother. The love I had for pursuing a career in law and opening my own firm one day. I even told him about David. How he'd broken my heart many times but ultimately, the thing that drove me away was his love for hood shit. I told him about Nevaeh and how she was pretty much the only consistent friend I'd had my whole life. He was so easy to talk to and listen to.

Ace was 26. Born and raised in Philly. He was in foster care for a short period of time as a kid, but he'd primarily grown up with his grandmother. She was well off and had taken care of him since she gained custody. She kept him in a private school and even sent him to college. He had no siblings, had only met his father a few years ago and had never known his mother. He graduated from Temple with a degree in business management. He had dabbled in everything from culinary to photography and a million things in between since he graduated. He'd traveled to dozens of countries and spoke French and Spanish fluently.

He'd only had one serious girlfriend his whole life and she'd died in a motorcycle accident several years ago. He had recently bought a large office building in Manayunk where he had incorporated all of the skills he had to open a few businesses. He was impressive, to say the least. I was entranced as he spoke about his passions and ideas for the future. It was a contrast to any man I'd ever met, or that I probably could ever meet in Philly. A few more hours had passed, and I completely forgot that we were in an elevator against our will.

“I’m going to say something, and I don’t want you to be offended.” He was talking to me, but his tone sounded distant, like he was addressing an entire crowd.

“Okay... I can’t make any promises.”

“Well, I find you attractive. I think you have a beautiful body. And at some point, I would like to have sex with you.” His face was straight and serious.

My jaw nearly dropped on the floor. I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Excuse me?” I sat straight up. We had only just met, and he was already trying to get in my pants. Just like a nigga to offer a false demeanor to get some ass. I wasn’t surprised, but I instantly wished I wasn’t in this elevator. I felt like I was sitting here naked, and he was staring me down with those crazy intense eyes.

“I’m being completely honest with you. I don’t see the point of beating around the bush about it. That’s what we do isn’t it? We go to dinners, talk for hours, text, and endure awkward situations until it finally happens. I would still be willing to court you, I have the money to spend on any date you can think of. I’d love to spend more time with you, you’re the shit. I think you have a lot of substance, but I’m a man with needs, just as you are a woman with needs. Do you think that’s wrong?”

I was floored.

“I mean... of course, we know what happens when people are attracted to each other. But there’s an art to it. There’s a timeline of the way this is supposed to go. You don’t just say that to someone. That you want to have sex with them. It’s not right.” I could hear my heartbeat in my ears. I don’t know if it was the fact that the conversation had stirred me, or if my body was still aware that I was trapped in this elevator. Whatever the case may have been, I felt lightheaded. Damn. I hadn’t had a chance to eat my wrap or drink my coffee and I was now realizing I’d left them in the car. I guess I was wearing my emotions on my face.

“I didn’t mean to upset you, I apologize. I personally just don’t do the chase. If I want someone, I let them know. I make my intentions known. I think a woman that I want to deal with deserves that kind of transparency. If it’s too much for her, it weeds out the kind of woman I need in my life. I’m not saying I only want to have sex, it’s just that I want a woman who can handle me. My honesty, my ways. I’m a lot of man to handle.” He smirked, staring directly into my eyes.

My eyes dropped to what was between his legs. At some point, he had removed his dress pants and was only wearing boxer briefs. Instantly I blushed. He seemed to indeed be a lot of man to handle. I sat for a moment and thought about what he’d just explained. I honestly had never encountered a man who didn’t give me the run around. Men would lie, finesse and maneuver around the truth any way they could, and I’d just learned to adjust and handle them accordingly. But I wondered, what it would be like to have a man that was just straight forward. That didn’t lie about anything and didn’t beat around the bush. Ace tapped my leg, interrupting my thoughts.

“So, are you a woman who would consider yourself honest?” He peered over at me with those eyes and spoke in a voice just above a whisper. It was alluring to say the least and the butterflies had suddenly made themselves reappear. I swallowed hard, feeling like I had a lump in my throat.

“I am. To an extent.” I managed to say. He looked at me seriously and almost seemed disappointed. I explained. “I feel like some situations require some couth. Some tact, a sense of elegance. And I approach every situation accordingly.”

“Look. You’re beautiful and you’re smart. I like the way you’re put together. But I want to make this perfectly clear... I am not going to play games, at any point in time. I see everything I do as an investment. If I choose to invest in someone, I need them to be on the same page as me. I live comfortably; I always have. I don’t like feeling uncomfortable, I don’t like to settle. So, when I say what I want, I expect to get it. Not close to what I want, exactly what I want. And I’m a very busy man, with many things that I’m in the midst of accomplishing, so tell me, do you think you are capable of being someone I should invest time and money in? Or am I too much for you?”

I stared at him for a while, thinking. What could I say? He single-handedly made me feel like he wanted me and that he didn’t need me at all, all at once. I was speechless. He was a catch, and I imagined us doing all the things he’d described together.

“I’m well worth it, as a matter of fact.” I said calmly. There was so much tension in the air, and I started sweating again.

“Okay, so with respect to your way of doing things, let me make you dinner when we get out of here. I’d offer to take you on a date, but the weather is pretty bad, and I wouldn’t want to have you out in that mess.” He smirked.

“That sounds good. What do you plan on making?” I leaned against the side of the elevator closest to me. I felt a little less tense. I hadn’t interacted with a man seriously since David. I had gone on a few dates here and there but nothing physical and nothing lasting. I wasn’t getting my hopes up anymore but shit, if I had to be disappointed, it might as well be by a fine nigga with money to blow and business plans.

“I was thinking about seafood. Lobster Mac & cheese with stuffed shrimp and crab cakes and maybe some crème brûlée.” He casually shrugged. Lord, my mouth was watering just imagining the food. I hadn’t eaten yet and just hearing about the food he wanted to cook made my stomach growl.

“God, I hope they get us out of here soon. I’m starving.” I groaned and threw my head back in frustration.

“Damn, I have a few protein bars in my bag and a water bottle. If you’re hungry, they should hold you over for a while.”

He turned and began to rummage through his messenger bag. He pulled out two protein bars and a big metallic red water bottle. I was grateful because I felt as if I could pass out. When he handed me the bars, I opened and ate them immediately.

“Sheesh, did you eat today?” He laughed, making me laugh at myself. I drank a big gulp of water and sat the bottle beside me on the floor. A sharp, sudden pain shot up my leg to my butt.

“Ahhh-ahhh!” I yelped, jumping to my feet as quickly as I was able to. Ace jumped up.

“What’s wrong?” I stomped my foot repeatedly trying to ease the pain. It only felt worse.

“Shitttt. I just caught the worst Charlie horse ever. Ahhhh!” I continued to stomp my foot, hoping to subdue the pain, even by a little bit.

“Okay. Stop stomping your foot. Where is it?”

“It’s in the back of my left leg, and my butt.”

“Alright, lay flat on your stomach.”

I looked at him puzzled. He unclipped a small hand sanitizer that was on the handle of his bag and applied it to his hands. Why the hell would I wanna do that? What was this nigga tryna pull? I hesitated. Before I could blink, Ace had lifted me into the air and dipped down to his knees to lay me on the ground. Shit, what did I get myself into?

“What the hell are you...?”

His hand firmly gripped the back of my leg where the pain was and massaged it. He was strong but just enough that it didn’t hurt. It felt so good. My mouth was open to speak, but I couldn’t form words.

“I’m just trying to help; you can hurt yourself.” He worked his way up my leg, just below the hem of my dress. Massaging deeply, he was careful not to reach under my clothes. God, it felt so good to be touched. The pain had stopped, but I didn’t want the massage to end.

“Does it feel better?” He peered over at me and paused. I shook my head yes, still not able to speak. Ace began to massage my lower back, then up to the middle, then onto my shoulders, and all the protest left my body. I had no idea how bad I’d needed human contact until now. I felt Ace’s hands moving lower and lower down my back and stop just above my butt. I shivered. He hadn’t touched me inappropriately at all, but I could almost feel his hands in all the right places. I relaxed a little, and suddenly he stopped.

“Do you want me to stop here?” he whispered. I shook my head no. All at once, he flipped my dress up just enough to cup my ass in his hand and massage. I let out a moan, unable to hold it in anymore. He pressed and grabbed, in a slow, even motion. I felt like I was going to explode.

“Can I take it further?” he whispered. I nodded my head yes without even thinking. I wanted to feel his hands all over me. I felt one hand leave my butt and slip between my legs. I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming. He massaged my sweet spot firmly with two fingers until I felt

myself sliding across the elevator floor. I felt my body release and Ace slid two fingers inside of me, sending me over the edge. In. Out. In. Out. It felt so good I could scream.

I hadn't been touched there in so long. I melted in his hands and thought my body would go limp. I whimpered well into climax, and he showed no mercy. I wanted to rip his clothes off. I closed my eyes, and before I could catch my breath, he flipped me over to lay on my back and I got a good look in his eyes. He was staring at me. I froze. What the hell was I doing? I'd just met this man; I barely knew him. This wasn't like me at all. But fuck. This shit felt SO good. I watched anxiously as he held my wrist down against the floor and used the other to grab his bag. He sat it by his foot and began to dig around. He pulled out his wallet. With one hand, he flipped the wallet open and pulled out a condom with his mouth.

In one fluid motion, he removed his briefs, revealing a portion of himself that I could've never imagined, then ripped the condom rapper with his teeth. He rolled it down onto himself. It was long and thick. A deadly combination. I gazed at the length of it as he proceeded to pull me to an upright position using the wrist that he had pinned to the floor. I was entranced. I sat up straight, waiting for him to guide my body in whatever direction. He stood to his feet and pulled me onto mine. He pushed me against the wall of the elevator, towering over me and staring intensely into my eyes as if we were longtime lovers. I couldn't shake his gaze.

"Look at me and understand something." He sounded stern, as if he was going to chastise me. He forced my chin up with his finger, so that I was looking at him in his eyes. His erection grazed my torso, and I could barely keep it together, but I dare not let my eyes leave his.

"I mean everything I say. I don't want to run around after you. I'm not going to. When I'm serious, I'm serious. If it's gonna be more than sex, I don't want you to play with me and I won't play with you. If it's just sex, that will be it. So, tell me what you want to do?" He bit his lip in anticipation and there was a fire in his eyes that was frightening. I shuddered. I felt in my spirit that this may be a mistake, but my body froze. I parted my lips to speak, but they were met by his mouth. He kissed me deeply and his hand moved from my wrist and my chin to my ass. He hoisted me into the air, wrapping my legs around his waist and pressing me harder against the cold elevator wall. I gasped, surprised by his strength.

"Wait... I..."

Before I could finish, I felt the full force of his manhood enter me. I lost my breath. He pressed me harder into the wall, holding me in place and burying his hand in my hair. He let out a low, guttural moan. He was so big, I felt like if he moved another inch, I could rip in half. He gently tugged my hair enough to turn my head so that he could whisper in my ear.

"You're so tight. Fuck." He whispered, releasing my hair from his grip and returning his hand to my ass. And with that he began to stroke, slow but deep. I could barely take it. I felt my juices dripping down my legs. I moaned and groaned, trying my best to adjust to his size. I squirmed between his body and the wall. He closed his eyes and began to stroke harder. I yelped, attempting to push him with one hand, which he again pinned to the wall. It was too much.

“I’m not done with you yet.” He smirked. I closed my eyes, trying to gain my composure and focus on everything that was happening. He was in total control and my body was letting him do whatever he wanted, though my mind had been second guessing from the moment we started. He spun his body around, placing me back onto the floor, never pulling out. Now he was stroking faster, with more force.

I whimpered, thinking he would slow down. He pulled out, flipped me onto my stomach, before penetrating me again. POW! He slapped my ass with all his strength. It stung like a bitch but felt good at the same time.

“Arch your back.” He said calmly, but with authority. I did what I was told, arching it as much as I could and parting my legs just enough to keep my balance. To my surprise, I felt his tongue, slowly separating my lips, working around the entrance, back down, then back up, then back down. He began to suck on my clit until my body was close to collapsing. I moaned and begged him not to stop. I was dripping at this point, losing my breath with each second, and my body could not handle it. He continued to suck, lick and kiss my pussy and my ass. I was in a stupor. The room was spinning, and I couldn’t tell up from down.

“Lay down flat on your stomach.” He demanded. I obliged. He entered me again, slowing his stroke. One long stroke in and one long stroke out. It drove me up the wall. I was cumming more than I ever had before. He stopped for a minute and gently turned me onto my back again and stared at me. His eyes were wild with lust. He lowered his head to kiss me and while my eyes were closed, I felt him enter me again. He pumped and pumped, all the while I could feel his erection stiffening until I knew he was going to explode. He grunted furiously, pumping in and out, and finally collapsing beside me on the floor.

I laid there catching my breath and having no idea what to say, what this meant, or what to do. I had only just met him, and although Ace seemed amazing, I couldn’t believe we just had sex. But whatever this was, the sex was the best I ever had. I peered over at him, and he was putting his clothes back on. He caught my glance and blushed. I smiled. He looked so damn good.

“Was that too much for you?” He took hold of my hand gently and tugged a bit to move me toward him.

“It’s been a while...” I gathered my composure and scooted closer to him.

He looked at me seriously for a minute and gently squeezed my hand.

“I still wanna get to know you. I know I said out the gate that I wanted to have sex, but I still want to see what you have going on.”

I was pleasantly surprised to hear Ace say this. Exactly what I wanted to hear.

“Well, I was hoping that was the case.” I laughed.

We sat there for a while making plans for a date once we were out of here. An overwhelming feeling of tiredness came over me and I wondered what the hell was taking so long for someone, anyone to come get us out of this sweatbox? I yawned, preparing to lay down when I noticed,

perched in the corner of the ceiling, a dome camera. I could've died right then and there. I had just had sex live and in living color for all the staff, and most likely one of my dad's friends to see, with a stranger. I was mortified. And at that very moment, I wished it hadn't happened. What the fuck was I thinking?

# Chapter IV

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*Erin*

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“There is a fucking camera in here, oh my god!” I fought back tears. Ace looked up immediately, then looked back at me. My eyes were hot with tears, and I couldn’t hold them back. I couldn’t imagine what this would do to my dad. What he would think of me, what he would say! He had enemies, competition, other lawyers that would do anything to drive his business down… and I had just added more ammo that could be used against him.

Ace turned to me with a face full of concern. I began bawling uncontrollably at the thought of upsetting my dad after all he’d done for me.

“My dad is gonna be so upset with me.” I wailed, burying my face in my hands. “We shouldn’t have done anything. I barely know you and now I’m on video having sex with you. What the fuck.” I could throw up.

“Erin, please. Stop crying, I’ll take care of it. I promise, I’ll handle it.” He spoke so calmly, and his tone was reassuring. He grabbed my hand and held onto it for a moment.

“What are you gonna do?” I wiped the tears away as they continued to fall, wondering how this could be fixed. I stopped the tears, but I was mentally inconsolable. What if this somehow made it to my school or came up when I was trying to get a job, or ended up on the internet? This was a fucking nightmare, and it was all thanks to me doing something I knew I shouldn’t have done in the first place.

I sat there, contemplative, wondering what would happen now. Suddenly, I felt the jerk of the elevator and it began to ascend. My eyes darted around quickly as I attempted to gather all my belongings and straighten my clothes. I didn’t want to look out of sorts when the doors opened. Ace calmly gathered his things from the floor. He stood up and helped me to my feet. I wiped my eyes one more time even though I was sure I was a hot mess and had mascara streaked down my face. Ace gently squeezed my hand and looked at me for a second.

“I’ll handle it.” he said, kissing my hand. I nodded, although I was apprehensive to say the least.

The elevator doors opened slowly and standing there in the hall was Mr. Greeby and two men who were repairing a fixture on the hallway wall. I squinted my eyes, adjusting to the brightness of the hallway lights.

“Are you okay? Does anybody need medical attention?” Mr. Greeby rushed to my side and talked close to my face as if being stuck in an elevator had inexplicably made me deaf.

“We’re fine Mr. Greeby, just very tired.” I yawned. Ace smiled and approached Mr. Greeby.

“Thank you for working so hard to get us out of there. It’s been an ordeal.” He gestured to Mr. Greeby to shake his hand.

“No problem at all, I apologize for the great inconvenience this must have caused you both and I deeply appreciate your patience and cooperation.” Greeby shook his hand for entirely too long and smiled entirely too hard, the way white people do when they feel guilty about being white. He retreated down the hallway and around the corner where I could hear the whoosh of the service elevator doors opening and then closing.

I was so glad this nightmare was over. This part of it, at least. Now my biggest concern was this fucking security footage. I was over the whole thing and just wanted very much to be in my bed. I had to pee, and I had the worst headache. I dug in my purse for my apartment key. And of course, my key wasn’t in my bag because I had let Nevaeh take them out, so she could look at the pepper spray I just bought that was attached to my keychain. I was 90% sure they were sitting on her dresser. Shit.

“What’s wrong?” Ace asked. I frowned, removing my hand from my purse.

“I don’t have my keys to my apartment. I left them at Nevaeh’s dorm.” I huffed, rolling my eyes at myself.

“That’s not a big deal, I’m sure they have a spare downstairs until you get yours back. I can go get them for you and talk to Mr. Greeby in private. I’ll handle it. Just wait in my apartment.” He retrieved his keys from his messenger bag and handed them to me. I paused before slipping them into my purse.

“It’s apartment 2113.” He said, adjusting his tie.

“I just... are you sure?” I stammered. Ace didn’t know me; he wasn’t obligated to do anything for me. But he was ready and willing. My stomach growled.

“And it’s food in there for you.” he chuckled. “Just make yourself comfortable, it’s not gonna take long.” He walked back toward the elevator and pressed the button for it.

I watched him disappear behind the elevator doors and turned to head toward his apartment. I was in apartment 2121, so it was just down the hall. When I arrived at his apartment door, I became increasingly nervous. What was I walking into? My anxiety and overthinking were turned all the way up. I took a deep breath and forced my thoughts to be still. I unlocked the door and eased it open slowly.

As I entered the apartment, the smell of lavender and coconut overtook me. There was a sudden soothing feeling that calmed me down. Looking around, I was impressed yet again. His apartment was a lot bigger than mine and had a much different view. Because it was a corner apartment, the floor to ceiling windows wrapped around half the space. It was breathtaking. I

immediately noticed that unlike my apartment, he had a second floor only accessible by this beautiful floating staircase. The place was covered in warm oranges and yellows, and deep reds and browns. Beautiful pieces of art were everywhere. Two small paintings and one large one was situated over a faux fireplace. He had a big ass TV, about 70 inches. Three bronze statues of howling wolves were right under the TV. They were each facing in a different direction of the room.

The kitchen appliances were all copper colored. It was beautiful. I made my way over to the couch and took a seat. On the table right in front of me were art history books, a photo of Ace and this beautiful older woman who I'd assumed was his grandmother Amelia, who he'd told me so much about. She was supermodel gorgeous, even at her age. She was built like a brick house, had long silver hair and the same sparkling hazel eyes as Ace. The picture was of his graduation day, and he looked amazing. He was holding his cap in one hand, his degree in the other and was grinning from ear to ear. I smiled, thinking about how happy I would be when it was my graduation day.

I studied the room some more, becoming more intrigued. There was so much character in this apartment. It only made me more attracted to his many layers. My gaze fell over the large painting between the two smaller ones. The large painting was of two joined hands, one light and one darker with gold chains spiraling around the wrists. The background was black and a splatter of red paint that looked like blood straight across.

Both smaller paintings were of a wolf's silhouette. One white silhouette on a black background, the other black on a white background. He clearly had a thing for wolves. All the art was unfamiliar to me, but it was all beautiful. I stood up, stretching my sore body and twisting my torso in any direction that would make something pop. Before long, my body reminded me that I had been holding my pee for an unreasonably long time. I needed to find a bathroom immediately.

I stood up and glanced around, trying to imagine where the bathroom would be. I headed toward the corridor on the other side of the kitchen. There were two doors, one of which I assumed had to be the bathroom. I reached for the door and attempted to open it, but it was locked. I turned to the room on the opposite side of the hall and tried to open that door, but it was locked as well. Great, I needed to relieve myself soon or I would explode. I headed back out into the living room and began walking up the staircase. The light from the windows was the only thing illuminating the room. I reached the top of the stairs and marveled at my surroundings. There was a short white hallway leading into a large white room. I proceeded slowly, not knowing what to expect.

I entered the room and was blinded. Everything was a brilliant white and gray. There was a king size bed covered in bright white sheets and blankets, and gray accent pillows with a huge mirror on the wall at the head of the bed. All the furniture was white, except for a gray ottoman at the foot of the bed and both light wooden bedside tables. I don't know who this man's decorator was, but the entire apartment was flawless. After studying the room for a while longer, I noticed a door in the far corner right by the window. It had to be the bathroom.

I walked across the room, taking in the smells of vanilla and lavender. I admired all the odds and ends, including a beautiful fur rug in the middle of the floor and a large painting of course, of a wolf. Unlike the painting downstairs, this one was a gorgeous gray wolf howling at a moon that was almost too silver to see on the white background. When I entered the bathroom, thankful to finally relieve myself, I noticed a black duffle bag on the floor. It was between the walk-in shower and the Jacuzzi style tub. My curiosity was nagging at me to see what was in the bag. I wondered what was in it. Drugs? Money? Some girl's overnight shit? I sat there, on this man's toilet, staring at this bag for what seemed like eternity. I could just sneak a peek, and he wouldn't even know. I wiped, flushed and stood to pull my panties up. While I walked across the room, toward the sink, I kept my eyes on the bag. I washed my hands and decided that if I needed to know what kind of man I had just gotten tangled up with, looking in this bag would provide some kind of insight.

“Erin, you in the bathroom?” I could hear in the distance. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Yea, I’m coming out now.” I responded quickly and exited the bathroom immediately. I walked out of the bedroom, back down the hall, down the stairs and saw Ace take a seat at the island that separated the kitchen and dining area. He removed his messenger bag from his shoulder and set it in front of him before loosening his tie.

“What happened? What did he say?” I said anxiously, standing in front of him, hoping to hear good news.

He opened the flap on his messenger bag and retrieved what looked like a case with a DVD in it.

“This is the elevator footage, straight out of the camera and I watched him remove the digital file, this is a backup copy that’s automatically made just in case the digital one goes down.” He handed me the case. I was amazed. He handled it like he said he would. But what could he have said to get this?

“What did you do?” I sat the DVD on the counter and sighed. A wave of relief washed over me. He could’ve killed someone to get this, and it wouldn’t have mattered. I was so happy to not have this hanging over me.

“Money talks. You name a man’s price, and he’ll do what you ask.” He nodded calmly.

“Thank you, I just- I really appreciate this. This could’ve gone left if the wrong thing happened to this.” I hugged him tightly. When I let go, I remembered that he should’ve had my key as well.

“Your key, however, was a different story.”

“What do you mean? They should’ve had a spare, like you said.”

“They should’ve, but your key and several others had gone missing since we were in the elevator. So, they have to get a locksmith out once the roads reopen tomorrow and they’ll be changing the locks.”

Ughhhh! Today was not my day at all.

“What the fuck. Could today get any more difficult?” I sighed.

“Well, I mean, I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable, but if you want to sleep here, just until tomorrow, I have extra space and I won’t be in your way at all.”

I hesitated. Good sex or not, this guy was still pretty much a stranger, which made me apprehensive. In the elevator was one thing, but sleeping in his house, this unfamiliar territory? It felt nuts to even consider, but what could I do? The entire city was still shut down, I couldn’t get into my apartment, and it looked like my only option.

“Okay, just until tomorrow. And I need a shower, like 5 minutes ago… and a meal.” I shook my head and took a deep breath.

“Okay. I was about to start dinner now, so it could be done by about 8. I have a few quick things you could eat, and you can take a shower while I cook.” He stood up, unbuttoning his sleeves and rolling them up. He went into the kitchen and opened the doors to the fridge. The shelves were completely stocked, and the vegetable and fruit drawers were full. He started pulling out a bunch of food, then pots and pans. It was a turn on, knowing he could cook and watching him prepare. He handed me a small container and a pair of chopsticks from one of the drawers by the sink.

“Please tell me you eat sushi. It should hold you over for a few hours until dinner is done.” He smiled.

“Yea, I love sushi. I don’t get it much anymore because none of my friends eat it.” I laughed thinking about Nevaeh calling me bougie for eating it. “Haven’t had it in a while actually.”

“Well, go ahead. I was gonna have it when I got up to my apartment, so it’s still pretty fresh.”

“I’ll eat it after I shower, I feel gross and I’m super sore.”

“Okay. You know where the bathroom is. I’ll try to find you something to wear. My friend Tiff is working on a women’s sleepwear line, and she gave me some samples for my grandma and aunts, they might fit you. They should be in a black duffle bag in the bathroom.”

Well, that mystery was solved.

I figured my dad, Nevaeh and my grandma had been blowing my phone up, so I decided to plug it in. It had been dead for going on 2 days, and I couldn’t imagine how worried they were. I found a charger in Ace’s room and plugged my phone in. It would take a while to come on, but I had to call everybody soon. By the time I was done, it should be charged.

I proceeded to the bathroom, ready to wash the entire day away. I closed the lid on the toilet, grabbed the duffle bag from the floor and sat it on the seat. It was funny that the thing I thought the worst of a half hour ago turned out to be harmless and innocent. I should think a little differently of Ace. I mean, he seemed amazing. He was well off, well-mannered and well endowed. He had kept his word and went out of his way for me. He was a multi-talented

gentleman. I was definitely gonna enjoy everything good about him until the proverbial shit hit the fan, which I was sure it would at some point.

I went through the bag carefully. The sets included nightgowns, short sets and silky robes. The colors were beautiful pastels and nudes. I opted for a pale-yellow short set and robe that just so happened to match my mani-pedi. The material was beautifully soft and well put together with lace trim on every piece. I was definitely gonna have to give homegirl kudos for this.

Turning the water on in the shower carefully, I pulled my messy, thick, unruly curls up into a high bun and secured it. I pulled my dress over my head, slid out of my hot ass boots, unhooked my bra and stepped out of my underwear. I stepped into the water, which was almost too hot to touch, just how I liked it. Ace had a bunch of natural hair products and African black soap lined up neatly on the ledges of his shower. I felt right at home. I wondered for a second if this was all his own product or if it had a woman's touch. Then, I decided that the shower felt so good that I didn't care who it belonged to. The water washed over me and relaxed me.

I grabbed a towel from the rack right next to the shower and wrapped it around myself. I picked up the clothes I'd picked out and headed for his bedroom. From there I could smell that Ace had started dinner. I spotted a container of organic coconut oil on one of the bedside tables and decided to help myself. Pouring it into my hands, I moisturized my entire body, massaging it deeply and making sure not to miss a spot. This was the most relaxed I'd been in forever and after I finally slid into the night set, which fit like a dream, I found myself laying back on Ace's bed. I sank into the mattress and felt like all my problems were dissolved for now.

I laid there in the quietness of the room for a moment, so still that I could hear every move Ace was making in the kitchen. The silence was broken by the continuous vibrations of all my messages, missed phone calls and voicemails, flooding through at once. I grabbed my phone from the charger and unlocked it. I'd gotten 3 messages from Nevaeh, 6 messages and 4 missed calls from my dad. 2 missed calls from David, and a missed call and voicemail from my grandma. Sheesh. I scrolled through them, catching up before I called anybody back.

Nevaeh: Thursday at 8:05 am – *You left your keys. Call me when you get in.*

Nevaeh: Thursday at 8:53 am – *Yo wya? Your dad has been calling me looking for you. Call me. Call him. Call somebody bitch.*

Nevaeh: Thursday at 10:17 am: *I'm worried about you sis, please call me.*

Daddy: Thursday at 10:18 am – *Sorry I missed your call sweetie. I was in a meeting. Lunch later?*

Daddy: Thursday at 12:32 pm – *I have been calling you! I don't care what you're doing, call me back.*

Daddy: Thursday at 1:37 pm – *I just got a call from John. Call me right away if you can!*

Daddy: Thursday at 1:55 pm – *I called a buddy of mine to come in and help with the electricity and hopefully help things along. You'll be okay sweetie. Call me when you can.*

Daddy: Friday at 5:30 pm – *I'm wrapping up at the office right now sweet pea, I will call you when do CD I'm able to get downtown to you.*

Daddy: Friday at 6:17 pm – *I'll be downtown by 7, call me when you can sweet pea, so I know everything's okay.*

I sighed. My dad was so paranoid. Always had been. Being an only child had always been a double-edged sword. Yea, I got anything I wanted; the latest clothes, money, constant spoiling; but my dad also worried about me constantly and I always had to do a whole spiel to convince him to let me do things with my friends or go places. It was exhausting. I appreciated it, of course, as I got older, but sometimes I wished he'd let me sink or swim on my own. I dialed his number. He answered on the third ring.

“Hey baby, are you okay? I was worried about you.” He answered breathily. It was so good to hear his voice. My dad and I usually talked every day and I’d never gone a day without hearing from him or getting a text. I didn’t realize how much I missed his voice until I heard it.

“Yes dad, I’m fine but you don’t have to come down here. The weather is still bad, and I don’t want you to travel in it. Everything should calm down by the time the weekend is over, and I’ll be over there to the office or to grandma’s house. Just please, don’t come all the way here in this weather.”

“Well, I just wanted to make sure you were okay, that’s all. But that’s okay. I will see you on Monday. Are you sure you’re okay? I know you don’t do well with elevators.” He chuckled. I rolled my eyes and smiled.

“I’m fine dad. I swear. I’m just very tired and I’m ready to eat and lay down for a while.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll let you go. Just get some rest and stay out of that elevator until the weather clears up. Was there anybody else in there with you? Are they okay too?” His voice was full of concern.

“Umm… Yea, just one of the neighbors here. He was fine. Dad I’m gonna go, okay?” I attempted to rush him off the phone. Thinking about being back in the elevator made my stomach churn. Thinking about Ace and what we’d done while I was talking to my dad sent my anxiety through the roof.

“Alright love bug, I’ll see you soon… I love you.”

“I love you too daddy. Bye.” I sat my phone back on the bedside table and plopped down onto the bed and sighed. I was so tired I could barely keep my eyes open. I closed my eyes. I just needed to rest them for a while until I could eat. This bed felt so good.

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When I woke up, the room was completely dark. My body still felt heavy with sleep, and I wanted to continue to lay there, but who knows how long I’d been sleeping. It could’ve been next week, and I wouldn’t have even known. I sat up and stretched. I tapped my phone screen to

see what time it was. It was midnight. I must've been knocked out. I stood up and stretched again, bending and twisting to fully wake up.

The only light that managed to creep into the room was from the window. The city was dim and dull, finding its only brightness in the snow blanketed streets. I peeked out the window for a second. The typically overpopulated downtown blocks were deserted. I could only hear the rhythmic whoosh of the plow machines and the salt truck that attempted to clear the destruction of the snowstorm. It was peaceful, void of the nightlife that I'd grown accustomed to hearing around this time.

The aroma of dinner had filled the apartment. I slept well past the predicted dinner time of 8 o'clock, but it smelled as if the food had just finished and was still waiting to be eaten. I opened the bedroom door, grasping at my robe belt, making sure it was fully closed. The light from the hallway had spilled into the bedroom all at once and I squinted, struggling to adjust my eyes. I could hear voices as I approached the stairs. I hung back for a second, wondering who else was here at this hour, in the middle of this snowstorm.

"There's a lot that needs to be addressed, and people who need correcting." I heard a very deep, unfamiliar voice say, in a hushed tone.

"All of that will be handled, but we'll rap about that at another time. What you got for me?" I heard Ace respond.

There was a heavy thud, almost like something heavy had been placed on a counter or table. I could hear them shuffling around, not speaking, but obviously doing something. I edged toward the end of the hallway, on my toes like a child. There were footsteps that seemed to lead out of the room. A door opened downstairs, then closed shortly after.

"This snow been in the way man, I can't get shit done the way I need to." The unfamiliar voice said.

"Yea? That's your excuse? The snow?" Ace laughed.

I stopped just short of the top of the stairs, peeking my head out for a second to see what was going on. I could see ace and Mr. Unfamiliar-Voice sitting at either end of the island in the kitchen, thick stack of rubber-banded money between them. Ace grabbed the money and stood up from his seat, Unfamiliar followed suit. He was a bit shorter and rounder than ace and his thick black locs were bundled behind him in a bun. He wore a pair of black Nike sweatpants and a matching hoodie with black, ugly boots. Ace approached him and firmly placed his hand on his shoulder.

"We got deadlines bro. So, whatever you gotta make happen, please make it happen." Ace tilted his head and pat his shoulder twice. Even from where I was standing, I could see Unfamiliar's body had tensed, and it seemed like he was afraid or nervous. Ace was obviously pressing this guy, and he was definitely shook.

“I got you bro, on God.” he said, adjusting his posture and shaking Ace’s hand, trying not to seem as intimidated as he clearly was.

“Ard, I’m holding you to that, I need some kind of progress by next weekend. You know OG been pressing me.”

I heard the door in the distance open again, which meant someone else was there. My eyes darted to the corridor I’d been in earlier with the locked doors. A tall, skinny guy appeared from the hallway and walked toward the two. He didn’t speak, he just nodded in their direction. Ace nodded back.

He was about as white as the snow outside and his hair was sandy blonde. I could see the tattoos on his face from where I was standing. He looked like the hood niggas I’d grown up around, much different than Ace. But I couldn’t help but wonder, why was Ace, the “clean cut” businessman hanging with these guys. I was definitely judging a book by its cover, but I couldn’t see them doing the same things Ace had talked about doing. Who was he really? He was so cool and composed earlier and now he was pressing somebody who was obviously intimidated by him. I was baffled. Intrigued.

“We cool B, just handle what you gotta handle.” Ace took a step back and I could see Unfamiliar’s body relax a little.

“Bet.” He nodded then began walking toward the living room. I stepped back, hoping they hadn’t seen me. I began walking backward toward the bedroom door, closing it just loud enough to be heard.

“Erin, you good?” Ace called up to me in a much different tone than he’d just been using. I cleared my throat.

“Yea, I’m good.”

“Come here for a second?”

I hesitated. Whatever was going on seemed shady as hell. But I was here. And I was instantly regretting everything that had happened since I walked in that elevator. My heart was beating insanely as I walked down the stairs into the living room. The floor was cold on my bare feet and the smell of dinner still lingered in the air, even stronger than it was upstairs. All eyes were on me when I’d finally reached the couch where everyone was sitting. Fuck. I was alone here. Instantly I felt like an idiot. Paralyzed with fear but trying not to wear it on my face. What if this was a set up. No one knew where I was. No one knew who I was with. I was a moron. My body tensed.

“Somebody’s finally up.” Ace smiled at me and motioned toward where he was sitting. I waved nervously at Unfamiliar and Tattoo face.

“Hey, I’m Erin. Nice to meet y’all.” I faked a smile, trying to piece together everything I’d just heard and getting a better look at them up close. There was no way I could take them all. I looked over at the kitchen, wondering if there were weapons in reach. I steadied my breathing for

a moment and tried to remain calm. I spotted the knife block on the counter. I had a clear path to it from the couch, but I would have to dive for it. I looked closely at all of their faces, making sure to note every detail. Unfamiliar was very handsome. He had deep, brown eyes, beautiful brown skin and braces. He extended his hand for me to shake.

“Basir.” He smiled, introducing himself. I shook his hand and forced breath back into my body.

I turned to tattoo face. His face was full of freckles. His dirty blonde hair was coiled into thick tight curls. He wasn’t half bad looking either, but he had a different look to him. Hardened, like he had been through a lot. He had 2 teardrop tattoos, a dollar sign above one of his eyebrows and the initials ‘J.W.’ right on his forehead, in the corner. He looked very serious, and it was kind of scary. He looked at me and nodded his head. He didn’t extend his hand or anything, just a nod. I looked at Ace nervously and he smirked.

“That’s Dub. His mouth is wired, he can’t talk. 4-wheeler accident.” Ace placed his hand on my shoulder reassuringly. I shuddered. My body felt very tense again.

“I was just talking to B about these deadlines for the businesses. Some of the vendors were late with their deposits because of the snow and it’s throwing everything off. And my investors were expecting good news. Do you know any small business owners that want an advertising opportunity next week? I have a few spots left to fill for the event I was telling you about.”

Everything started to make a little more sense! I was relieved to know that the conversation was about business. The vibe in the room changed for me. I relaxed a little and then realized he asked me a question.

“Umm, I have a few paintings and a few friends from school with art that we could sell. I know a couple people that sell facial products and hair care stuff. I can help.” I offered.

“Dope, I’d be into that. Just give me their contact info and I’ll set something up.” He nodded his head in relief and sat back in his seat. He shot a look at both his friends.

“It’s getting late, man. I gotta get home to Gee before she starts blowing my phone up.” Basir said, standing. Dub stood as well but simply nodded and went ahead toward the front door. I watched the two leave, ushered out by Ace. He said his goodbyes and walked back into the kitchen. A sense of relief hugged me warmly. I watched Ace closely.

“Did you get some rest?” he asked, rummaging through one of the kitchen cabinets. I watched as he removed a plate and began adding food from the stove to it. It smelled so good.

“Yea, too much actually. I’m gonna be up all night.” I smiled. His back was turned to me as he continued to fix the plate. He turned to me and placed the plate on the kitchen island. He looked up and motioned for me to come sit down. I obliged.

“Well, I’m always up this late, so I guess I’ll be keeping you company.” He smirked, handing me a fork. I dug into my food, savoring every bite and in awe at how perfect it was. Everything was cooked amazingly and seasoned well. I could cook for myself, but this was a show of elite skill. I was impressed.

“Wow, yo. That was really bomb.” I sat back in my chair, full and satisfied. He sat opposite me and smirked as I stuffed my face.

“Take your time, chew your food.” He chuckled and continued to stare.

I laughed, conscious of how starved I was and the fact that I was chomping my food down. It had been such a day, eating dainty was the least of my worries. I cleaned the plate in a few minutes and was stuffed. All while watching him, watching me. He had held a look of intrigue on his face, smiling at me every now and again.

“Do you have anything to drink?” I asked, standing to wash my dishes. Ace stood as well and grabbed the dishes from my hand. He placed them into the sink, walked over to what appeared to be his bar, and revealed a bottle of wine.

“Is an adult drink, okay?” he chuckled. I smiled. I really could use that entire bottle right this moment. Wine was my go-to for a stressful day, and today, or the last few days, rather, had been a bit much.

I watched as he removed a glass and filled it halfway before handing it to me. We sat there talking more about his business, my schooling and hobbies, family, etc. 1 glass turned into 5 and I was feeling warm inside. I noticed he’d been drinking water for the most part and watching me get a little buzzed. He seemed to be enjoying watching me get drunk. I giggled.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

He smirked and stood from his chair.

“I’m just watching you do you. I only poured the first glass; you did the rest. You need some water though, before you get too comfortable.” He went to the refrigerator and grabbed me a bottled water. I drank it and stood up, looking at the time on the large clock on the kitchen wall.

“Wow. Have we been sitting here that long? It’s almost 4 am.” I stretched. “I think I’m finally tired.” I felt myself stumbling. I was drunk for sure, albeit wine drunk. I gulped my water as I felt my temperature rising steadily. I tried to stumble over to the couch when I suddenly felt myself being scooped up into Ace’s arms.

“Relax. You just need to lie down.” He whispered. I melted in his muscular arms and stared at him as much as I could until my eyes couldn’t keep themselves open anymore. I drifted off for a moment until I felt my body sink into the mattress again. It felt like heaven. I expected to feel Ace lay next to me and wrap his arms around me. I was drunk and I wanted to be cuddled. I heard him shuffling around the room.

“Are you okay?” I whispered into the dark room. I couldn’t see him, but I could tell he was still there.

“Yea, you go to sleep. I’ll sleep on the couch.” he whispered.

“But... why? It’s your bed.” I whispered. I desperately wanted to be held but I didn’t want to come on too strong.

“I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable. It’s okay.” he whispered again.

“You can sleep with me.” I murmured.

The room fell silent. My eyes darted around, trying to find him in the darkness. He didn’t respond, but I could hear him there. I heard him climb into the bed, but he seemed so far away.

“You want me to sleep with you?” he said quietly from the other side of the giant bed, catching me off guard.

“Yea, if you want to.” I said in a whisper.

“I can’t hear you; I need you to speak up.” His voice was louder, and authoritative. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and gave me goosebumps. I cleared my throat.

“Yes.” I said, turning my body to face him. In an instant, I felt his warm hand slip between my thighs and his fingers press against my sweet spot. I gasped.

“I still can’t hear you. If you want something from me. I want you to ask me for it.” he said softly and began massaging with two fingers.

“Yes. Please.” I moaned out loud. He applied more pressure and massaged slowly, never pausing or losing rhythm.

“Yes what? What do you want?” he demanded through clenched teeth. He began to move faster, in a circular motion, applying even more pressure. I squirmed and wriggled, feeling myself getting wet. I couldn’t focus. The room was spinning, and I couldn’t make it stop.

“What do you want Erin? You want me to fuck you?” He growled, turning my body away from him and wrapping his free hand around my neck. He choked me firmly, but not too firmly and pulled me so close that I could feel his thick erection on my leg. I wanted him badly. My body felt warm and trembled beneath his grip. I squirmed.

“Yes, yes. Please. Yes.” I panted, wanting him to do what he did to my body in the elevator.

“Tell me you want me to fuck you. Now. Say it.” he grunted, tightening his grip on my neck. I struggled to breathe for a second, gasping for air.

“Say it. I want to hear you say it.” he repeated calmly, finding his fingers through the bottom of my shorts and sliding them inside of me gently. I melted on his fingertips.

“I... I...” he began thrusting his fingers in, then out, then in, then out, finding a rhythm that made my entire body shake uncontrollably.

“I. Can’t. Hear. You!” He said loudly between thrusts. A tear escaped my eyes with the tightening of his grip and speeding up of his fingers. I choked, trying to get air in my lungs and words to my mouth. The room was spinning faster, and I was cumming, and I couldn’t stop.

“I want you to fuck me.” I managed to squeal. His hand released my throat and began snatching off my shorts. He pulled them from my legs and threw them across the room. Before I could guess what would happen next, he thrust the entire length of his manhood into me. The force knocked the wind out of me and all I could do was moan. He rocked me back in forth, down into the mattress. I was still shaking, screaming out in pleasure. God, I never felt anything like it. He nibbled on my ear and buried his hand deep in my hair, tugging gently.

“I wanna keep this. I want it to be mine. Can I have it?” He growled into my ear.

“Y-yes. Yes!” I howled. I was under his spell.

“Yes, WHAT!?” He flipped me onto my stomach and pounded me into the bed. I could feel his erection stiffening more and more. He was about to explode, and so was I. Shit. He wasn’t wearing a condom. I squirmed and tried to wriggle free from the position I was in.

“Wait...Ace!” I yelped. He continued. Harder. Faster. Deeper.

“I don’t wanna wait. I want you to answer me.” He yanked my hair, jerking my head back and bringing my gaze to his. I could see his eyes glowing in the dark room. He was ravenous and my body was at his mercy. I could feel myself soaking the sheets under me. He moaned loudly.

“Fuck! Tell me I can have it!” He shouted. “Ahhhhh!” He slowed down for a second and loosened his grip. He began slow, deep, hard strokes and kisses on my shoulder.

“You... can have it.” I groaned, out of breath. I didn’t even know what I was saying. I was still drunk, and the room was still spinning, but the juices dripping down my thighs spoke much louder than I could.

“That’s what I thought.” he moaned. He sped up again, nibbling on my shoulder and burying himself as deep as he could go. I was in heaven. He grunted loudly, enjoying my body as I enjoyed his. This went on for what felt like an eternity until we both found release and collapsed next to each other. I was close to being out cold, but I could feel Ace kissing my cheeks and forehead until I finally fell asleep.

# Chapter V

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*Erin*

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Ace and I went on like this for months. We went on dates at least twice a week, attended his business events together, I'd met his family, and he'd met mine, and we fucked like rabbits constantly. It became our routine. I couldn't believe it had been 6 months in. I could feel myself falling in love with this man. My dad wasn't quite sold on it, but his attitude toward Ace was much better than it had been with David. So, I took that as a win.

I had adjusted to dating someone who was as confident as Ace was. It was a change for me, but I got used to it. He treated me like a queen and gave me things I'd never dreamed of. I couldn't even remember ever feeling like this with David, or anyone for that matter. But I knew I didn't want it to end. There had been a few bumps in the road, his temper had flared once or twice and we'd get into it whenever he felt like he wasn't in control, but it was nothing we hadn't been able to figure out after a few days of silent treatment. We were kindred spirits. Where I could be reserved and reluctant, Ace was always very sure of himself and didn't take any nonsense from anyone. It was inspiring to me. I was learning my artsy side again. Writing poetry, sketching, everything that had been so freeing to me before I buried myself in my books. Ace had helped me with my studies and my senior year had gotten off to an amazing start. The semester began about a week ago and I'd been super busy with helping Ace at his businesses and my dad part time at his office for a little while.

"Have you seen my laptop?" I scrambled to get ready to head out of my grandma's house to meet Ace.

"I think you left it in the car Nena." my grandmother chuckled. She was cutting onions and peppers for dinner. I wanted to stay a little longer to eat because the smells were invading my nose and begging me to ditch my responsibilities. But I had promised Ace I'd stop in at the shops to help with a few things. I was tired as hell and hadn't eaten all day. My grandma's Paella was my favorite thing in the world.

"Nanaaaa, I'm so TIRED!" I wined. I flopped down on the old ratty recliner and sighed. I looked around her beautiful living room, adorned with all the expensive furniture my dad had bought over the years. Her floor was so clean you could see your reflection in it. The only thing that stuck out like a sore thumb was the brown, corduroy recliner I was sitting in. It was worn and stained and hanging on by a thread, but my grandmother refused to get rid of it. It was Papi's chair. He had come home from work every single day and ate dinner in that chair, read the paper

in it, read us bedtime stories in it, and fell asleep with my Nana on his lap every night until he'd wake up and carry her up into their room.

One day we'd come home from school to my Nana sitting in the chair weeping and although we were young, in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Butch and I knew he was gone. He had been killed in a botched robbery, and my Nana hadn't been the same since. Every few years, my dad bought her new furniture, even offered to move her out of this shitty neighborhood. But she refused. She insisted that Papi's spirit was in this house and that she would never leave it. My dad wouldn't step foot in the house since his father died, not even on the lawn. He would drop me off at the corner whenever he needed to and my grandma would blow him kisses from the porch, or meet him at the car, but that was it.

I'd always felt very at home in the house and though the neighborhood sucked, the essence of my Papi and the presence of my Nana always centered me. It calmed my spirit and made me feel so safe. I always found myself napping in that recliner or lying across my Nanas lap letting her play in my hair while she watched her Novellas. I could come here to complain about school, boys or my dad, look at old pictures, listen to stories about my Papi, anything. It was my peace.

“Don’t go if you don’t wanna go babe. Help me make dinner.” Nana walked into the kitchen with her bowl and started bustling round with her pots. I pondered for a second, then decided against it. Ace helped me with so much school shit, I didn’t want to leave him hanging. I stood up reluctantly, mentally checking back in. My tired ass wouldn’t be much help, but it was the least I could do. I dialed Ace’s number as I gave Nana a kiss on the cheek and made my way to the car.

I stepped outside into the heavy, humid Philly summer air. Ace’s phone rang and rang but no answer. He must have been busy. I could have choked from the smell of cigarettes from Mr. Willy next door on his porch. His son Robert was sitting on the ground in front of his old ass car, trying to change his tire while Mr. Willy, who had a permanent resting bitch face, was scowling from behind the screen door. I waved to them both, opting out of an actual conversation because they were both perverts, and I was too tired to check them the way I usually had to.

“Erin!” I heard a familiar voice call me after I opened my car door. I looked around for a second. I could see an obnoxious red Dodge Charger pull directly in front of the house. I rolled my eyes as far back as they could go, knowing exactly who was driving. David. My stomach sank in an annoyingly familiar way. And, of course, he had parked just behind my car, effectively blocking me in the driveway. I did not have time for this bullshit. I knew there would be one of those long drawn out “I need closure, and I miss you” speeches I had grown anything but fond of over the years. I sighed and buried my head in my hands for a second before taking a deep breath.

I watched as he jumped out of his car and jogged over to where I was standing. As much as I had grown to dislike him, he never lost a step. He looked good every single time I saw him. He wasn’t dressed up, but he always found a way to put shit together and make it look good. He was wearing a white Amiri T-shirt, a pair of grey sweat shorts, and a pair of Balenciaga stretch knit sneakers, which coincidentally I had bought for his birthday last year. He smelled like Creed

cologne and weed, which was especially intoxicating to me. The mixture of smells was a cocktail of PTSD for me. It tickled my nose, maliciously, forcing my body to react. He looked good, unfortunately for me. It was my poison. The scents wrapped themselves around me, as I attempted to wrangle my sense.

Judging by the detectable loose hair on his shirt, and the sharp shape up and fade, he had just left the barbershop, which was right down the street. He had a tendency of popping up on me unannounced, so I wasn't too surprised.

“You duckin’ me?” He laughed and leaned in to embrace me. I drew back. As good as he looked, as good as he smelled... I didn't want him to get the wrong idea. David knew the spell he always had on me and used it against me every time. I had not spoken to him since me and Ace started dating and I really didn't need his energy anywhere near me while things were going well. He was toxic, manipulative and most dangerously, he was my first love. A deadly combination.

“I'm not ducking you; I'm just very out the way. You know what it is... And I have a boyfriend.” I said. I could see him practically turn red. I had never had another boyfriend since we had been dating. A fling here and there, but never someone I claimed a relationship with. But of course, macho man had to play it cool.

“You serious?” He laughed. He swiped at his shirt haphazardly, wiping loose hair from it and leaned against my back passenger door to look unbothered. But I knew he was bothered as fuck, and I knew where this was going. He was going to tell me how no nigga could compare to him, how we were meant for each other and blah, blah, blah. I had heard it all before. In the years we had been together, we were on a dangerous merry-go-round where he would disrespect me, betray my trust or just do something to piss me off, then he would show up with a long speech, good sex and gifts and we'd be right back at it.

To be honest, our last fight wasn't even the worst it had been, but something in me had finally snapped. I was no longer interested in staying up in my apartment until 3 am waiting to know if he was dead or alive. He would stumble in drunk telling me his phone died. I wasn't interested in going down to the block to cause a scene because his bitches decided to air their grievances on Instagram, just for him to tell me “It's when we were on a break.” And I mentally couldn't deal with drinking myself under a table because he made me feel worthless and insecure. I decided I was over it and that last time was the last time. And getting with Ace was a reward for me finally choosing myself. I felt weightless and free and appreciated in a way I never had before, and I loved it. And yet, here he was... with his smell, and his breath close enough to tickle my cheek. I jerked myself back to reality, trying to expel him from my thoughts.

“Yea, seriously. Now back your shit up, I gotta go.” I brushed past him and walked around to the other side of my car. He walked around behind me and grabbed my arm, yanking me close to him. Before I could say a word, he pulled me in and kissed me. I snatched away and smacked him as hard as I could.

“Yo, what the fuck?” He exclaimed and shoved me into the side of my car. I shoved him back and quickly got into my car. He yanked my door handle open and pulled me out.

“Why you tripping yo? Wassup? I should smack the shit outta you!” he huffed, gripping my shirt. I squirmed, trying to get him to let go.

“Get the fuck off me. Don’t fucking kiss me, don’t touch me, get the fuck away from me.” I shouted loud enough for him and the whole north Philly to hear. We had gotten into physical altercations so much over the years that it felt normal. But I knew it wasn’t, and I couldn’t allow him to take me back to that place. I yanked myself out of his grip and pushed him out of my way to climb back into my car. I slammed the door and hit the lock. He looked at me as if he was hurt. Defeated. I started my car and shifted out of park and into reverse. There was just enough room for me to back up and U-turn over the thin patch of grass that separated Nana and Mr. Willy’s driveway so I could get onto the street. I was leaving one way or another.

“Talk to me boo, talk to me. Just real quick, yo. I’m sorry.” He managed to say. He looked at me intensely through my window. I had to laugh. He was certifiable. There was no way I was falling for that dumb ass pouty face and another bullshit speech. The Erin he knew was not the Erin that I was now. She was gullible, naive and in love with him. But she was gone. He didn’t have access to this new me and I wanted him to feel it and know it to be true. I put my car back in park and decided to get out. I walked over to him again and took a deep breath.

“Listen to me, and I want you to really listen.” I said, being sure not to break eye contact. “You will never have access to me again. Okay? Don’t come here, don’t come to my apartment, don’t come to my school, don’t call me, don’t text me. It’s not happening. I hope you remember that kiss for the rest of your life because it’s the last one you’ll ever get. And I hope you remember me in every way, because you will never get this pussy again either. It’s a wrap. Now move your car or I’ll move it for you.” I got back in my car, and in my rearview, I could see him standing there stuck on stupid.

“I hope that new nigga worth it, bitch.” He finally retreated to his car.

“He is babe. He is.” I rolled my window down just enough for him to hear me before backing up. I spun into my U Turn and sped off. I felt like another weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

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I arrived at Page One in about 15 minutes. Ace owned 3 beautiful office spaces and an extravagant event venue space in this dope ass compound in Manayunk. The atmosphere in this hipster-riddled section of the city was a nice change of pace. There were dozens of shops, studios, cafes and all kinds of shit the white people loved who came to Philly from out of town. My favorite was the escape rooms and paintball arena. Ace and I had been there 3 times since we started dating and thoroughly enjoyed it. One of my favorite things about him was the level of spontaneity that he had. Every day there was something new lined up for us and it never got boring.

I parked in front of the vegan cafe a few doors down from one of the “Page One” offices. There was Page One Banquet Hall, Page One Art Collective, Page One Realty, and Page One Management. Each business raked in a shitload of money. They kept Ace and his family comfortable and gave him a name in the city in the past few months. Though he owned the businesses himself, he had put everyone he was close to in a position to win with him. He spent most of his time in the Art collective curating pieces, hosting mixers and scouting new talent to show off. He was so passionate about every venture; I had no idea how he kept up with it all. I helped as much as I could, wherever I could. Mostly on the business end with finances and back-office stuff. I was good at it, and he always made sure to pay me my worth. It was refreshing to finally be in a relationship where I could give and take and not just give and give.

I hiked up a flight of stairs to the hall entrance. It had beautiful stone stairs leading to the front door. People loved the production and drama of it all. There was like a red-carpet ambiance and was the envy of every other venue in the city. There was floor to ceiling doors and windows in the front. Upon entry, you were taken somewhere magical. Everybody in the city ate that shit up, every event.

The walls were decorated with a contemporary mosaic tile and the floor was covered in spotless marble. It was mostly used for social mixers and other formal events. Ace would rent the space out to the upscale Philly crowd, charge them for the size of their event guest-wise, catering, decor, and prep, cleaning and even helped coordinate the entertainment. It was a cash cow for sure. He got to rub elbows with congressmen, organizations and big names that he wouldn’t otherwise have access to as a young black man in Philly. I unintentionally reaped the benefits of his success, so I felt obligated to help as much as possible.

I entered the hall and headed upstairs to the administrative office where I was sure I’d find Ace and Jules. Jules was Ace’s older cousin who he brought on board to help with receptionist duties and other back-office operations. She was beautiful, savvy and had a heavy social media presence. She promoted the venue, put together meetings with potential customers, had her own team who dealt with the odds and ends of it all and she was honestly amazing. We had gotten pretty close in these months, and it was always a good time when she was around. I walked into the office and Ace was sitting behind the computer desk, but Jules wasn’t there.

“Hey babe, I called you. Did you bring the spreadsheet?” I looked around for a second. “Where’s Jules?” I said, looking at Ace. He looked at me pensively. He slid his chair back from the desk and stood up slowly. He never broke eye contact as he walked behind me to the office door and locked it. I looked closely at him and noticed his eyes were glazed over as if he had been drinking.

“I sent her home for the day. That fundraiser for the mayor is starting earlier than expected.” he said, grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me close to him. He smelled like my favorite cologne and fabric softener with a hint of liquor. It wasn’t the Creed, like David wore, it was Clive Christian, which made me love it more. It was new, fresh. Just like us. But it was the middle of

the day and Ace wasn't much of a drinker, so I wondered what could've been going on. I kissed his cheek and took a step back. Before we started this conversation, I wanted to let him know about David popping up. I had plenty of bullshit in my previous relationship, and I didn't want to start having it in ours. Lying and hiding things from him was out of the question.

"I gotta tell you something. David popped up at Nana's house today before I got here. He hopped out on me, and I had to smack the shit outta him." I sighed and looked him directly in the eye.

"What? What happened? What you mean you had to smack him?" Ace's expression changed and I could see a fire ignite in his eyes I'd never seen before. He was typically calm and composed. Too cool for anything to take him out of character. But at this moment, there was something there that I hadn't met until now. My heartbeat quickened as I prepared to tell him what happened. I met his eyes again, intense and golden. His jaw clenched.

"He blocked me into Nana's driveway and kissed me. I was telling him to move his car out of the way so I could get out of the driveway, and he kissed me. I... I didn't even think, I just reacted, and then he pushed me --" I stammered, unsure of what would come out of this whole thing. "I'm okay and everything, it wouldn't be the first time we got into it. But I didn't expect that shit. Not at that moment." I peered up at Ace, he was now towering over me and wrapping his arms around me. He locked me in a tight embrace and kissed my forehead.

"Thank you for being honest with me. And I'll take care of it." He rested his hand on my cheek and looked me in the eye. His posture relaxed a bit.

"Don't worry about it. It's not gonna be a problem." He kissed me slowly and I felt his body stiffen against me. Our kiss deepened. I felt him lift me into the air and he sat me on the desk. I closed my eyes and let him take control. I was enveloped in the smell of his cologne and his warm body. He kissed my neck and my shoulders as he eased my pants and panties down to my ankles. He kissed between my thighs for what seemed like an eternity and then suddenly, he scooped me up and slammed me into the wall.

"Ahhh" I winced. "Slow down, slow down." I pressed my hand against his chest firmly. I looked in his eyes and they were still glazed over and red. He was teeming with remnants of rage and disdain. It was almost scary. Ignoring me, he held me tightly with one arm while removing his pants with his free hand. I squirmed in his grip to try to get comfortable, but he just held me tighter.

"Baby --" before I could say anything else, I felt the full force of Ace inside of me. The strokes were fast and furious. I felt like my body was being pounded into the wall. I was dripping wet, but I wasn't comfortable. I looked in his face and saw a ravenous, angry scowl. Ace suddenly scooped me up again and slammed me onto the desk, sending his laptop, keys, phone and paperwork flying to the floor. In one swift movement, he buried his hand in my hair then thrust the entire length of him into my ass. My entire body went limp, and I couldn't form noise intense enough to match the pain that I felt. A tear escaped my eye, I whimpered and tried to remove

him, but it only hurt me more. Ace groaned in pleasure as he slowly stroked in and out, in and out.

“Stop. It hurts.” I insisted. He lifted me from the desk, never pulling out. He laid me onto the floor gently as if it lessened the pain. I cringed as he relentlessly pounded into me. Ace pinned both my wrists to my lower back with his hands. I managed to turn my head to look at him.

“Just relax. Relax. Shitttt. You feel so good. Do you want me to stop baby?” His eyes rolled back in his head, and he began kissing the nape of my neck. Fuck. I could feel my pussy throbbing out of control and he was not letting up. I relaxed as the pain seemed to subside. I closed my eyes tight and tried to let myself enjoy it.

“No. Don’t stop” I was in a trance. The pain and the pleasure spun around me relentlessly, leaving me in a stupor of incoherence. A tear slid down my face and I gulped in air, trying to gather my wits.

He stopped suddenly and pulled out, flipping me onto my back.

“I love you baby.” He whispered, pushing my t-shirt up over my boobs. He licked and kissed my stomach and nipples gently, hugging me tightly with one arm. My body was flushed with warmth. I twitched and writhed. His big, firm hands slid up and down my curves. He gripped, pinched and nuzzled at me until all I could do was pant beneath him. Shit.

“You’re all mine, right?” he groaned. I felt him bury himself inside of me slowly. He kissed my cheeks and forehead. I was melting and spilling all over the floor. My body surrendered to him, the way it did every time. I felt like I was truly his. Every single time.

“Yes baby.” I moaned and held onto him for dear life. He slowed all the way down, kissing my neck and shoulders. He stopped for a moment and looked me right in the eye. Flames in his eyes and heat radiating from his body, I just wanted to never let go. It was so warm.

“Tell me no one else can have you. Tell me that you’re only mine.” He growled. I bit my lip. Ace had this intense need to hear these affirmations during sex. It turned me on. But this time felt different. There was an inquisitive look in his eyes as if he really wasn’t sure. I tried to ignore it, but as he began to rock his body into mine again, he repeated. I gazed at him. He was beautiful. He made me feel safe and adored. Everything about him was perfect.

“I’m only yours” I moaned. He hugged me tightly, burying his face in my shoulder. I could feel him quivering, getting closer to his release. I instinctively pushed him a little so he could pull out. In return, he held me closer and sped up his stroke. He went faster and faster until I felt him explode. He groaned and bit his lip, glowing with satisfaction. I had no idea why he had just done that. I wasn’t on birth control, and we had discussed the fact that at this point in our careers/schooling, kids weren’t in the cards. Not to mention we’d only been dating a few months. I felt like I was spinning out.

“Why did you do that?” I said, jumping up. Ace walked across the room to the desk and plopped down into his chair. I adjusted myself. Ace fiddled with his clothing as I approached him.

“I’m sorry baby. You just feel so good.” He stood up and looked down at me with his glowing eyes. “I wasn’t thinking.” He looked me lovingly in the eye and swept a few strands of my hair away from my face. I kissed his cheek and adjusted his clothes. I was determined to get to the bathroom and pee immediately. I exited the office and headed through the hallway to the bathroom. My phone began ringing, I hit the lock button, sending whoever it was to voicemail.

My body felt sore, especially my ass. I don’t know what had gotten into Ace or why he was so aggressive, but I felt the aftershock all over. I had done anal before, even liked how it felt, but never so roughly, or with anyone with Ace’s size. I stood in one of the full-length mirrors, lifting my t-shirt to reveal a bruise on my side. I winced at the purple-ish mark. What the fuck. I examined it for a few more minutes and cringed again.

I stormed out of the bathroom, back down the hallway and just as I was about to reenter the office, my phone rang. It was my dad. I sighed; I would have to call him back because I needed to let Ace know this shit was unacceptable. I sent my dad to voicemail. I walked back into the office and Ace was jotting something down in his planner.

“We need to talk.” I insisted. My phone started ringing again. It was my dad. I rolled my eyes. Why was he calling me back-to-back like this? I answered.

“Hey dad, can I call you back in --”

“Erin, listen to me, I need you to go to your grandmother’s house do you hear me? Go NOW and go to Papi’s chair and --” My dad was whispering and then suddenly I heard him yelling and a loud bang. Gunshots? Oh god. What the fuck? My mind raced.

“Dad... DAD!?” There was silence. Then the phone hung up. My eyes filled with tears instantly.

“Erin?” Ace stood up and looked at me. “What’s happening? What’s wrong?”

I stood there, feeling numb. I felt like the room was spinning and my body was hot. Ace was talking to me, but it faded into nonsensical background noise.

“My dad... my dad.” I stared blankly at my phone. I called his phone back. Voicemail. Again. Voicemail.

I felt my legs buckling and my breath getting heavier. I looked at Ace and he looked at me.

“I think somebody shot my dad.” I felt my whole body trembling.

“What?? Where is he? I’ll call the police!” He grabbed his phone quickly and began dialing. I was frozen.

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I stood there numb, watching the hours pass by. The police came by, took a statement, and began putting together a search party. I called my Nana, I called Butchie, and I called Nevaeh. I felt like I was outside of my body, watching the detectives talk amongst each other, then the

office being flooded with my family and friends. But I couldn't feel anything. I had never imagined life without my dad and in an instant, I felt him being snatched away.

It felt like an eternity had passed. I stood there holding my Nana's hand, trying to hold myself together. One of the detectives approached me. She was a beautiful brown skin woman wearing a dark blue pantsuit. Her hair was a mane of dark, defined curls that framed her face perfectly. She was at least 6 feet tall with not a heel in sight. Her posture was straight and statuesque. I would have mistaken her for a model.

"Ms. Whitfield, my name is Detective Deans. I'm so sorry that this is all happening. But our officers are heading over to your dad's office and to his home as well. We're hoping to find anything that would let us know where he was last, or who he may have been with when he called you. I know this is difficult, but we will keep you posted. For now, just keep your phone with you and try to remain calm. Stay with your family and let us handle it." She placed her hand on my shoulder and tilted her head, looking me in the eye.

"We will get you some answers." Her eyes were warm and compassionate, yet insistent and determined. I wiped a tear that was creeping down my cheek.

"Thank you" I mumbled.

"Please, take my card and call me if you have any questions, hear anything else or remember anything that can be helpful."

I nodded and slid the card in my pocket.

"Who would do this to my baby? I don't understand." My Nana erupted into tears again. She had been inconsolable since she'd arrived. It was so hard to keep my composure while watching her cry. She was one of the strongest people I knew, and she was falling apart. She had raised me. While my dad was working hard to provide, she was the one who wiped my tears when I fell off my bike. She taught me how to do my makeup. She taught me how to cook. And now... I wanted to hold her and protect her from the hurt she was feeling. But how could I? I was in pain too. I imagined she was thinking of her husband, her first and last love, taken from her too soon. And now, her son taken too. I shuddered. No -- He was okay. I had to believe he was okay, or I would lose my mind.

I hugged her tightly and rubbed her back.

"Let's go home Nana." I whispered to her. "Come on."

I looked around the room. The crowd was starting to thin out. Detectives and officers began leaving. My family members started emptying into the parking lot where news vans and reporters had finally started leaving too. We started down the stairs and to my car.

"I'll meet you at the house okay babe?" Nevaeh leaned in to hug me as we approached our cars.

I shook my head.

“I’ll drive you and leave my car here.” Ace said, he opened my passenger side door and motioned for me to get in. I plopped down into the seat and watched my Nana walked over to Butchie’s car. She was visibly shaken. Butchie too. I hadn’t seen either of them this way since Papi died. I hadn’t felt this way since then. My heart was aching. I wanted so badly for my father to call my phone and tell me he was okay. This whole thing was breaking my heart, and I felt more helpless than I’d ever felt before.

I sat there staring aimlessly at the passing trees and buildings and people. Ace kept peeking at me at every red light, trying to gage what I was feeling. Probably trying to find comforting words. Trying to find something to say that would bring me peace of mind. But there was nothing. I was inconsolable. It was unreal. As I felt like my world was falling apart, the world just kept going. Children were playing outside in the street, smiling and laughing. People were walking their dogs. Cars were riding by. The world just kept going. And my world was still. Just waiting and hoping. I could barely breathe. The ride to Nana’s house that usually took 20 minutes felt like it was taking an eternity.

When we finally pulled up to the house, cars were spilling out of the driveway and flooding the street. My family was huge, and even though they were scattered all over, they always pulled up when something was going on. And though I was in no mood, I found a small bit of solace in the fact that so many people cared about my dad. Another tear escaped my eyes. Fuck. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t sit in all these people’s faces and pretend to be strong and pretend I didn’t feel helpless.

“Erin... Do you want to go home?” Ace placed his hand on my leg gently. I looked at him. His eyes were so calming. I erupted into tears. Loud, ugly, sobbing replaced the silence we had driven over in. I couldn’t stop it. I shook my head excessively, burying my face in both hands and letting my sadness overtake me.

“Please. Please. Take me home.” I shouted. He unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned across the car to embrace me. He held me tight. We hugged and rocked, rocked and hugged. I melted into the embrace. I was just a kid right now. And Ace was my comfort. I retreated from the embrace and wiped my eyes on my sleeves.

“Just let me tell Nana we’re leaving” I whispered. He nodded.

I stepped out of the car wearily, walked up the driveway and to the front door. I reached for the front door and suddenly felt my phone vibrate. I grabbed it out of my pocket quickly. I wiped my eyes again, unlocking my phone.

*“Daddy” shared his location with you.*

I nearly dropped my phone. He was okay! Why was he sharing his location? Why didn’t he call me? I looked at the notification closely. I expanded the map that appeared in our message thread.

The pin he dropped was in a familiar location. An old property my dad owned in a quiet part of the city. About 15 minutes away from my apartment. My hands started to shake. My phone vibrated again, and a message appeared in the thread.

*“Come alone. Tell no one.”*

I stood there in shock and confused. What was happening? Why did I need to come alone and why couldn't I tell anyone? I stuck my phone in my back pocket and sprinted back to the car. I got back in the passenger seat and looked at Ace. My dad said not to tell anyone and to come alone but how could I keep something like this to myself? My head was spinning.

“My dad just sent me his location and told me not to tell anyone.” I blurted out. I felt my whole body shaking. Ace looked at me like I had 3 heads. He opened his mouth to speak.

“He told me to come alone, and I have to go right now!” I blurted again. “I need you to get out and go tell my Nana that I need to go home.”

He hesitated.

“Now Ace, right now!” I yelled. “I have to go!” I leaned over him to open his door. He climbed out of the car, and I quickly climbed over the center console into the driver's seat. He started to lean over into the driver's side window. I knew he would try to talk logically to me or tell me to let him come. So, I put the car in gear, backed out of the driveway as fast as I could and sped off. I had to get to my dad!

I drove as fast as I could, feeling like I was on autopilot. I was running stop lights and signs, hitting sharp turns and nearly causing accidents! But I didn't care, because as fast as I was driving, my mind was racing even faster. I needed to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that my dad was okay. I needed to understand what was happening and why he told me what he did. My sanity was on the line at this point, and nothing was going to stop me from getting to him.

I arrived at the property after only 10 minutes. My body was shaking. My mind was still moving a million miles a minute. I barely stopped near the sidewalk before hopping out of the car. The area was secluded, covered in tall weeds and bushes. I looked around the immediate area for a familiar car or something that could make this make more sense. There were no cars, no people, just grass, litter and a stray cat or two. The property hadn't been tended to in a while because of how busy my dad was. It was a property he'd recently bought and was planning to completely renovate and rent out. He had at least 5 of them in the city and a few out the county. He'd talked about giving me a few to manage once I graduated and stressed how important residual income was.

I approached the front door, looking around again. The door was slightly open. I pushed it slowly, unsure of what I would find inside. The place was gutted, cluttered with cleaning equipment and trash bags. I scanned the room.

“Daddy?” I managed to call out. My heart was beating out of my chest. There was no response. I walked carefully from the living room area, through a narrow corridor into the kitchen area. My heart dropped.

My daddy was there in front of me, lying in a pool of blood.

“Daddy!!!” I cried out. My chest tightened. My body felt limp and heavy. Tears erupted from my eyes. Fuck. Who did this? Who would do this!?

I plopped down on the floor beside him, looking for the wound. My pants were immediately warmed with his blood. I tilted his head upward to see his face, sobbing and calling his name. His eyes fluttered as I cradled his face in my hands. He was holding a gun, still grasping it tightly. I looked over his body and saw that he had been shot multiple times. His stomach, shoulder and leg were bleeding heavily. I looked him in his eyes and felt like his soul was struggling to leave his body. He was waiting for me. He didn’t want to leave me.

“Daddy! Please Daddy! Don’t leave me, please!”

His body began shaking profusely.

“Who did this, who did this to you!?” I screamed. “God please, don’t take my daddy. I don’t want to live without him!” I hugged him closely as the shaking slowed down. His eyes flickered slowly, as if he was struggling to keep them open.

“I love you,” he managed. A heavy breath escaped him, and I knew he was gone. Just like that, my daddy was gone.

I collapsed over him and wailed like an infant. It felt like a gut punch. A shot to the chest. Like my life had ended with his. Not like this. He couldn’t leave me like this. I rocked him back and forth, begging him to wake up. I pleaded with God to perform a miracle!

Suddenly, I heard a shuffling noise. I looked around quickly and noticed another person on the opposite side of the large kitchen behind an island. His feet protruded from behind it, and he began to move. I quickly eased the gun from my dad’s grip and cocked it. My breath sped up and my head began spinning again. I hopped up, my pants fully soaked in my dad’s blood. I wanted to vomit. But first I wanted to kill whoever this motherfucker was. I wanted to trade someone’s soul for my daddy!

“Get the fuck up!” I sobbed, pointing the gun across the kitchen. There was a groaning noise, and more shuffling. He was injured too.

“Get the fuck up NOW!” I shouted again. It got quiet.

I approached the island slowly, cocking the gun. My heart was beating out of my chest. I stepped over his leg and walked around the island to see his face. The face of the piece of shit who took my father from me. My dad was always clean cut, but he made it a point to teach me how to protect myself. He always taught me not to point a gun if I wasn’t going to use it. And it was

never clearer than now, that his advice was always useful. I wouldn't regret ending this person's life. Even if it meant rotting in jail. I felt an intense rage coursing through my body.

I leaned into the dark corner to get a better look, never lowering my gun. Then, in an instant, I felt my heart sink into my stomach...

It was David.