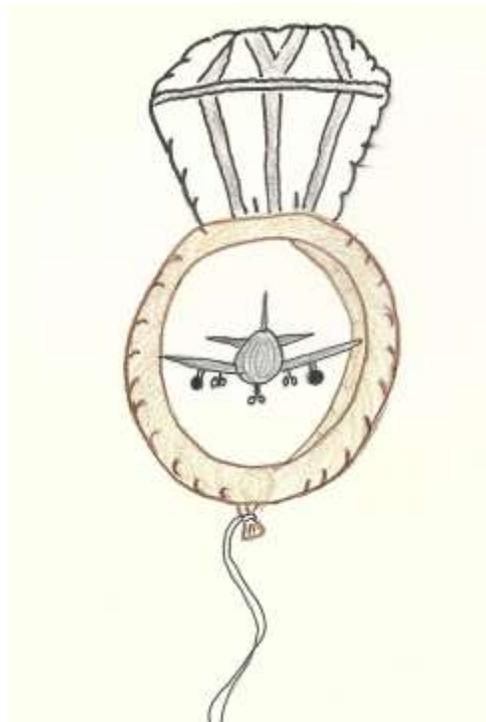




# Erin

How quickly can a person's day change to life altering? In the course of only one plane ride Erin finds out. Her understanding of what is right and wrong are put through the test, in some cases there is a very thin line. Choices have to be made.



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Erin’s trip to Europe is coming to an end; she settles into a seat at gate twenty-five and waits to board her flight home, taking this time to mull over the successes and even failures of her trip. The biggest failure came right at the beginning as she first signed in to her hotel; this is when her business associate thought he was there with her for more than meetings with clients, he had the nerve to order adjoining rooms for easy access, he told her. Setting him straight may have hurt her chances of advancement when she gets home, but she is hoping not. His assumption was quite uncalled for, she never gave him any clue that she was interested, they weren’t even sitting next to each other on the plane. Thankfully, he seemed to understand her opinion without too much ado. Outside of the main presentation meeting, he has barely spoken to her. Erin hopes that is a good thing and he isn’t angry.

Her first success however came on day one when she had her chance to do her own presentation. Everyone in the room was excited about what her company has to offer. The president of their client’s company closed his folder and said, “Where do we sign?” That was all she needed to hear. She remained on cloud nine throughout the rest of the presentations.

The activities that were planned however, Erin decided, would go under the column of failure. Who plans a cake decorating class for a business outing? Then there was the day they were all dressed in business attire and were taken straight to a picnic in a muddy park without having time to change or any warning. They should have made a back-up plan on that day. Yes, the activities at this industry meeting were all failures. She makes sure to write all of these ideas down so that if anyone wants to know what activities to plan for when her office hosts the meeting next quarter, she will know what *not* to do.

Erin takes a deep breath and puts down her tablet, work is over. She is heading home and will be enjoying her day off tomorrow. Her boss insists all employees be required to take one personal day before coming back to work after a long business trip, this one has been five days long. Tomorrow she has plans to spend time with her niece and nephew to give her sister a day off as well. Her sister is a single mom whose ex-husband was more interested in playing house than taking on responsibilities. Marriage was not what he had pictured. He gave her a large sum of money to put away for the kids’ college fund and said good riddance. Her sister seemed fine with that decision because she has a good job of her own, she didn’t want to be tied to him anymore in any way. She never wanted to be disappointed when the money didn’t come like a few of her friends have had to deal with.

Erin, personally, is not interested in getting involved with anyone right now, let alone being married. She has yet to see a successful marriage or one without the drama. However, she still holds out that somewhere out there is a person who can be both a friend and a lover. Her sister, Tracy, is currently dating someone who has enveloped her sister, as well as the kids into his life. Hence, when Tracy asked Erin to take the kids for a ‘couple’s day’, she jumped in to help her sister.

Erin has the whole day planned for tomorrow, first, she will take the kids out for a pancake breakfast, then on to the zoo, and if the weather is right, they will have a good old fashion water fight in the back yard. For lunch she will make her special meatballs with a salad and by then it will be naptime. While the kids nap Erin will catch up on all her e-mails from work and clean up the

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house for Tracy. Tracy is scheduled to get back shortly thereafter; the kids will hopefully be up and playing in the den. Tracy said there will be a surprise for dinner so she doesn’t have to worry about preparing that. While most people would not think this is the best use of a day off, Erin finds it the most rewarding.

Erin puts all of her work back into her briefcase, work is over, and she decides that she will start her day off now. She likes to watch people so she looks around to see who is going to be on the flight with her. Immediately, she is drawn to the young man in the designer suit standing in front of a group of obviously like-minded people. They are talking loud enough for everyone around them to hear because they want everyone to know who they are and how important they think they are. God, she hates arrogance. To the left of them is a young woman sitting with what looks like a two or three-year-old boy. She does not seem to be overly concern with the young man as much as she is with the one bragging about his \$10,000 watch he recently bought. Erin sees that he glances over at the girl with the boy and grins. ‘Hmmmm, that’s a weird pair’, she thinks.

Near the window, she sees an elderly couple sitting and holding each other’s hands like newlyweds. Yes, that is her ultimate dream – to find someone that she can grow old with and still love each other as much as the day they met. She watches as the wife leans her head onto her husband’s shoulder and how he pulls her into him and kisses the top of her head. He is sitting tall and proud, you can tell he is still in love with her. Now THAT is what marriage is supposed to be about. If she was a nosey person, she would go talk to them, but she is not and she stays right where she is looking around some more.

There is a couple of teenagers completely zoned out because they have plugged in to their current electronic device and are ignoring the world around them. What a shame. As a teenager, Erin and Tracy spent their days at the miniature golf center; it was the best hang out ever. They used to challenge everyone around to a round of bumper cars too. These kids sitting around plugging in don’t know what they’re missing. Face time, real face time, gave her the best memories.

There is an announcement at her gate and she thinks that she hears her own name. But how can that be? She has everything she needs, quickly she checks her ticket – yes, it’s here. There it is again. This time Erin takes herself over to the counter and introduces herself

“Yes ma’am, we did call you. I noticed that you are sitting in the area of the plane that has more leg room and you appear to be traveling alone, that is without any children or any obvious need for the extra room.” The airline representative says.

“I am, I paid extra for that luxury, as if extra leg room is a luxury. Is there a problem?” Erin asks.

“No, not a real problem, you see that man over there with the crutches?” She points to a place behind Erin. She shakes her head, “Well, seems he had a bit of a mishap on his vacation and has asked if it is possible to get a seat with more leg room because the way they set his leg it’s not completely bent or straight. I saw that you are on the same aisle side so I called you first. We will be refunding the extra money you paid along with giving you a free voucher for your next flight with our airline as a thank you.”

Erin looks behind her again and sees that the man they are asking about is a full head, if not more, taller than her and that indeed the doctors set his leg in a position that doesn’t look too



comfortable. She turns back to the representative and says, “Where is he supposed to be?” The woman from the airline shows her on the seating map where the seat is. Erin looks and decides that she will still be on an aisle seat and that it is only four rows back from where she originally had her seat. “Ok, I think I can make that work. Do you need my ID or something to know where to send the voucher?” The representative looks up at her and smiles, “I guess you’ve flown a lot to ask that. Yes, that would be best. Here is a form you can fill out; you will receive both the refund and the voucher within a week to ten days.” The representative answers.

Erin leaves to go back to her seat in the waiting area. How hard can it be to move back a few seats, and now she has her next vacation partly paid for. Not a bad thing. Before she gets to her seat she notices that the woman she saw before, the one who has the boy with her, is now flirting with another man. Something weird is definitely going on with some of these people.

Another perk to her acceptance to this last-minute seat change is that they called her to board at the same time as the first-class patrons. She quickly finds her seat and puts her carry-on above her. Systematically the passengers load the plane, each finding their spots with ease and settling in. The passengers look to be finished boarding when Erin realizes that the two seats next to her have not been occupied yet. She is beginning to think she has been rewarded for her good deed.

The flight attendants are quickly going up and down the aisles making sure everyone’s carry-ons are secure and that they have what they need. Then Erin hears a thunderous noise coming down on the other side of the plane. Everyone on the plane around her is watching as two of the largest people Erin has ever seen begin to find their seat. “Found it!!” One says to the other, “We are right here next to this little lady.” Erin realizes that they are pointing to her. Their voices are thundering throughout the cabin as they look for a spot that is left to put their backpacks opening each overhead compartment and slamming it closed when it’s full.

Very quickly, there are four different flight attendants scampering around trying to help them and also trying to calm down the other passengers as their items are being rustled around. Finally, they settle in their seats. For a couple of minutes, they still stand in their seats getting themselves organized. The one sitting next to Erin pulls up the shared armrest before sitting down. Now she feels claustrophobic. She tries to pull herself over in her seat to give him maximum room. ‘The man must play for some kind of football or wrestling team’ she thinks to herself. She smiles and adjusts herself to find a comfortable spot for the third time in five minutes. ‘Only seven more hours of this’ she thinks and laughs out loud, quickly she regains her composure so that no one figures out what she is laughing about, or who.

Erin takes some deep cleansing breaths and settles in for the long haul. The pilot announces they are leaving a few minutes late but that they will make up the time in the air. He thanks them for flying this airline and tells everyone to enjoy their trip. As the plane begins to pull away from the gate, “Mr. Big” adjusts again and now has left Erin no more than a fraction of her own seat. Erin sighs out loud in hopes that he hears her, but he does not. She counts the minutes until she can pull out her tablet and at least have something to read.

Erin almost feels sorry for her seat mates, they must be even more uncomfortable than she is, being squeezed into something so small. However, she notices that there are other seats open



and that maybe once the plane is at full altitude that one of them will see an opportunity to move to a place more comfortable because she has already moved once.

After the first hour passes, Erin feels that her arm is tingling from the pressure on her left side, the man is made up of solid muscle. This is not going to work. He is snoring louder than the plane’s engine, no way he will hear her if she asks him to move. One of the flight attendants approaches Erin, “Excuse me miss, are you the one who gave up their seat for another passenger?”

“Yes, I am.” Erin answers exasperated. ‘Now what?’ she thinks.

“The gentleman that is in your original seat has asked me if you would please come by because he would like to thank you personally, and obviously he can’t come to you.” She smiles at her.

Erin considers this for about thirty seconds. A chance to get up doesn’t sound like a bad thing right now. “I’d love to meet him, thank you.” Erin wriggles out of her seat, takes her purse and heads up the few rows to introduce herself to “Mr. Crutches”. It is not until she turns and faces him that she sees how incredibly good looking he is and those eyes could knock you off your feet. She swallows before she reaches out her hand, “Hi, I’m Erin.” She says quietly.

Mr. Crutches smiles easily and shakes her hand. “Marcus. I can’t thank you enough for your generosity. As you can see, I don’t think I could have been able to fit into a regular seat.” He smiles again.

“What happen?” she asks as she points to his leg. Her eyes following her hand and she sees two legs that probably keep moving a lot, not an ounce of fat on them. Pure muscle, she can tell even through his pants. ‘oh god look up you idiot’ she admonishes herself. Their eyes meet again. He is still smiling. ‘Whew he didn’t notice..... I hope.’

“Truth? I was carrying three bags of tourist shopping up the stairs to my hotel room when someone came flying into the stairwell and plowed into me – I went down like a lead brick. Not sure who was more scared, but I can tell you that young lady never heard many of the words that I said at that time. She was running from someone who was not exactly behaving properly to a woman, if you know what I mean. The hotel took care of me as well as her. They had to call the police and everything. I guess I can consider myself lucky because I only received a broken leg but that guy received a jail sentence big time.”

“Wow, that’s some story to tell. How did your family take the news?” ‘Yeah like he doesn’t know you’re inquiring about his marital status dingbat’ Erin always opens her mouth before she thinks. Well, not always, only when it comes to social situations, in business she rocks the room.

“My mom went nuts, even after I sent her pictures and she saw I am not so bad. The rest of the family laughed and said – oh that’s typical or they asked why I can’t go on a vacation without drama. I seem to attract such events according to them.” He replies.

‘Still no mention of wife or kids, but that’s ok – guess I’m not supposed to know.’ Erin smiles and looks up down the aisle for a second to tear her eyes away from his. “Shit!!! Are you kidding me?!” she exclaims.

Marcus sits up and turns around trying to see what she sees, but he doesn’t. “Is everything ok? Should I press the call button?”



“No, and Yes!” Erin feels the smoke leaving her ears as her anger begins to boil and the steam is rising right out of her ears. She is practically pacing by the time the flight attendant gets to her. Before she gets a chance to speak, Erin yells, “Do you see this? He has slumped down and is now completely taken over my seat! How much more do you expect me to endure on this flight? We have many more hours to go. Am I to stand the whole time?” She is fuming, her rational brain completely losing the fight to her emotional brain.

Marcus puts his hand out and takes her hand, she is momentarily distracted. “I’m sorry this happened, but I see a seat over near that little boy is open. Can she sit there?” He offers an option that doesn’t look that much better but it is better than being squished she supposes. The flight attendant looks at Erin to find out if that would be acceptable. She is still so angry and her hands are clenched but after a couple of deep breaths she nods. The flight attendant goes over to verify if the seat is taken – it is not.

“Excuse me, I don’t think I will be very good company right now. I’m going to sit down. It really is nice meeting you Marcus, I hope you recover quickly.” She pulls her hand from his, he is still holding on for a second and then he releases her with a smile. As she walks over to the other seat, she can still feel the heat from his hand.

‘Don’t look over Erin, settle in and forget him.’ She tells herself. Little Mr. toddler looks to have his own seat so she can at least resume sitting comfortably in her seat and not have to worry about being pushed on.

She reaches into her purse to find her tablet and then realizes that it’s over on the other side of the plane inside her carry-on. She flags down the next flight attendant to request that they get her bags from the other side and bring them to her. By this time, every flight attendant knows what she has been through today so this one is very happy to help her out. “Here you go Miss and I do believe that this will fit under the chair in front of you so you won’t have to get up to put it away later.” He smiles at her for approval. Erin nods.

With a deep breath Erin takes out her tablet and starts to look for something good to read. The little man next to her is full of questions about all the colors he sees. The woman next to him seems completely without care. ‘It’s going to be a long flight’ she says to herself again.

“Could you sit still for two minutes? Geez, you can sure be frustrating.” The woman sitting next to the young boy says.

Shocked, Erin turns to her and says, “How old is he?” trying to deflect the woman’s anger.

“Somewhere between 1 and 2 – not sure, maybe even 3. What difference does it make?” she says still annoyed.

Erin couldn’t believe what she heard, ‘is she kidding?’ Trying very hard to keep her cool, she asks, “You don’t know how old your own child is?”

“My child!!! Ha!! That will be the day! I was hired to watch him for the flight home. His father had to come pick him up in Europe from the mother and getting him home the court said he had to have a ‘nanny’ with him.” She used her fingers to indicate quotation marks when saying the word nanny.

“I take it this is the first time he met his son.” Erin says coolly.



“How did you figure that out? But yes, seems some young thing had a one-nighter with him and produced a son. Now that she is having second thoughts about being a single mom, she contacted him. Naturally, his lawyers got involved. She got some money from him, he got the kid because he is better equipped to give him what he needs. That’s what the judge said any way. I had to be in the courtroom to show I am legit his nanny. And would you believe that ungrateful woman cried!!! The man hands her over a million dollars and she cries that he is taking her son. God, what I would do with that kind of money.” She sits back exasperated by having to tell that story.

Erin cannot hold back her shock, “So you think you can buy someone’s child and they won’t be upset? What do you really do for a living?” Her temper is getting harder and harder to control today.

“Me? Well, I am a secretary before this trip – and now? Who knows what I will be.” She sits back proud of herself.

“Most likely *still* a secretary. Where does the boy go next? To a real nanny or some relative?” Erin can’t believe the conversation she is having right now. Her breath is irregular and her muscles are tight trying to keep her cool. She tries to remind herself that this is not her problem, but every time she looks down at those baby blue eyes staring up at her, she sees they are smiling. She is going to try and make this right. Poor thing probably has already been through DNA testing and who knows what else the shark lawyers put him through; but for a boy who is traveling with strangers, he seems to be doing fairly well.

“Are you kidding me?!” the woman exclaims. “After all I have done for him?! I’ve watched this kid every day for the past week and watched his father each night. (she says smiling) No way am I still staying a secretary.”

“Tell me,” Erin begins, “how *were* you chosen? Drew the short straw or did his father address you by name and ask you to join him on this journey? Or are you the only one who is single and therefore the easiest one to convince to leave with him? Oh wait, there could be one more scenario – you volunteered because you thought he would be more than a friend at the end of this trip.” Erin knows this type so well. The single rich boy who always gets what he wants by manipulating the people around him to make them think they matter but in reality, to him, they don’t.

With that last statement, Erin knew she hit the target. Poor soul, she has no idea that the man in first class doesn’t even know her name. Nor does he know the name of the mother of this boy, she is sure of that. Still, Erin has a soft spot for the blue-eyed boy with big smiles. She will try and get to the end of this story. Not for her, but for him, he deserves to be with his mother, this is not what she bargained for, nor what she wants, most likely. Erin has to forget this, why can’t she stay out of everyone else’s issues?

How dare he march in like that and claim to want his son. He can’t even be bothered to sit with him or get to know him. This boy is something special; most others would be really crabby without their moms, especially if they get hungry or tired.

The secretary stares at Erin in disgust. Surely this woman who sat down because she is being moved around is simply angry and taking her frustration out on her, she can’t possibly think



that she is some two-bit street walker, she has a legitimate job at his company and will most likely get promoted because of how much help she has given the boy’s father. Hmph, she will show Miss newcomer, “Do you mind watching him for a couple of minutes? I’m going to ask his father if it’s ok to give him something to eat in case he is allergic to anything, I see they are serving food now.” She asks Erin innocently.

Erin shrugs her shoulders, some nanny she is, doesn’t she even know what the kid can eat? She said she has been with him for this past week, or is she using it as a ruse to go get to speak with the father. Whatever, she will feed the boy when the food comes by. Surely, he will know what he likes and what he can eat. She is hoping there are no allergies. Erin is pretty confident there is not, otherwise this girl would be in serious trouble if she fed him wrong and with her job on the line, she most likely knows the truth already. She stands to let the woman out of their seats.

“What is your name?” Erin asks the boy

“Mommy calls me ‘little man’ but the father calls me Danny.” He says happily.

“Oh, which one do you like?” she asks him curiously.

“I like little man!!” he jumps around on his seat a while before Erin could get him to calm down.

“How about we get ready to eat? You see those people bringing food?” Erin is really hoping that there are no allergies, she is getting a bit nervous about the situation. As the next flight attendant passes her she asks if she can find out from the father in first class. She nods and tries to hide her smile.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me, right?” Erin asks in disgust. “In the morning? With all the lights on in the plane?” she shakes her head.

“I’m not at liberty to say what goes on with other passengers; all I can tell you is that this young man is not allergic to any food. I heard the question asked and answered before I came back to this section. Shall I give him a sandwich? Or the lasagna?” She responds, still trying to keep the smirk off her face.

“How about you give us one of each and I will feed him whatever he is willing to eat.” Erin responds in kind.

The attendant comes to their row and hands them each a tray of food. Erin is able to get the little boy to sit long enough to open both trays, she watches as he picks out the foods he wants to eat, the salad and fruit are his first requests. She opens them happily. ‘He eats rather well.’ she thinks.

Erin begins to eat the lasagna while her little friend is occupied. He looks at her puzzled, “Eat vegies first.” He says to her innocently. Erin smiles and opens her salad and joins him in eating their salad and fruit first. Then the two of them split the lasagna. He has a good appetite for such a little one. For dessert, he asks for his juice. This is not a child who has been mistreated in any way, those damn lawyers broke a woman’s heart all because she wants him to have a father and most likely has less money too. UGH!!!! She will have to make some inquiries when she gets home. She has plenty of connections in that area of law, maybe she can get his mother the lawyer she deserves to fix this.



Conversation with this young man has been fun, the flight attendant comes by to pick up their trays and Erin brings him to the bathroom. He follows her easily enough, however, it takes him a few minutes to believe that it is a bathroom. They get back to their seats and Erin starts wondering how long it takes to *ask a question*, but she would never say that out loud.

The lights are dimmed now so that people can sleep if they want to. The young man pulls out his bag from the floor and finds his blanket and his doll. A piece of paper falls from the bag, Erin reaches down and picks it up; it’s a picture of him and his mom. Her heart breaks a little bit more. They are in a park, and by the looks on their faces, they are having a great time.

He takes the picture and kisses it, puts it back into his bag. Then he pushes himself onto Erin’s lap, holding his doll in one hand and his blanket in the other. He nuzzles his head into Erin’s shoulder with his face into her neck, he has curled up into a ball and within a minute, he puts himself to sleep. “Don’t worry little man, I’ll get you home.” She whispers.

It has been over an hour since the ‘nanny’ left to go speak with the father. She finally meanders back with a grin on her face a mile long. She looks down and sees the boy sleeping on Erin’s lap and Erin is reading on her tablet. “Um excuse me, I need to get back to my seat.” She blurts out rudely.

Erin responds with, “Go ahead, I’m not stopping you.” She does not budge except to put her feet down on the floor to make it somewhat passable. The woman stands there tapping her feet and holding her arms across her chest. Erin is engrossed in her story and remains still. Everyone else around her is sleeping so there is no one for this woman to complain to. She loses her battle in about two minutes and shimmies into her seat. She sits down feeling triumphant though.

She looks to Erin and says, “You think you’re so smug don’t you. You think I don’t know what I’m doing do you? Well, you are so wrong, I have that man wrapped around my little finger now. All I had to do is spread some sunshine in his life and he wrote me this check to cover my expenses and then some for this trip.”

Erin looks at the piece of paper that she is waving in her face and does some quick calculations in her head. She collects her thoughts before responding. “Based on that number, I’d say he is giving you severance pay.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she pipes up angrily.

“Based on what the secretaries make at my company, I figure he gave you about four month’s pay and that means one of two things to me. The first would be that he is laying you off your job and has given you this payment to help you out so you can easily look for a new job. The second scenario is that it’s a random number to make you think he cares, when in actuality he probably already contacted his bank on his phone saying he lost that check number and that it shouldn’t be cashed. Going with the second scenario – you have received nothing.” Erin looks back at her tablet with a completely calm face so that the poor woman can’t tell how much she loathes her.

The woman next to her is now completely perplexed. Erin can tell she is trying to mull over everything she heard Erin say and trying to make sense of her life. Her little seat mate moves a bit and she rubs his back to keep him sleeping.



The 'nanny' is watching this woman next to her do what she could never do. Not once in the past ten days did that kid fall asleep on her or even near her, he usually cried himself to sleep, alone, in his own bed each night. The look on his face is even more content than she has seen him. This no name woman has the nerve to tell her she is nothing but a paid slut?! How dare her - again. She must be one of those self-righteous big shots who has no social life and probably envies her for landing such a successful man. She smirks at Erin and is about to speak but Erin beats her.

"Do the math, he paid for you to come on this trip, but never sits with you. He carried out his business and allowed you to go sight-seeing until he needed you to play your part. Whether that was in the bedroom or the courtroom, it was only a part in his orchestrated play, every step of the way. After the quick trial where they proved that the mother is unfit, he stuck you in a hotel room with the boy and there you stayed until today. Yet somehow you think you will be rewarded for this?"

All you've done is completely ruin your reputation up there (Erin points to the first-class curtain) and you care so little about what people think of you, that it makes me sad for you. The whole plane knows what the two of you were doing up there under that blanket. He is probably bragging about it as we speak. What happens when you find yourself with child too? Huh? You think he is going to pay up then? No, he will do the same as he did with this boy. He will prove that you are unworthy of being a mother. Think of how much fun the lawyers will have when they know it was conceived on an airplane? What kind of mother does that make you? No, honey you don't have anything except a piece of paper in front of you and a lost reputation. So, don't look so smug at me, you will come away with nothing. This is not a romance novel, it's the real world, like it or not."

Erin finishes her lecture and somehow feels better. She shouldn't because she totally embarrassed this woman and made an awful lot of assumptions about this boy's father, but she has seen it too many times in her industry. People go away for a business meeting and figure no one will ever be seen again - until nine months later. Lives have been ruined and the ones who really lose are always the children. She exhales and returns to her tablet, although she can no longer concentrate on her story.

In a whispered voice she hears a very shaky voice, "You can cancel a check over the internet? But he told me that I deserved it for all my troubles; than he smiled and winked at me." Erin looks up to see that the same woman who, only moments ago, was full of venom for her is now looking at her for sympathy. Erin watches her for a moment but before she can speak the woman stands up and pushes herself out of the seat, tears in her eyes she runs towards the first-class curtain. Only this time, they are not allowing her in. Erin bows her head - she didn't want to be right this time; her gut tells her she is.

A moment later a tearful woman stands before her, Erin moves her legs this time to make entry easier. She bends over her and grabs her purse. "There is a seat in the back of the plane, the flight attendant said I can take. They told me that unless the boy is in distress, I am no longer allowed up there." She sniffles then continues, "If you are right, then I may not have a job, this whole trip is for nothing, no advancement, not relationship, just.....well.....sniff, sniff....." she runs

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down the aisle towards where a flight attendant helps her to her new seat. Erin takes a deep breath and sighs. “I wish you well.” she says to no one.

Erin finds herself falling asleep, so she allows this to happen. Holding onto her new friend, she closes her eyes. Someone is tapping her on the shoulder. Erin takes a moment to shake her head awake, she sees the lights are on and there is a flight attendant next to her. “We have a snack to serve, would you like two again as before?” she asks.

Erin pushes herself to sit up. “Yes, that will be great, thank you.” As she stirs so does her little friend. He rubs his eyes, “potty” is the only word he says and Erin jumps up before the bathroom is occupied. Made it in time, she is thankful. She washes her face to help herself wake up and then brings him back to their seats where their breakfast/snack awaits them.

Speaking a mile a minute, he tells her how much he likes fruit and Erin finds herself being highly entertained by this young man. Too bad he has a jerk for a father. She shares her granola bar from her purse with him too and he eagerly eats. After their trays are taken away the two new friends begin to color on a pad of paper Erin has in her briefcase. The next couple hours pass with ease.

“Excuse me, where is Irene?” an angry male voice says.

Erin slowly looks up and sees the boy’s father. Erin couldn’t help herself at this point so she looks up at him and simply says, “Oh so you do know her name. Now, here is the bigger question – what is his?”

The man is not amused, but she cares not. He looks over at his son and asks, “What have you got there, Bobby?” The boy does not answer. He looks down at the woman sitting with his son perplexed. Erin tries to save him a little embarrassment although she is not sure why she whispers to him, “Danny, your father asked you a question.” The boy looks up and sees the man next to them, he looks at Erin then back at the man with the stern face. He says to Erin, “I like you. Color with me?” and he continues to color.

Erin looks up again and shrugs her shoulders before she says, “It may take him some time to adjust to having you around.” She says as if she is the authority on the subject.

“What did she tell you?” he says angrily.

“Enough to know that you are the sperm donor of this fine young man, that you had her play a part in your orchestration of taking this boy from his deserving mother whose only misjudgment was sleeping with you in the first place.” Erin is holding herself quite confidently now.

The man looks at her and is red in the face. “You know nothing of me or this situation. She contacted me and said her son needs a father and I’m that person. I went to get him. What can she give him? She lives in a basement of someone else’s flat? I don’t owe you an explanation but since you’ve taken over as guardian during this flight the least I can say is thank you.” His voice a little softer at the end.

“What happens now? He goes home with you and is brought up by an army of nannies and servants because you can’t be bothered to be the father he deserves? When does the playtime end for you? What will it take? Getting a disease? Do you know for sure that all the women you’ve slept with are clean? In this day and age and you still go unprotected with people you hardly know. Shame on you!! I don’t need your thanks. But know this, I will be watching you and if I’m



not convinced he is with the right parent. I promise you I will see to it he ends up with the parent who will love him and nurture him into the man you aren’t.” Her words are spoken under her breath so as not to disturb anyone else or her little friend.

He stands there for a moment not knowing what to do. No one has ever talked to him so straight out like that. He always commands respect in every room he is in. He watches his son and realizes that he looks like his own brother did when they were little. It has been mentioned to him to let his sister raise his son because she already has a family and he will mesh right in. Vaguely he remembers a time when he used to take time out to play around for fun and not for personal fulfillment.

Now he looks at this woman who could cut diamonds with the laser sharp look she is giving him. He probably deserves this, maybe she is right, and he needs to wake up. But who the hell is she to tell him so? He will have to find out.

He takes a breath before speaking, “Nonetheless, I will be meeting people at the gate who want to meet him. His family (he says with emphasis) If you’re playing guardian anyway, do be a good woman and bring him out promptly.”

Erin cuts him off, “What!! Take your own child out - he doesn’t belong to me. I have my own things to take and I can’t exactly carry him too. You have brass ones mister, and I’m so looking forward to tearing them right off of you so you don’t make any more mistakes where he is concerned or you’ll be hearing from more than my lawyer.” She has so much anger in herself right now she feels her blood has actually turned to venom, she doesn’t quite know what to do.

This time, instead of looking down at her, he kneels down to speak to her face to face. Quietly, he says, “He won’t go to me. Apparently, he doesn’t like men with dark hair, he and his momma are both light colored hair and he thinks there is something wrong with me. I guess your red hair is safe to him. Please, I don’t want him going out crying in my arms and afraid.” He stands up and walks quickly back up to his spot.

Erin has no choice; she will have to look after him for the duration. There is a shadow over her and she sees Marcus standing up on his crutches next to her. “I see you have had one hell of a flight tonight. Would it be too forward if I asked for your number so that I can thank you, say over a game of scrabble down at Luigi’s?” he asks innocently enough.

Erin is not sure this is something she wants to pursue; she reaches in her bag and pulls out one of her business cards because it doesn’t have her personal number on it. She hands it to him, “Give me a call next week, I’m pretty booked this week though.” She said confidently. Confident in that he will forget by then, that is.

Marcus takes the card and smiles, “Until then he says.” and walks away and Erin thinks to herself, ‘now you can get up?’

Irene has been watching this exchange. She sees that woman playing with Danny in a way she could not do this whole week. ‘What is wrong with her?’ she thinks. Whoa, who is the hunk on the crutches? This woman must be a magnet to men, mystery woman has had four of them come up to her so far since she left that seat. ‘Were they all waiting for her to leave?’ she ponders. She is still watching them both play with each other when she is interrupted by someone standing near her and clearing his throat. She looks up.



“Excuse me Ms. are you Irene?” Irene looks at him with a watchful eye. She does not recognize him at all. Nice clothes, well-kept hair and he is looking at her a bit sheepishly. “Do I know you?” she asks.

“Have you ever been to Cancun?” he simply asks.

Puzzled, Irene answers, “No, why would you ask?” She looks into his eyes and realizes what he is implying. ‘Oh god!!! How many people has he told?’ She sits up in her chair and immediately looks down the aisle to see the other woman sitting with Danny. Her heart begins to pound out of her chest, her breathing is becoming increasing fast, faster than she can contain. ‘Oh man, is this what a panic attack feels like? Is this a real heart attack?’ She puts her hand on her chest to make sure her heart has is not jumping through her skin. All those men who came to her must have had similar questions because every time one of them walked away, the woman had turned around to face her with a sympathetic smile – now she knows why.

All those men, each and every one of them came up to her and made a proposition. They think she is the one who was in first class giving the boy’s father some “attention”. Not once did this mystery woman refer the questioner to her. She has withheld these propositions from her. Most people she knows would have sold her under the bus, but this woman is perfectly fine with shielding her from those hurtful words. First, she admonishes her for her stupid actions, which, in reality, were stupid. But it is her decision as to who and when she sleeps with someone. There is another clearing of someone’s throat. Irene shakes her head and realizes the man is still standing there.

With a little more confidence than she actually has Irene responds with, “Are you taking a survey with all the passengers or is there a real reason you are asking this question?”

The man smirks at her and gives her a look that says he will go along and play her game if she would like. Then he puts his hand on her shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “Is next week good for you?” Irene could not get out of her seat fast enough. She scrambles out of her seat and pushes him aside into the gentleman across the aisle, she is in an enclosed area with no place to run, she looks from side to side and heads for the bathroom. In the process she slams right into the flight attendant who had helped her into this new seat before. The attendant steadies Irene and holds her at arm’s length and looks into her eyes. She sees panic and pulls her in to hold her. Looking over her shoulder she sees a man from first class and put two and two together. She whispers into Irene’s ear, “I hope you don’t ever have to see these people again.” Irene shakes her head no into the woman’s shoulder.

Meanwhile, in first class, there is one man who is feeling pretty down in the dumps himself. The words that new woman had said to him are sinking in. He has spent too much of his adult life playing around. He has made major triumphs in his businesses, he has climbed to the top with plenty of his own blood, sweat and tears but he has also crushed many hearts for no reason except that he was using them as an arm candy and physical urges. No emotion involved. Then his son came. One he had not known about for over two years – she had no intention of telling him, ever. She said as much in court. That she had no intention of having him know a father “who treats woman as a piece of meat you buy at a market, take it home to marinate, grill and chew up and spit



it out.” her exact words. No, her intention was to take him as the gift he was and give him everything she could.

He looks up to see another man standing near his seat. “She must be a one timer because she is not interested in a repeat performance. Even to Cancun.” He says slyly.

The full effect of what he has done comes slamming down on him like a barrel full of lead bricks. His chest could not be heavier and he feels his breathing getting slower. He stares at this man, a perfect stranger to both he and to Irene. In as steady a voice as he could muster he responds with, “You’re a pig. I’m sorry you got that impression of her. I made a mistake with her does not give you the right to make assumptions either, about her or about me. You had better get to your seat before I stand up and do something I may regret.” However, before he could stand up the captain put on the ‘fasten your seat belt’ sign and asks that everyone prepare to land. He sits back down and takes out his pen and paper.

*“Dear Irene,*

*First off, I want to say that as two consulting adults, whatever happened did so because both people wanted it. However, it has come to my attention that you thought there is more to this trip than what there is. I realize that this may come as a surprise, and I apologize for any misunderstanding that may have occurred. I also realize that you probably will feel uncomfortable working in the same office as before being that you will have to see me every day and that this may bring you some discomfort. The check I gave you is sincerely for all the work you did here as well as an apology. Please accept this, the apology is sincere.*

*As you probably already know, I have several offices around the city as well as a couple out of state. Therefore, I will be informing Mrs. Arlington, the head of personnel, that you will be in touch with her and that you are to be offered the same position or better (if you are qualified) in one of our other locations. Should you choose to leave the firm altogether, I will be happy to write you a very glowing professional recommendation letter for your next position. This offer comes with no strings attached. I wish you well and one more time ask for your forgiveness. I hope that this has not caused you any harm in any way and I will make sure on my end that your name is never besmirched.*

*Joe.*

Joe finishes his letter and finds the flight attendant that he likes and asks her to please deliver the note to Irene and to wait for her to read it. That it is crucial that reads the letter before she leaves the plane. She looks at him with the same eyes as the woman who is watching his son. God he is a jerk. “It’s an apology if you must know.”

With that she raises an eyebrow and takes the note back to Irene, who is now sitting back with Danny and Erin. Irene doesn’t want to read the note, she hands it to Erin, “Can you read it first?” she asks shyly. Erin nods and reads. “Go ahead, I think you’ll want to hear what he has to



say.” Irene takes the letter and reads the first part, she looks up at Erin and the flight attendant, reads some more and tears involuntarily slide down her cheeks.

“What did you say to him?” Irene asks.

“The truth” is all Erin said. Irene hands the letter to the flight attendant, she has been as much a part of all this as anyone else. “Well, that’s a first. I’m happy for you though. I hope new beginnings will give you a new perspective. Personally, I’d take him up on a job in a new place, no one will know you. New beginnings, new friends.” She retreats to her station as the captain calls for everyone to prepare for landing.

With her letter in hand, Irene chooses to retreat back to her other seat. Erin meanwhile tries to settle down a very curious young man into his seat so that he is as ready for the landing as anyone else on the plane. The landing is smooth and everyone starts to mill around and get their belongings that have been stowed above these past seven hours. Erin starts to contemplate how she is going to get herself, her things and Danny’s things off the plane at the same time. While he is still sitting, she gathers everything onto her seat so she can best assess what needs to be done.

Thankfully she was on a business trip so her personal items aren’t as much as she thought. Danny bends down and reaches for his backpack that is on the floor in front of him. He tugs onto Erin’s shirt. “My box. Momma’s box” he is pointing to an overhead compartment.

Erin follows his finger to the blue box. ‘Now how the heck is she carrying this too?’ she thinks to herself. She puts Danny’s backpack on him and gives him a bag of hers to carry. She takes down the box and her briefcase/carryon. She puts the box on the floor and begins to push it with her foot, with Danny right behind her, she guides them all of way to the door of the plane. The flight attendant that has been helping her all along the way sees her and offers some help. She picks up the box for her and sits it on top of a cart that they have on the off ramp. She adds the other carryon without a word. Erin starts pushing this cart with one hand and holding Danny with the other. He seems happy enough to be walking instead of sitting on the plane.

Erin is watching out for Joe, where the heck could he be? She continues on towards the baggage claim. There she finally sees him among a large group of people with signs that say “Welcome to the family Danny!”

‘How stupid are these people – he is only two and a half he can’t read and besides they are making such a production they are going to scare the daylights out of him’ Erin scans the crowd and finally sees Joe, he is standing there next to a woman in stiletto heels and a skirt style that is way past her prime, must be his mother or maybe a sister, who knows.

Erin walks with Danny towards them. As the woman sees them approach, she comes running up to them and quickly picks up Danny and twirls him around. Then she pulls him in for a big hug. The look on Danny’s face is one of terror not love. As soon as she puts him down, he runs back into Erin’s arms. Erin picks him up and checks the damage. Erin stares at the woman and says, “What do you think you’re doing? You are a stranger to him, that’s not the way to win him over. Now it’s going to take him twice as long to get to know you because you have him afraid of being attacked. Crazy must run in the family I see.” She is staring at Joe now.

He cracks a smile as if he appreciates what she said to this person. He slowly approaches and squats down in front of Danny. “Ok Danny, you have to say goodbye to the nice lady and



come home with me, your daddy. Remember? We talked about this back at the hotel. Do you remember this?” He is holding on his last hope that Danny will come to him. He sees what Erin sees, the child is now completely frightened.

He looks back at his mom, “Thanks a lot for ruining all that I’ve been working on this past week.” With that he turns to Erin. “Your business card please?”

“No” is all she said.

“Why not?” he asks

“You have no need or reason to contact me. Consider this a warning though, as I said before. You WILL hear from me within a week when my lawyers figure out exactly how well *you* are suited to being a father. I will not let you push this boy aside or his mother, and before you ask, no I don’t know her but I don’t have to, to know that your team of lawyers steamrolled into the courtroom without a lick of real proof as to whether or not she is fit to be his mother, all you looked at is her lack of money, or so you thought.” With that Erin gives Danny a kiss and a promise that he will see her soon and that he should go with his daddy for now.

Erin storms off not knowing if she has the story right at all. As far as she knows the mother could have given him gladly and that Irene made more of the reaction than was really there. In reality, how well does she know Irene? Not at all, and considering her behavior with this Joe, her version of the truth could be very much skewed.

She quickly pulls out her phone and calls her lawyer’s office. “Hi, it’s Erin, I need to speak with Alastair immediately please. Yes, it is a matter of life and death actually.” Erin grabs a cab right outside the baggage carousel doors. She is talking a mile a minute to Alastair and explaining all that she knows and doesn’t know. He assures her the courts in Europe don’t bow to the highest bidder when it comes to a child’s custody, however he does hear her concerns and said he would check into things with his people over there.

“I expect a report before the end of the week – without fail!” she hangs up frustrated. One thing she can’t stand is when he decides what is important and what is not. She gives that man enough money and never asks for anything and the one time she does ask, he decides to be patronizing about it? Well, she made her opinion and position quite clear, an answer or a new law firm.

The whole ride home Erin cannot focus on anything except what had happened on the plane. As she is entering her home, her phone rings. “Hey, is that my most trusted babysitter back from her European excursion?” Tracy asks cheerfully. This is what finally tears Erin back into her reality and not all those other people. “Hey, walking in right now. What’s up? You’re not wiggling out on me for tomorrow, are you?” Erin asks teasingly.

“Oh, no, I certainly need you for tomorrow. I’m checking in on you. You sound horrible though, bad flight?” Tracy asks.

“You know I don’t have the energy to explain right now. I would like to shower this all off and call you later. Do you mind?” Erin pleads.

“No, the kids have been asking for you, I thought you’d want to know they are looking forward to tomorrow. Have a good shower,” Her sisters says.



Erin step out of the shower and her phone is buzzing again. She trips over her own shoes and barely makes the phone on the next ring, “Hello” she says in a breathy voice.

“You’re not going to believe this.” It’s Alastair.

“You have news already?” she asks.

“I called a colleague of mine to see if he heard of any such case recently with a two-year-old boy etc. And, as it happens, he was the woman’s lawyer – pro bono.” He continues.

“What? That means she really couldn’t afford to keep her son after all.” Erin sits down on her bed, she is devastated, that poor woman.

“You don’t know the half of it. She walked into his office with her son and an envelope. The envelope was the DNA paternity proof she needed. Mind you, my colleague is no slouch and even he didn’t see the onslaught coming until Joe what’s his name came in the courtroom with his team of goons.

They immediately took over the courtroom without hearing anything about the woman. The jack ass barely even looked at the mother, not in denial, but almost as if he didn’t even recognize her. Dumb kid thinks he can go around and play in every port he lands in.

Sorry, that’s not very lawyer like of me. Anyway, she had no intention of giving up custody. That is not why she contacted the father. She wanted her son to gradually get to know him over the course of some time because she had recently been diagnosed with a fatal disease and she wanted to make sure he was going to be taken care of afterwards.

If she never got sick, she had never expected to see Joey boy again.” He finishes. Erin is still sitting on her bed trying to absorb all that he just said.

Quietly she says, “Her lawyers didn’t even get a chance to speak to the jury?”

“Seems their minds were made up after the goons spoke and they barely gave them time to bring her side to light. You were right Erin, the woman is devastated, however, she told her lawyers that maybe it’s for the best because now her baby won’t ever have to watch her suffer. Strong woman. She is using the money they threw at her to pay for her medical expenses and for the hospice care she will need in the end. As in, less than a year, end.”

“I didn’t want to be right on this one Alastair. (Erin is biting back tears) I didn’t want to be right.” She whispers on the phone. Erin is having a hard time taking all this in right now. She sits down on the floor.

Alastair and Erin have been friends since childhood, went to college together and have been entangled into each other’s lives ever since. He knew her threat to leave was only to emphasize how much she needed answers, how much it mattered to her. He also knows she gets herself involved in the underdog of a story very easily.

“Hey, you ok? Want me to come over? I don’t have my next client for three hours because he can’t come until after work hours for him.” He offers. Erin contemplates this offer for a moment. She could use him here right now but then again, any time they get together it always results in one thing and she really isn’t in the mood for that right now. Alastair only knows one way to make a woman feel better. He knows it well, but it’s all he knows.

“No, I’ve got this one solo. Is there anything we can do for her?” Erin inquires.



“Not really, my friend said the judge made some kind of stupid statement that she did the right thing in contacting his biological father before it was too late. He praised her for making the right decision. There would be no overturn on this ruling, if that’s what you you’re hinting at.” Alastair speaks softly because he knows the information is hard to hear, he had a hard time himself.

“I guess not then Alastair. Thanks, I really wasn’t expecting to hear from you until the end of the week. Guess we got lucky on this one.” She says.

“You have to stop taking on the world Erin, I know you want to save everyone from themselves but you can’t. I hate to say this, but she did make her own bed so to speak. It ended not great but ended nonetheless. And, to tell you the truth, maybe being forced to take on the boy will stop him from playing Russian roulette with his sperm.” Alastair finishes off by saying, “Hang in there my friend. I’ll call you later in case you still need me.”

Erin hangs up. Of all the luck, she should be happy that she received an answer so quickly. She should be thrilled to know that the boy is actually in a better situation, but somehow, she feels like crap instead. She thinks of Irene too, had she known the woman was sick, would she have fought for her? Would she even give the boy some better attention? Erin falls back on the bed and sighs.

“Pull yourself together Erin, you have a big day tomorrow with your niece and nephew.” She says out loud.

The rest of her day goes pretty smoothly. She does some laundry and makes herself a simple dinner. Tomorrow will be fun and she can sure use some of that, she will make sure of that as a matter of fact.

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“Aunt Erin is here!!!!” She hears through the front door. The kids must have been looking out for her and saw her car pull into their driveway. Always a nice welcome to come here.

Erin walks right in and is immediately attacked by two very loving young children. Her first reaction though is very different from her norm. She begins to tear up. Holding them is reminding her of Danny. How was his night in his new home? Did that crazy woman leave him alone? Did his father actually act like a dad and tuck him in, read him a book? Still, so many unanswered questions. She has to decide to either drop this completely or get involved, not an easy decision and if she does, how long will she follow Joe and Danny?

With a heavy heart she takes the children out for the day she promised. First the pancake breakfast, where she picks at her plate, then off to the zoo where she can’t even tell the difference between a giraffe and a zebra. Good thing the kids think she is kidding and had a fun time correcting her. Getting back to Tracy’s house she has a hard time mustering the energy to let them have a water fight so she promptly puts them in front of the television and gives them some time to watch before nap time. She needs the mindlessness of their programming.

Once they are asleep, she cannot find her concentration to do the work she needs to do so she thinks it’s best to sleep on the couch along with the kids. Her mind is numb, her heart aching. She needs to go find Joe’s office and check in on Danny, but not today. Probably not tomorrow

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either, Alastair is right, she needs to stop taking on everyone else’s problems as her own. But Danny’s big eyes keep watching her, she still feels his hug when Joe’s mother grabbed him.

Tracy sees her sister sleeping on her couch and immediately stops her boyfriend. “Erin doesn’t sleep during the day, there is something wrong. Maybe we shouldn’t have company for dinner.”

“Don’t be silly Tracy, Erin is the strongest woman I know. She probably is solving world hunger under those rapid eye movements.” He retorts.

Tracy hits her beau’s shoulder affectionately then goes to check on her sister. She gently nudges her shoulder, “Erin – we’re back hon, you ok?”

Erin opens her eyes slowly to see the concern look in her sister’s eyes. “I’m good, you guys home for the duration I suppose.”

“Yes, Bennet is starting on dinner as we speak.” Tracy says smiling.

Erin is in no mood for one of Bennet’s special dinners. Her stomach is still in knots and she thinks she might actually be sick. “If it’s all the same to you sis, I think I’m going to head home.”

Tracy is now dumfounded. Erin never leaves before dinner on days she babysits. She always tells them it’s the best payment plan there is. “Erin, what’s going on? What happen on your trip?” Tracy urges her to spill the story but Erin can’t. Danny will forever be in her heart and she needs some time to let the hurt stop, he will never know his mom is sick and that hurts even more.

She puts a hand on Tracy’s shoulder, “Don’t worry about me. Probably jet lag, time difference and all.”

Tracy knows this is a load of hooey because Erin travels all the time and never has this reaction. “Ok, this once, I’ll let you go. But you will be missing a great surprise.” She smiles at her sister.

Erin walks down the hall to use the bathroom before she leaves. Her hand on the doorknob to leave the bathroom Erin starts to believe she is hearing things. She hears a man’s voice as well as a young boy. Could it be? ‘Oh god you’re really losing your mind now Erin, get a grip.’ She says to herself. She puts her head on the door for a moment to catch her own breath.

There is the voice again though. She turns the knob slowly and makes her way down the hallway. She has to blink about five times, then she hears shouts of joy, “Erin!!” she turns her head towards the sound, it IS Danny. Erin squats down with open arms and the boy goes flying into them. She pulls him in tightly as he does to her as well. Her eyes are closed holding him and he is stroking her hair.

“Why are *you* here!” a voice bellows that brings her back to reality.

“Me? I practically live here, Tracy is my sister, what’s your excuse?” she stares at Joe now, her opinion now only getting lower and lower of him. Joe looks from Tracy to Erin and back again. He looks over at Bennet, his old friend. “You knew about this! I mean her!” he points to Erin.

Now Bennet and Tracy have a turn to be blown away. Tracy speaks first, “You two already know each other? Well, that’s half the battle then.” She says innocently.



"You're trying to set me up with a womanizing man who leaves sperm deposits all over the world? A man who tears a son away from his dying mother? I'm glad you have such a low opinion of me Bennet." She turns to her sister, "I thought we got passed this Tracy! Now I've really *got* to go." Erin puts Danny down and grabs her purse to dart for the door.

Someone grabs her arm and squeezes it hard. "Ok, I cop to the womanizing but that second part is crossing the line." Joe snarls at her as he pulls her around to face him. Erin sees this is a power struggle now that needs to end.

"Call your lawyers, they knew and they steamrolled over her anyway. Do you even know her name? Will you be able to tell your son about his mother with something other than you slept with her one drunken night? You sicken me, now get your hands off of me before I do something that will prevent you from ever having children again." She tugs on her arm but he doesn't budge.

"Her name is LeeAnn, she is the same age as me and we were actually together for about six months. She is the last real relationship that I ever had. She is the only one who wanted nothing from me which is also the reason we broke up. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't let me help her, why she is perfectly content with taking a walk in the park and calling it a date. Not that it's any of your business but we only slept together twice. My son was conceived with affection not drunken lust." His grip on her is starting to loosen. Then he asks, "Are you sure about the dying part?" he asks sheepishly.

Erin pulls her arm free and fishes through her purse, she throws a card into his hand, "Call Alastair he will explain everything." He catches her hand before she can pull away fully.

Softly but angrily she says, "Don't do this Joe. Let me go, I need to separate from you and Danny."

Instead of letting go he calls to his son, "Danny, come say goodbye to our friend Erin." all the while looking not at her but into her eyes. Danny comes running to the door and hugs Erin's legs. "Bye friend Erin, see you soon." Then he runs back to play with her niece and nephew.

"You don't play fair at anything do you?" Erin turns and leaves through the door, charges down the porch steps and gets to her car before she can change her mind. As she turns the key she looks up and sees Joe watching her out the front window.

"Damn that man." She says out loud.

Joe turns to see his friend Bennet, who responds with only one word, "Explain." He growls.

Bennet and Tracy look at each other, Tracy pops a wine bottle open and the three of them walk into the dining room, leaving Danny to play with Tracy's kids on the floor. The three kids are surprisingly friendly considering they only met a couple of minutes ago.

"I believe you need to explain first. You can start with LeeAnn and end with how the hell you met my sister and what the hell did you do to her because I swear Joe, if it involves anything physical I'll kill you myself and with my bare hands." Tracy says between her teeth to make sure the kids don't hear her anger, her fists are forming tightly.

"Ok, fair enough, I'll go first." Joe says softly. The adults are trying very hard to make sure the kids don't hear a word. Joe takes a deep breath and starts at the beginning. He starts off slow



but then his words started coming out faster and faster until his voice was practically running through the story.

Tracy starts to laugh. “Oh my goodness Joe, you’ve known her for a few hours and already you can imitate my sister’s attitude perfectly. I’m sorry, I found that funny.” She covers her mouth. Bennet looks at his friend. “Let’s call this Alistair and get the full story. If your lawyers did this without your knowledge, you need to tell LeeAnn. She needs to know the truth.” He puts his hand on top of Tracy’s, they had a hard time telling each other their pasts but now that they have, the two of them understand each other better and feel closer than ever. Bennet loves her kids as if they were his own, but what she doesn’t know is that he wants them and her for life; he simply hasn’t found the way to tell her yet.  
~ ~ ~

“Alistair, you’d better come over. I’ll be home in fifteen minutes.” Erin cries into the phone.

“See you soon.” He says as he hangs up. Alistair packs up his desk in record time. The last time he actually heard tears in Erin’s voice was when she was broken by that rotten excuse of a man she thought loved her.

He jumps into his car and breaks all kinds of records getting to her apartment. He sees her car in the lot and knows she beat him home, which is good because waiting would kill him. He brings his car to a screeching halt, too close to the street light in the lot. Alistair jumps out of his car and checks the front corner, ‘only a dent, no big deal’ he says to himself. He crosses the parking lot in seconds flat, uses his key and takes the stairs two or three at a time to get to her apartment.

Alistair opens the door quickly and looks around. He sees Erin right where he thought she would be, on the floor. He slams the door shut and runs to her side, she lifts up and falls into his arms. She cries until she has no more breath left in her.

Finally, she says, “I thought I was over this. I thought I couldn’t cry anymore. I miss him Alistair, I miss him so much. My rational brain knows what happened but my heart will always be broken, and then this little boy, he went straight to my heart.” She leans into him and he pulls her in again.

“Ok my dear, you’re going to have to start from the beginning. I did your bidding about finding out about that guy without questions but now you owe me answers.” He says stroking her hair.

“In a minute.” She snuggles into her friend a little more.

He sits and holds her. “You scared the living crap out of me tonight my friend. I’ll always be here for you, always. You’re my girl.” He says into her ear.

“I know. How about we order some Mexican food tonight?” she smiles.

“Ok, go wash your face, I’ll make the call.” He pushes her off of his lap and stands to make the order. By the time she comes out she feels better.

Erin walks into the kitchen and opens a bottle of sparkling grape juice. Since her miscarriage, she hasn’t really had much to drink that has alcohol. Alistair comes into the kitchen and picks up his glass, “Ah, my favorite vintage, last week.” He laughs. Erin does too.



Erin sits down at the kitchen nook and begins to talk. She tells him about the trip home and why the boy pulled so quickly at her heart. She then proceeds to tell him about what happened at her sister’s house tonight.

“Whoa, honey, that sucks for you. Tracy should have known better. How could she let Bennet bring him into your house? Did you tell them about the trip?” he asks.

“No, I didn’t really have time to, they had no way of knowing come to think of it.” She says looking at Alistair. She stands up to pace her apartment, her walking picks up as her mind races more and more. Alistair steps in front of her and catches her in both arms.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s not your fault.” He looks her straight in the eye and speaks in a firm voice. There is a buzz at the door.

“I’ll go get the dinner, my treat tonight.” Erin says.

As Erin walks downstairs to get the dinner, Alistair’s phone rings.

~ ~ ~

“Is this Alistair?” a voice asks.

“Yes, how can I help you?” he asks.

“My name is Joe, Erin threw your card at me this evening and said I should call you to clarify some things in my own life.” Joe says.

“Now is not the time for this. Call me tomorrow when I’m in my office.” He cuts the phone off as Erin walks back into the apartment.

“Alistair, you know what I have realized?” she asks.

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.” He answers.

“You and I have the weirdest relationship in the planet. We’ve experimented with each other physically, but our strongest bond is really our hearts, and our ears. You were there for me throughout the hardest parts of my life and I have been for you. How do you define this? Married but living apart?” she jokes.

“No, I call it deep rooted friendship. Everyone needs at least one.” He smiles at her and helps to set out their food. “Erin, we would kill each other if we lived under the same roof for more than a weekend and you know I’m telling the truth.” He laughs again.

They spend time laughing and talking things out. Erin spends some time crying things out as well. Alistair watches his best friend and part time lover go through a range of emotions this evening. “Erin, remember Barbara?” he asks.

“Sure, how is she?” she asks.

“Wonderful actually. You know the reason she left me?” he asks.

“No, we never discussed it.” She says.

“You.” He says and watches her eyes pop out at him. “She couldn’t keep you out of her head. We used to fight about how many times I would come to you, answer your calls; even spend the night. She never believed me when I said we actually slept together and are still only friends.” He finishes, watching her for a response.

Erin comes around the table and hugs Alistair, when she was done, she toasts him and says, “Am I to assume she is the reason you’ve been smiling so much lately?” she asks.



“You know me so well. Listen Erin, after I hung up with you, I called her first to tell her I was coming, you know what she said?” he asks her concerned.

“Not to come back?” she asks cautiously

“No,” he says seriously. “She actually said to me, send her my love and tell her I hope she is well. For the first time, she has resigned to the fact that you will always be a part of my life. She is no longer jealous. I don’t have to hide that we are dating to you.” Alistair says relieved.

“I’ve cried for hours, I’ve been fed and hugged. I’m good now Alistair. I promise. Go home to Barbara and tell her I’d love to have lunch with her someday, just the two of us, we can compare notes.” She leans over and kisses his cheek.

Alistair pulls her in and holds her for a long time. “You’re my best girl, for always.” He says again.  
~ ~ ~

Erin spends her night in on and off fits of crying. She has not let her emotions hit her this hard in over a year. She closed herself off emotionally, to the world on that fateful day. The day the powers that be decided to take her baby from her and subsequently, her last bit of faith in mankind.

Tracy knew what she went through. She knew the whole sordid details of her life, including that day and all that lead up to the miscarriage. How on earth could she think to bring that man, any man, into her house for Erin to meet and one with a child yet? Even if she didn’t know what happened on the plane. Bennet knows his friend for who he is or Joe must be the best actor and con-man around. Which she is sure he is not because he seems pretty transparent to her.

At 3:00 in the morning Erin finds the strength to go back into the shower and let the water wash away all her remaining tears. She is emotionally and physically spent and slides into bed finally fitfully falling asleep.

After talking until all hours of the night, Bennet, Tracy and even Joe fall asleep on the couches. Danny happily went to sleep with his new friends especially because they told him he could wear one of Aunt Erin’s t-shirts that she left at the house.

Joe never spent so much time talking about himself, or his life, let alone his feelings about anything personal. Seeing Erin’s face this evening, the fear in her eyes, there is more to her hating Joe’s actions than she says. He has met many strong-willed women in his life, both for business and for pleasure, but no one has ever given him the mouthful that she did, twice today. At the time, the two of them being perfect strangers. She didn’t hold back, she said what he needed to hear. But dying? Is LeeAnn really dying? His heart has been having a hard time internalizing that thought.

He sent messages to his own lawyer but has yet to receive any answers. This was not supposed to be a hostile take-over. He wanted to do the right thing. No child should be left without parents. In all of Joe’s selfish activities, causing orphans isn’t one of them. A few years ago, a woman claimed to be having his child and he right away sent her money to help with all medical expenses but when the paternity test came back that he was not the father, Joe was crushed. He knew she couldn’t have gone through the pregnancy without his financial support, so without telling his lawyers or his parents, he sent her a lump sum of money to help her get back on her feet. Joe never heard from her again. That was five years ago.

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When LeeAnn called about the baby, Joe jumped at the chance to be a father. He also was happy to get back to Europe and see her. But things went awry when the lawyers got involved. His father found out where he was going and would not allow him to leave without an entourage. Joe should have known that his father knew more about the story than he did. He is tired of being his father’s puppet. Going and doing whatever he is being told to do. Being a pawn in whatever business deal his father has fated to him. Never been his own decisions. Not until he breaks ties, his life will never be his own. His life will never be his own; he will never be his own man either. He repeats this over and over in his mind, making it very hard to get any real sleep.

In the past year and a half Joe has carefully been looking at all the books from each business they have and how much control his father has over each one. Secretly, he has purchased three of their competitor’s businesses under a different name. A name his father or his cronies could not trace back to him. He has enough money to set himself apart from his controlling father finally. If this is all true about LeeAnn; his father will see exactly how strong Joe has become.

One of the many things that keep him up at night is how he can be a better man than his father. After hearing Erin’s rant in his face on the plane, he realizes one piece of him is exactly like his father; that his father’s immoral influence hit him more than he ever wanted. He has to change this. This can be changed and the change starts today.

Joe looks back at his friends sleeping and he sneaks into the room where Danny is sleeping and lifts him quietly. He leaves a note for his friends. He has to get to the bottom of all of this. Erin’s fright, LeeAnn’s illness and the reason he takes advantage of women’s needs. Well, that last part is probably because his father has poisoned his mind with archaic thoughts about a woman’s roll in this world. He now, more than ever, does not understand how his mother has stayed with him all these years. She knows, she has to know. Does she really feel fulfilled by the money he gives her? How can that be enough? Does she have her own liaisons?  
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LeeAnn wakes from her nap to the trill of her phone. Appears it has been ringing for a while. She picks up. “Hello” she says quietly.

“LeeAnn don’t hang up please.” Joe’s voice is choking.

“Ok.” She says. She has never heard him so upset.

“I spoke to Alistair, he is a lawyer of a friend of mine here who found out that you are sick. LeeAnn why didn’t you tell me? I would have helped. I still can. Tell me what you need. Danny? Do you want me to bring him back? Do you need me to stay with you? Anything. Please, be honest. You have to know I didn’t know my dad’s lawyers were going to bamboozle you. You have to believe me. LeeAnn, I wouldn’t do this to you, not you. I wouldn’t.” Joe’s voice is still cracking.

LeeAnn has tears running down her face. She has made peace with being without Danny. She spoke to her parents, they both believe it’s best he doesn’t remember her sick. It could take six months or a year but he should not watch. “While it wasn’t done in the best manner. I’m ok with you having him. Do you love him already?” she asks innocently.

“More than I knew I could. Took him a while to get used to me though.” Joe responds. “But you knew that would happen. didn’t you?”



“Yeah, he has a tendency to get a whole room wrapped around him. Kind of like his father.” She tries to lighten the mood.

“No, LeeAnn, that is not the real me. You know the real me. You’re the only one. I don’t want to be that man anymore. I signed up for therapy this morning with a really good guy, he says it’s not as hard as it sounds to change how you see things. He says in six months I will be my own person and not a puppet of my father. He says as long as I see the differences already then I can make a difference in myself. He is going to show me how to make different choices.” He says, his voice calmer.

“Joe, you are not a puppet. You may not realize this, but you really aren’t. You made decisions here that you never asked him about. You conquered those bullies in the boardroom on your own fruition, you took walks with me in your designer suits but never cared that I was wearing my discount jeans and t-shirts. Joe, I was angry for a while, I was. Spoke to my folks and my sister, everyone agreed it’s for the best. Just love him Joe. All I can ask of you is to love him.” LeeAnn’s voice is choking now.

Joe takes a deep breath, “LeeAnn, your folks are here, your sister is here. Don’t do this alone. Let me at least pay for you to come here and be with your family. I will stay away if you want; but let me at least bring you home.” He says with a heavy heart.

“Joe, you gave me enough already, it’s paying my bills.” She says.

“You need more than bills, you need support. You need someone to hold your hand during treatments, cry with you when you need to and laugh with you when you need that too. If it wasn’t for Erin, I would never have known you were sick. Now that I know I have to do all I can. I’m going to send your sister to you to help you pack up. You probably shouldn’t be traveling alone. I’ve already set up appointments with the doctors here. Even if it’s the end, your life should be beautiful. You’ve always lived your life beautifully.” Joe is feeling things he didn’t know he could feel but the confusing part is that he is not sure if the feelings are towards LeeAnn or Erin.

LeeAnn cannot hold back her tears any more. She knew Joe would do the right thing by Danny. She knows her little man will be taken care of in love and not out of obligation by hired help. Whoever this Erin is, she hopes she gets a chance to thank her for making Joe realize he is his own man.

“LeeAnn, you ok?” Joe asks.

“I knew you had it in you but I also knew you didn’t want a family. I’m sorry I kept him from you. I’m sorry Joe, really. But I didn’t want you to come back feeling trapped.” She cries some more.

“I wasn’t ready then, I am now. I really am LeeAnn. I want to be his father, his mentor and his best friend. Maybe Bennet can help teach me that. Remember him?” he asks.

For the next couple of hours LeeAnn and Joe catch up with each other on everything from their favorite moments in movies to what the future holds for Joe. They laugh, they cry, and in the end, they remain the best of friends.

“Her flight is set for tomorrow morning. Be well LeeAnn and keep in touch. I’ll wait for you to call.” He says. Joe does not want her to feel obligated but wants her to know she can call.



“Ok Joe.” LeeAnn hangs up first because she doesn’t want to cry again. She feels better about her son now, and even though it’s hard to admit, she is happy to go home back to the States for her final weeks or months. LeeAnn takes herself to bed and for the first time in a long time, sleeps soundly.  
~ ~ ~

The knock on the door is loud and fast. It starts and stops and starts and stops again. Erin does not want to get out of bed. She doesn’t know who is at the door but she doesn’t want to get up. The knock comes one more time this time with a voice.

“Erin if you don’t open up, I’ll slam the door open, sister or no sister I’ll break this down. You hear me?” Bennet yells.

Bennet? Why is Bennet here? This is unusual. Erin decides to get up from her bed and runs to the door. “Coming, don’t break the door down, I can’t replace it, this building is historic.” She calls to him. Erin opens the door slowly and sees Bennet looking frantic. He rushes past her and starts looking around like a madman, he looks under her couch and in both of her bedrooms including closets.

“Bennet, who or what are you looking for?” she asks.

“Joe, we were up talking all night, sometime after 2:00 in the morning he left the house. He isn’t at his dad’s place, he isn’t at the office and he isn’t at his private apartment. I can’t find him Erin. This isn’t good, he doesn’t do pain well. I have to find him. Alistair said Joe called him and he was forced to talk to him about LeeAnn. Apparently, the part Alistair didn’t tell you is that her death is weeks or months away. The doctors have already told her to get her affairs in order. Erin, I’ve known you through the worst part of your life, he isn’t like you. He isn’t as strong as he looks. I have to find him. You’ve got to help me.” He pleads.

Erin is still in her fog from the night before. “Hold on Bennet, take a seat.” She pushes him towards the couch. Erin walks into the kitchen to bring herself into consciousness. She boils the water and slowly makes herself a tea. “Bennet you want a drink?” she calls to him.

“A drink?! Erin!!!! I’m a wreck. When we woke up and didn’t see him or Danny I freaked. We spent all night talking. He told us about his relationship with LeeAnn and how you were probably right, that his dad’s lawyers took hold of the whole scenario. He realized that he didn’t have a moment to talk to her either, everything happened so quickly.

Erin, you struck a chord with him, I haven’t seen him open up in all the years I’ve known him, and that’s since high school. I’m worried sick, where could he have gone? Did he come here at all last night?” he asks.

“Bennet, if he left you guys after 2:00am, he would not have been here until 3:00. I think I was asleep during that one hour. Not many other hours but from 3:00-4:00 I was definitely asleep. If he knocked, I would not have heard him, but if he knocked like you did, I might have,” she says.

“You think this is funny, don’t you? This is a man’s life Erin, the child’s life. We need to find him,” he yells.



“Did you check LeeAnn’s family? Maybe he grew a heart and went there to find out if all of what I and Alistair said is true. They would know,” her words are matter of fact. Bennet looks over at Erin.

“How did you think of that?” he asks.

“Seems obvious to me, that’s my job remember. I do research then I make presentations in a board room to explain what I have uncovered in order for a client to sign with us. Bennet, you’re really scared, aren’t you? He wouldn’t do anything to himself would he?” Suddenly feeling nervous for Danny.

“I have to find out her information. Maybe Alistair can find it for me. Give me his number again.” He says. Erin hands him her phone and Bennet calls Alistair.

“You guys are unbelievable. First, I spend a night picking up your soon to be sister in law and now you?! I told Joe all he needs to know, I don’t think I should give you the information you’re legally not privy to. He called last night even though I told him to call me in the morning.” Alistair says with a tone of annoyance.

Bennet hands Erin the phone and shakes his head no. “Alistair? Bennet showed up at my house worried sick is all. They haven’t heard from Joe since he left in the middle of the night. We think he may have gone to LeeAnn’s family. Bennet is having a small panic attack here. Joe is out there somewhere with the boy. Any hints will be appreciated.” She says as she hands the phone back to Bennet.

“Anything, please,” pleads Bennet.

“All I will tell you is he said he is going to make everything right. He is in touch with her family, yes, they live here. I think he is bringing her home so she can be with her family during this time. This is all I can tell you. He did not say where he is going today, he did say something about bringing Danny to his best friend. I’ve got to go to work, and so should you. He is a grown man Bennet. He will call when he needs you.” Alistair hangs up.

“Erin, he said I should go to work. God, I don’t know how you guys do this all the time. You and Tracy are so strong when it comes to worrying about things. I nearly fell over when her son hit his head last night on the table. I was getting my keys ready for the emergency room. Erin, I can’t go to work. I can’t go back to my place. What the hell am I supposed to do? Help me please,” he begs.

Erin walks over to Bennet and gives him a big hug. When she lets go, she pulls him to the couch. “Bennet, I’ve spent the past twelve hours going through fits of crying and anger. I hate Joe for what he did to all those girls and you know why. But what you may or may not know, depending on if Tracy told you or not, is that I had a miscarriage a while ago, and yes, the baby was the man’s who will remain nameless in our family. Seeing little Danny on the plane taken from his mom, I lost my self-control. Seeing the same careless man at your house, well, Tracy’s house. I couldn’t take the memories, of the flight or of my own past. I could not take having that kind of person near my family. The hurt was too much. I know he is your friend and I feel for you. But I can’t be pulled in to a man like that again Bennet. I can’t. I’m sorry you can’t find him, but I’m not



the one to find him.” She hugs him again and Bennet pulls her in. He holds on a bit longer when he hears her tears coming again.

The two of them sit on the couch for a moment. “Erin, I’m sorry. I didn’t know about the miscarriage, I did know the rest though. Tracy loves you so much, she was mortified when you left and read the riot act to Joe; if it’s any consolation he seemed relieved to get all of this off his chest. He does not want to be like his father; you have to believe me when I say that he is now going to do everything in his power to become a better man than his father. With Danny in his life he will. I know you don’t trust him, but trust *me*, ok? He was pushed to become his old man long before he was emotionally ready. That old man is nothing short of a monster on a good day, imagine what he is like on his bad days? Especially when he thinks the situation might involve his precious family reputation. The man no idea how trashed his own reputation is.” Bennet kisses the top of her head like a big brother would.

“Tracy is the best and the two of you seem to really be connected. More lately than ever.” She sits up and stares right into Bennet’s eyes. “When are you going to marry her?” she asks bluntly.

“I guess that means I have your permission? I’ve already spoken to your father, last week. But that was a formality, it’s yours I really wanted.” He says.

Erin finds herself smiling, “I’ll watch the kids any time for that,” she says with a smile.

“I’m going to hold off until I know Joe is ok. Sorry, I can’t have this on my head. I’m going to try and be calm, maybe Alistair is right, going to work will be a distraction. You ok?” he asks.

“Me? Best night I’ve had in a long time. I don’t think I ever allowed myself to cry like that since everything happened so it’s probably for the best. I actually do feel good. I’m going to get to work today too. Boss only gives off one day.” She stands and walks Bennet to the door.

~ ~ ~

Joe spends the night holding his son on the couch. He cried, he laughed with LeeAnn but most of all he learned to love, not only his son but himself. Sometimes he would look down at his son and inhale the smell of his t-shirt. He has to find Erin.

Danny wakes up and sees he is in his father’s lap. He sits up and hugs him immediately. His mom used to sleep with him sometimes too, he was told. Those were always his favorite nights. LeeAnn told Joe, Danny always woke happiest in her arms.

“I sleep good.” He whispers in his father’s ear. Joe hugs him a little harder.

“Today we are going to do everything for Danny. What do you like for breakfast? Your favorite, if I can’t make what you like, we will go buy some at a store.” He smiles at Danny.

“Momma gives me strawberries and sugar for a treat. Then we eat oatmeal.” He says.

“I love strawberries and whipped cream, want to try that?” he says. “I know a place that makes them with pancakes.” Joe laughs.

“Pancakes? Breakfast? Holiday!”

“Yes, it’s the first day we become father and son. That’s a big holiday isn’t it?”

“Ok, I wear friend Erin’s shirt?” he looks down at himself wearing the large t-shirt.

“I think it would be better if we both changed clothes. Maybe we can match. Last one in the bedroom is a monster!” Joe calls as Danny starts to run.



He plans on spending a wonderful morning together. First a pancake breakfast, then they ride over to the 365 Fair and Joe will take Danny on all the rides he wants to go on.

Joe leaves his phone in his car, he is sure that there are a million e-mails and texts and possibly a few voice messages as well. Most of which, are probably from Bennet and/or Tracy. Possibly from his father, because he is skipping a business meeting this morning. But right now, he doesn't care. He sent Bennet one message and that's all he needs for now

He spoke with LeeAnn's sister who couldn't be more thrilled about going to pick up LeeAnn. He told her that LeeAnn wants to stay distant from him and that he is ok with doing that as well. Everyone is on the same page about Danny not watching. He asked her to send a really good family picture to him so he can put something in Danny's room so he knows his mother was beautiful. She suggested that maybe when things settle down, Danny could meet his grandparents. Joe agreed. He told her that LeeAnn will argue that he is flying them both first-class and she should be prepared for that fight. Her sister laughed and thanked him.  
~ ~ ~

Erin has been trying to work all day. There is something about the last thing Bennet said that has been gnawing at her all day. Alistair said something about spending time with a best friend or character. "That's it!" Erin says out loud, thankful no one is around to hear her.

She grabs her purse and her jacket and walks quickly towards the door. "I've got a meeting." She calls over to the secretaries and hopes her boss doesn't see her leave. She did really well on her recent trip so she figures he may leave her alone, at least this week. She brought in over a million dollars' worth of projects in a four-day trip. Her colleague, on the other hand, did not.

Erin slowly pulls into the theme park, one that is really more of a fair but everyone around here calls it a theme park because it's the only fair around open all year. He can't possibly be here, the likelihood is crazy, but what the hell. For Bennet she will spring for the price of a ticket and go to the kiddie area to see if she can find him. It's the only place that makes any sense to her.

\$35! She thinks to herself. That's a lot of money for a place that she personally would only walk around in. 'It's for Bennet and Tracy' she reminds herself. She takes one of the fair's maps so she can find him, or not, and be out of here. Erin is still hoping this will count as a long lunch and that she won't be pulled into anything while being here. She decides to put on her sunglasses and hat to try and not be obvious that she is looking for someone.

The kiddie area is not too hard to find, they have giant ballooned figures flying high above it. 'Who in their right mind would buy that for a kid? I mean really, in their house it will be huge!' she thinks to herself. 'Focus!' she reminds herself.

Erin sees a little girl crying. She looks around and does not see any parent in the nearby area, she decides to watch for a moment. The girl is so frightened she isn't even making any sound crying. Her parents will never find her. Erin feels compelled to step in, "Hello!! Anyone missing a small girl with beautiful pigtails. Anybody!!!" She calls at the top of her lungs while staying at least five feet away from the child so as not to scare her. The security guard hears her and immediately comes over and announces the information on his walkie-talkie with the voice coming out through the loudspeaker system. Erin watches as every parent looks around and down, then, thankfully, an



adult cries out. They come running over. The little girl screams, “Mommy!” and runs to the frantic woman.

The woman rushes over to Erin, “There are so many horror stories, she left the bathroom before the rest of us. Thank you. You’ll never know how much, but the only words I can say are thank you.” Through her tears, mother and child walk away.

“Not many people get involved, I too am thankful. In all my years here, it’s usually a security guard who is watching over the child and that scares them even more because these uniforms aren’t as pretty as the characters, are they?” the security guard smiles at Erin and pats her shoulder as he walks away.

“Friend Erin!!” she hears from behind her.

Erin slowly turns around, ‘so much for being inconspicuous.’ She thinks to herself. “Hello Danny, what are you doing today?” she asks.

“My daddy nice. We eat berries and cream for breakfast. What did you have?” his words came out somewhat scrambled but Erin understood every beautiful word.

She squats down and says, “I forgot to eat breakfast today, isn’t that silly?” she asks him.

“Hello again. Out to save all the abandoned children of the world I see. So, now I know your secret identity superwoman, do you have to kill me so I don’t reveal your secret?” Joe asks smiling.

“That is usually how it goes. Will tar and feather or cement shoes work better or you?” she asks sarcastically.

“That sounds awfully harsh.” Joe says.

Before Erin could answer, Danny is pulling on her arm and racing over to the next ride. “Come me Erin?” he asks. Erin squats down and looks deep into his green eyes, they must be his mother’s, “Your friend here doesn’t really like rides. You go with your father.” She stands up and looks at Joe.

“Please, wait for us?” Joe questions.

Father and son walk to the line for the ride, Erin takes out her phone and snaps a picture of them making sure that the background is there so Bennet will know where they are.

She clicks sends and debates what to do, she looks up and sees Joe’s pleading eyes from back where she is standing. She looks behind her and takes a seat at the nearest bench. Joe acknowledges that he sees her and she nods back to him.

Her phone buzzes, “*Thank you, but how did you figure this out? And why didn’t you tell me, I would have gone for you. I know you hate rides.*” Bennet answers.

“*A hunch, no point in making you waste a day too. Your work is too important. Go save a life, this one is fine as you can see.*” Send

“*Erin, he is a good guy, I promise. He called me earlier today but would not say where he was or where he was going, only that he has finally found peace in his life and its name is Danny. He also told me he is flying LeeAnn home to be with her family in her final months. He is financially taking care of anything and everything she needs. They talked for hours last night and worked it all out. It’s for the best.*’ Send



*‘Oh, and Erin, you need to move on too. People do change and not only that, I’m going to say this probably for the millionth time that you’ve heard it – it WASN’T your fault. I love you baby sister. To end on a high note – tonight’s the night. It’s our anniversary. ☺’* Bennet signs off.

Erin takes a deep breath and thinks about what she read in Bennet’s message. She was very quick to judge, yes. She made a lot of assumptions, yes. The mother is being taking care of now and so is the child, so maybe in all of her fears she did a good thing for a change. So why does she have tears rolling down her face again and why can’t she stop them.

Danny crawls into her lap and hugs her, she didn’t even see them approach. His arms are around her neck and his cheek is next to hers. “I’m back, don’t cry.” He whispers. Erin gives him a little tighter of a squeeze, then she puts him down.

“I’m ok little man. Must have been some dust in the air, did you have a fun time?” she asks, not looking at Joe.

“Yes, we’re getting ice cream, want coming, chocolate,” Danny smiles at her, his words still get jumbled sometimes.

Erin looks up at Joe, “You’re dead with those eyes and so is every woman he will ever meet.”

“Erin, who was it?” Joe asks directly.

“Excuse me?” she says defensively.

“Who ruined your life? Was it someone who flew into your life and left? In case you’re wondering, the whole thing on the plane the other day is the first time I’ve ever done that. I made a life of appearances for my father. My reputation has to be like his or his respect doesn’t come. I’m done with that. When I met LeeAnn a couple years ago, she taught me to be my own man. I’ve been accumulating other businesses. I have three now that are doing really well. I haven’t taken a dime from my dad in almost eighteen months now. He doesn’t even know. I want to make sure I have time for Danny. But Erin, part of me wants to make room for you too. I can’t explain why, but I do.” Joe puts his hand up to prevent Erin from speaking yet. “Bennet and I talked today.”

“Yeah, I know. He told me,” Erin says. Joe turns to face her questioning her. “He showed up at my apartment worried sick about you. Bennet would not be worried about anyone who is as big of a jerk as I thought you to be. He told me what you’re doing for LeeAnn too. How many possible other Dannys can there be?” Erin asks.

“Truth?”

“Yes, please,” she says.

“Only after you tell me who ruined you?” Joe stares back into her eyes.

“Dinner?”

Joe picks up Danny and they head towards his car. Erin gets into hers and follows them back to his home. After a dinner of grilled chicken and vegetables, Joe gives Danny a bath and they both enjoy listening to Erin read him his bedtime story.

Erin waits for Joe on the couch in the den. She sends multiple text messages to Bennet who simply replied *“love him like a brother. By the way does Tracy like rubies?”* he responds.

*“Yes!!!!”* Erin finds herself jumping around on the couch now.



“He is asleep. I think after the day we had, he will be sleeping for a long time, hey, what’s gotten into you?” Joe smiles.

“Bennet is going to ask Tracy to marry him tonight!!! Tracy will finally have a complete family!! Oh my god I can’t wait to hear how he proposes.” She jumps off the couch and is jumping around like a toddler who was given his favorite toy.

Joe smiles at her, “Nice to know the simple things in life make you happy.” Joe says. Erin turns around and realizes where she is. Her mood falls quickly. She looks back down at her phone. ‘like a brother’ it says, she reminds herself. Bennet doesn’t give himself to anyone, she knows that and she knows why too.

“You want to talk now? Or will that kill your mood?” Joe asks.

Erin begins to pace the room, pacing always helps her. Joe stands out of her way and watches, he sees that her mind is working quickly almost as if she is revving up for something. Erin turns around and takes a deep breath. “Sit down, this may take a while.” Erin says in a very mild voice.

Erin tells Joe about the traveling salesman who used to come to town, who seduced her into letting him be her first. Then there was the businessman who convinced her he was the only one who could love her until she caught him with the secretary from downstairs. She pauses again, she starts to pace again, this time faster and faster, Joe jumps in and stops her before she runs out of the room or through the window.

He stands there holding her shoulders, “This is the one who broke you, if I know the guy, I’m going to personally string him up by his balls and feed him to the sharks.” Joe is looking her right in the eye and for some reason she believes him.

“Do you always look through to people’s insides like that?” she asks nervously.

“No, only when I want the person to know I mean what I say deep down. At work I look over everyone’s heads.” Joe says softly. He pulls her over to the couch and sits her down, he moves over and sits down on the chair across from her so he doesn’t crowd her.

Erin watches him for a minute. Why is she spilling this to him? She hasn’t really told anyone, even though the police would have been the right people. She begins to think of that horrid night. She hasn’t even told Tracy the whole truth. She thinks of Danny and her breath begins to catch. Joe slides down to the floor and puts his hand on her knee.

“If he exists, and you know his name, I promise you I’ll sick dad’s lawyers on him if necessary.” Joe tries to make her laugh.

Erin grins, she begins to shake. ‘Get hold of yourself, eventually you had to tell someone, why not a stranger?’ she asks herself. ‘yeah a stranger that is stunningly beautiful and has a son you’re in love with already.’ She reminds herself again.

“Erin?” Joe asks.

She looks down at him, waiting patiently. He looks like he will wait all night if necessary. Erin takes a few yoga breaths. ‘Like a bandage, pull it off quick and it won’t hurt as much.’ So, she takes a deep breath and begins to ramble the whole story. The drinks one night, the dinner the second date and the tie me to the bedpost in a drug induced evening of sex, otherwise known as



rape. Then she tells him about the miscarriage. Erin ends with how she swore off even recognizing that men exist. Except for Bennet, he is the real deal she tells him.

Joe stands up, “Name! Damn it, Erin I know you remember this, give me his name!” his face is full of fury, her hands begin to shake, she doesn’t want trouble. Joe looks like he could cause trouble.

“Joe, don’t, there is nothing you can do, no proof, all over.” Erin’s voice is shaking

Joe sits down next to her. “There is always something to do. That’s why my father has a whole crew of lawyers, I have a few of my own but his have no scruples as we’ve seen recently and sometimes, they are better for a situation like this one. Here, write it down on this paper, you never have to say his name again.”

Erin writes the man’s name down on the paper, seconds later Joe is on the phone, he asks her a few more details as the lawyers ask him and she answers them. Dates, places and times of everything.

Joe is practically screaming on the phone, she can hear him in the other room. The knock at the door startles her, she runs to get it so he doesn’t answer it angrily. “Bennet! Tracy!” Erin jumps into her sister’s arms and the two of them start screaming like a couple of young school girls. The three of them fall into the house together and then Erin remembers Danny, “Shhhhh, Danny is asleep.”

“Damn it!! You pull all kinds of crap for my father all the time, for one damn minute you can do something for the good of someone! Besides, you know damn well you can do this in your sleep. My father pays you enough to do his bidding, consider this an order from him. If you need confirmation I’ll personally pound it into your head in the morning. Good!! I need answers in no less than two days.” Joe slams down the phone and storms into the den where he sees three people staring at him in shock.

“Erin?” he asks, she shakes her head no and pulls Tracy’s hand out to show they are engaged. Joe jumps towards Bennet. “Let’s pop a bottle open!” he calls to them.

Tracy takes Erin aside. “What happened?” she asks knowing full well that Erin is hiding something from her, something big. “Not tonight Tracy.” Erin answers.

~ ~ ~

Erin takes her second shower of the morning. She has not been able to stop taking showers since she left Joe’s place a couple days ago. As if things happened all over again, she needs to wash it off, get it out of her system. Nothing is working. The knock on the door disturbs her debate about taking yet a third shower. Without thinking, she walks to the door only covered by a towel. “hello” she opens the door.

“Erin?” Joe asks.

Erin looks at Joe, she has not seen him since that day. Seeing him is not helping. “Where is Danny?” she asks.

“I dropped him off by Tracy, she and your niece and nephew will entertain him today. I’ve been trying to reach you for the past twenty-four hours. You’ve not been at work, the gym, the park, anywhere. Tracy finally broke down and gave me your address, she said you’re not answering her either. How many showers have you taken?” he asks.

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“Today?” she asks.

Joe walks in to the apartment and pulls Erin into a hug. The smell of her seeps into him deeply. ‘Yes, this is what you need in your life’ he thinks to himself. He brings her over to her couch and sits her down. Then he reaches behind him and throws a blanket over her in case the towel slips.

“Joe, I can’t do this again. I was so broken when the events happened. I’m right back there. I thought I was over the whole thing, but now you made me bring the memories out and now I’m broken all over again. I can’t fix this, you can’t fix this. What is done is done and clearly, I’m not worthy, so please go.” She whispers and hangs her head lower.

“Stop right there Erin,” Joe interrupts. “come on, you’re getting dressed and I’m taking you out, we have to go to the lawyers, they need you and you’re going to rock this.” Joe responds. He doesn’t give her time to think, he pulls her up and drags her to her room, pulls out clothes and waits for her to get dressed.

The visit to the lawyers is to take her DNA because they found the man in question, and not only did they find him, but they found the rope he uses to tie people up, the same one each time, multiple DNA has been found in the fibers. She does everything the lawyers ask of her, sign things, writes information down, and gives a detailed description to the artist.

“Erin, with your help. This guy will be under arrest within the next week. Joe here has made it clear that we notify you only if you’re needed but most likely, you won’t be. Get on with your life, we’ll take it from here.” The head lawyer tells her.

Joe looks to him and says, “We’re even now.” He says remembering that last night he had a real heart to heart with this lawyer to tell them how he could bring them up on ethics charges for what they knowingly did to LeeAnn. He told them if they don’t go through with finding who did this, all the way to arrest, he reserves the right to still call them.

Joe spends the day trying to bring Erin out of her funk, but there is nothing that is working. “Come on.” He finally says and drives her over to Tracy’s house so she can see Danny and Tracy’s kids. The minute they walk in Erin runs to Tracy, she takes her into the guest room where she finally spills the information she has been holding onto for so long. Tracy cries with her, when Erin is spent of tears Tracy holds her sister’s hands in hers. “You should have told me right away. But you couldn’t and that’s ok. No guilt. You did nothing wrong. Nothing at all. Joe to the rescue once again.” She says.

It is at this moment that Erin finally realizes the brevity of what Tracy said. Joe, the man she thought was not worthy of her words is the one saving her world. “Tracy, my world is confused, what do I do about Joe?” she asks.

“Joe is good people. Bennet has been speaking of him for months now that he wanted to introduce you two. Fate brought you two together before we could. He is a protective sort as we can see. Maybe that’s what you need.” The two sisters hug again.

In the six months since Erin met Joe on that crazy flight home, both of their lives have changed. Last month they buried LeeAnn. Her parents decided that it is best to not be in touch



with Danny, it will only bring them pain. One day, in the future, when he is old enough to understand they can give Danny their contact information. Everyone gave hugs and goodbyes at the same time.

Erin and Joe have grown very close. Today he plans on taking her back to the theme park where their friendship started. Bennet and Tracy will be getting married in two months, the anniversary of their first kiss.

Joe has a few things to discuss with Erin today. As they pull into the parking lot of the theme park Erin begins to object. "You said you were up for anything." Joe says.

"Joe, you know I don't go on rides." She answers.

"Who said we're going on rides?" Joe grins. Erin sits a bit stiff in her seat. "Don't be like that, I'm really not going to make you go on any rides." Joe says.

The afternoon has been fun, Erin and Joe are walking all through the park, joking about the people they see doing silly things. Taking funny selfie pictures of themselves and simply talking about nothing at all.

Joe knows the serious part of the day, has to begin somewhere. They come around the corner where they see the kiddie section of the park. "Let's sit down here, I'll get us some lunch." Joe says.

Erin waits patiently for him to come back. "Erin, I have something I have to get off my chest. So, here goes. I received a letter yesterday telling me that you will not be needed in court for anything, the lawyers accumulated enough evidence to prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law. They have three women who are willing to go to court, you don't have to. He won't be getting out any time soon. That's the good news." He says.

"If there is good news, that means there's bad news too?"

"Yes," Joe takes a big breath. "the bad news is that I've fallen deeply in love with the craziest most independent woman I know. This woman loves my son as deeply as I love her and I was wondering if you know if there is any way she would spend a lifetime with me?" As soon as he says this, a man from the balloon store comes over and presents Erin with a giant engagement ring balloon being anchored by a little black box.

Erin sits in shock. She looks at the balloon and begins to laugh. What is she going to do with this balloon? "Joe are you sure this woman is worthy of such attention?"

"More than worthy."

"Well, then, do you think your family wants such independent thinking around? I'm sure I don't fit into your father's idea of a dream wife for you." Erin asks nervously, she has yet to meet any of his family.

"I'm not sure this goes on the good news or bad news side of the coin but they haven't spoken to me since they found out I gave so much money to Danny's mother and family. Are you ok with a small intimate wedding?" he asks.

"This is still very hard for me."

"I know, but there is no other person on this earth that affects me the way you do. LeeAnn thinks you're pretty too. I snuck into her hospital room one day and we talked. I told her the whole story, how you loved Danny from the moment you saw him. She laughed when I said you



had red hair because I used to say red hair was unnatural. Sorry about that.” Joe says, still waiting for her to putt the ring on.

Erin looks down in her hands and sees the box again which she opens slowly and almost falls off of the chair. “A blue diamond.”

“As rare as you.”

“LeeAnn approves of me? You spoke to her about me?” Erin now believes he truly did have a relationship with her and he wasn’t simply feeling guilty and paying LeeAnn and her family off.

“I snuck in while her sister was out, I had the nurse give us a warning before her sister came back in the room and I snuck back out. We laughed, we cried, we loved, all in the minutes I had with her. But you, you Erin are the one I want to laugh, cry and love for an eternity if only you’d let me show you how special you are for the rest of our lives together.” Joe pulls the ring out of the box and slides it on to her finger for her.

Erin looks at her hand, her other hand goes to her stomach. So much heartache, so much loss. He whispers to her, “maybe we can fill that void again, this time with love.” Can she really be happy again? She looks into his eyes and she melts inside. For the first time since her trauma happened, Erin leans over and kisses a man that is not Alistair.

Joe brings his hands up on her cheeks and slides them to the back of her head to show her exactly how she deserves to be kissed. When they part the crowd of people around them begin to cheer. Joe and Erin look around and see that there are strangers watching as he proposed and once it was sealed with a kiss, it gave everyone cause to celebrate.

They stand together and wave to everyone. Perfect strangers come up to them to congratulate them. The balloon man brings out a bouquet of carnations, music begins to play over the loud speaker and their names are announced for the whole park to hear.

“If you want to shout things to the world, no better place than a theme park. Now everywhere we carry this balloon we will make people smile. Come Erin, let’s make people smile today.” Joe offers her his hand.

She puts her arm inside his, she takes a selfie to send to Bennet and Tracy and then her parents. As they turn down one of the cobblestone walkways of the park cheers begin again. Erin looks up to see her whole family, kids and all. She looks to Joe, “I couldn’t help myself. Mad?”

Erin swings her arms around his neck and they kiss again, this time to whoops and hollers from everyone around them. Hugs and kisses all around. Erin’s parents are holding Danny’s hands, when they let go of him, he runs to jump into Erin’s arms.

He kisses both of her cheeks and smiles at her then he hugs her neck. “Ice cream!” Everyone laughs.