

Erin's Triumph

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Chapter 1

Erin stepped out of the courtroom and blinked against the late-morning light. The Philadelphia air was crisp, alive with the hum of city traffic and the rustle of leaves stirred by an early spring breeze. For a long moment, she stood still on the courthouse steps, letting the sunlight soak into her skin like she hadn't felt its warmth in years.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

The muscles in her cheeks resisted the motion at first—stiff and unused, like creaky hinges opening for the first time in forever. But she didn't care. Her chest felt light, like something dark and heavy had finally been lifted. Not just freedom. It was euphoria. A clean, dizzying kind that didn't leave a bitter aftertaste. And this time, the sensation wasn't chemically induced or fragile.

She could breathe again.

"Ms. Salazar!" a voice called out behind her, tugging her back to earth.

She turned, her heart hammering with an instinctive jolt of fear before her mind caught up. *You're not trapped in the dungeon. Not anymore. He can't hurt you now!*

Carefully relaxing tense muscles, Erin slowly scanned the stone steps and saw him—a tall man in a navy coat, moving down the staircase with calm, purposeful strides. He didn't hesitate or waver. Broad-shouldered and solid, he carried himself with the quiet confidence of someone who knew what he wanted and wasn't afraid to ask for it. As he reached her, he offered a slow, steady grin—assured, but with a flicker of warmth that softened the edge.

"Yes?" she replied, her voice tight but steady. She'd ignored the warning signals from another confident man.

"I got your name from the bailiff," he said, breath slightly short. He extended a hand. "I hope that's not creepy."

Erin blinked, startled—not just by his words, but by him. His hazel eyes held a steady, grounded warmth, the kind that didn't try to charm or press but simply *was*. At first glance, he could've passed for someone who once breezed through college on charm and easy smiles, but there was something quieter beneath the surface. He didn't crowd her. Didn't stare too long. There was a gentleness in the way he gave her space, a kind of self-restraint that felt intentional. Like he understood the weight silence could carry.

"I... you did?" she asked, surprised by the flicker of curiosity in her own voice.

He ran a hand through his hair—not calculated, just a simple, nervous tic. It made him more real. She noticed the rough edge of a healing scrape on his knuckle, the way his coat looked a little too lived-in to be curated. His clothes didn't quite match, and there was no polish to his stance—but somehow, all of it added up to something solid. Dependable. The kind of man who didn't need to perform strength because it was already there.

But sincere.

“Yeah,” he said. “I was sitting in the gallery of that trial. I—uh—I just wanted to ask if you might want to have coffee sometime.”

At first, she opened her mouth to decline. It was the autopilot response. *No, thank you. I'm not ready. I don't trust this. I don't trust men.* But her gaze slid back to the courthouse behind her. The tall pillars. The echo of the gavel. Lawrence Hoffmeier was gone—being transported in shackles to a maximum-security prison two hundred miles away. He'd spend the rest of his life boxed into a cell with no windows, no way to charm or manipulate the next woman he decided to trap in his basement torture chamber.

She was free.

Her hand moved to her collarbone, brushing against the chain of a simple necklace she hadn't dared wear until now. The sensation grounded her.

“I mean, if you drink coffee,” the man added, voice faltering. “No pressure. I just thought—”

“Yes,” she interrupted, a little too quickly. She surprised even herself. “I do drink coffee. And...yes, I'd like to get some with you.”

His grin widened like a boy who'd just gotten the winning lottery ticket and didn't know where to cash it. His whole demeanor changed—shoulders back, chin up, confidence blooming out of that initial hesitation.

“Yeah?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yeah,” she said again, this time with a full smile. It felt less foreign now. It actually felt *good*. “When?”

He stammered slightly, glancing down at his shoes as if they might offer a script. The pause wasn't calculated. It was real—honest in a way that disarmed her more than slick confidence ever could. His shoulders lifted in a helpless sort of shrug, the corner of his mouth twitching like he knew he was fumbling the moment and had decided to lean into it anyway.

Then he looked up at her again, his grin hesitant but full of something boyish and quietly hopeful. “How about now?” he asked, his voice low, almost cautious—like he didn't want to scare her off but couldn't quite hide how much he wanted her to say yes.

There was no swagger. No push. Just that warm, tepid charm—offered like a gift, not a challenge.

She looked down at her charcoal wool skirt, ran a hand over it instinctively to smooth any courtroom creases. Her blouse was simple, the kind her therapist had called a “soft armor”—structured but approachable. She'd worn it to help herself feel strong for the verdict.

And she had the whole day off.

“Now sounds good,” she replied, nodding. “Let's do it.”

He brightened again and motioned toward the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps. “There's a great little place just down the block. Best muffins in the city, I swear.”

She chuckled at his earnestness. “Lead the way.”

Fifteen minutes later, the café’s bell chimed overhead as they stepped inside. The smell of roasted coffee beans, vanilla, and cinnamon wrapped around her like a hug she didn’t know she needed. Wooden floors creaked beneath their feet as they found a small table by the window. Her cup of decaf steamed gently between her fingers, and he sat across from her, cradling a drink rich with cream and sugar.

“I’m Jim, by the way,” he said, offering his name like a peace offering.

“Jim.” She tried it out softly, and it felt...right. “Nice to meet you. I’m Erin.” She turned the paper cup in her hand slightly, then looked up at him. “What do you do?” he asked.

Please don’t say lawyer, she thought, already bracing herself for disappointment.

“I work with computers,” Jim said, his fingers curled around his coffee cup. “Development, mostly. Some projects that integrate across different platforms.” He gave a sheepish grin, the kind that tugged one corner of his mouth higher than the other. “Kind of boring, honestly.”

But as the conversation moved forward, his grimace softened into a more eager smile—boyish, almost—but paired with a quiet confidence that made it far more appealing than he probably realized.

“I’m working on a project right now for the city,” he added, warming to the topic, “to help streamline the bus system so it better syncs with the subway schedule. You wouldn’t believe how much time people waste just standing around waiting for the next step in public transit to arrive.”

Erin sipped her coffee—lukewarm now, but she didn’t mind—and watched him as he explained. Words like *algorithms*, *optimization models*, *rider feedback loops*, and *efficiency analysis* filtered through the air, but she only caught every third one. Not because he wasn’t interesting, but because her attention was caught by *him*.

The way his hazel eyes lit up when he got excited. The way his fingers traced invisible shapes on the side of his cup when he talked. The way his smile unfolded slowly—never forced, never practiced, just honest.

He wasn’t suave. He wasn’t smooth. But there was something captivating about his energy. Something solid. She found herself leaning in slightly, breathing easier with every passing minute.

For the first time in what felt like forever, her body stirred with warmth that wasn’t adrenaline or fear.

She actually felt... interested.

In a man.

That realization alone should have terrified her. But it didn’t.

Jim suddenly stopped mid-sentence, blinking like he’d just remembered she was there.

“I’ve been talking way too much,” he said, and a blush rose on his cheeks. “Will you tell me about yourself?”

Erin smiled and wrapped her hands tighter around her cup, letting the warmth ground her. “I work at the city’s animal shelter,” she said softly. “I love the animals. They don’t lie. Their needs are simple.”

Jim tilted his head. “So are you a cat person or dog person?”

“Both,” she replied immediately, then laughed. “But the rats and spiders? Yeah, those are a hard no.”

He stared at her. “Spiders? Like... actual spiders?”

“Oh, yeah.” She lifted her palms dramatically. “Some people think tarantulas make good pets. I don’t ask questions. I just make sure they have crickets and water and try not to scream when I open the enclosures.”

“Damn,” he said with a shudder. “That’s dedication. I would’ve quit on day one.”

She laughed, and the sound surprised her. It had been a long time since laughter had come so easily. “Thankfully, the mealworms and spider-feeding shift comes early in the day. After that, I get to cuddle with dogs and scoop litter boxes.”

He smiled again, but this one faded into something more thoughtful. “How’d you end up working at a shelter? Did you go to vet school?”

She stilled, her fingers stalling on the rim of her cup. It was an innocent enough question, but she hesitated.

“Why do you assume I’ve gone to college?” she asked gently.

Jim didn’t miss a beat. “I don’t know,” he said, studying her. His gaze wasn’t invasive—it was curious, sincere. He wasn’t just awkward. He was smart. And observant. And kind.

Erin hesitated, then surprised herself by saying, “I majored in history. I was about to start law school.”

Jim nodded once, understanding flickering in his eyes. “So what happened?”

She glanced out the café window, where pedestrians bustled by in coats and scarves, unaware of the quiet, intimate storm stirring in her chest.

“Life,” she said simply.

He seemed ready to ask more, but Erin pushed her chair back and stood. The moment had grown too tender, too close, and she wasn’t quite ready to let someone see more than what she’d offered.

“Thank you for the coffee,” she said softly, her voice steady even as her heart thudded in her chest. She tossed her half-full cup in the trash and turned back to him with a faint smile. “It was a delight getting to know you.”

Jim rose too, his movements unhurried. He reached out and took her hand, warm and steady. He held it—not in a clinging way, but like it mattered.

The heat of his skin, the roughness of his palm—it grounded her. That spark—the one she thought had died long ago—flickered inside her chest. And instead of running from it, she let herself feel it.

Just for a moment.

“Can I see you again?” he asked, his voice quiet, steady.

Erin hesitated—but not out of fear. She pulled a napkin from the metal holder on the table and uncapped a pen from her bag. Her fingers were calm as she scribbled her number and handed it over.

“Call me,” she said, her lips curving into something real. Then she turned, coat brushing against the back of the chair, and walked out of the café.

Control, she reminded herself as she hitched her backpack higher onto her shoulder and stepped out into the sunlit street. The early afternoon air was brisk, cool enough to make her thankful for her coat, but not cold enough to bite. Traffic buzzed in the distance, and a pair of pigeons flapped noisily past a trash can that overflowed with half-eaten pretzels and crumpled coffee cups. The city was alive—indifferent and sprawling—but somehow, today, it didn’t feel hostile.

She could have taken the subway back to her apartment. The station was just two blocks away. But Erin would never go underground again. Not after what had happened before.

Instead, she walked.

Her boots struck the sidewalk with a steady, self-assured rhythm. For the first few steps, her legs still remembered fear, still moved with caution. But as she turned the corner, slipping into the rhythm of city foot traffic, something inside her loosened.

She lengthened her stride. Not quite a skip, not yet—but there was a lightness to her steps now. The weight in her chest didn’t vanish, but it had shifted. It was no longer a prison. It was armor. Hard-earned and perfectly fitted.

She could walk through this world without flinching.

She passed a store and caught her reflection in glass window. Her dark hair was pinned up in a twist. Her skirt still held the neat fold from where she’d sat on the hard courtroom bench. She looked composed. Strong. Like someone who had made it to the other side.

Today, she *had*.

She hadn’t spoken in the courtroom—hadn’t needed to. Her testimony was already on file, catalogued, submitted, dissected. She had cried, though. Not loudly. Just a soft, stunned kind of release that came the moment the judge said the words:

Life in prison. No possibility of parole. Maximum security.

It had echoed in her skull like a bell tower ringing in a new year.

She was safe.

Finally, truly, undeniably safe.

Of course, she knew there were still dangerous people in the world. Lawrence Hoffmeier's kind of evil didn't simply evaporate now that he was locked away. But she had survived the worst of it. She had endured the darkness, lived through what some wouldn't dare imagine. If there was another monster lurking out there, he would pick someone else.

And if he didn't—well.

She reached into her coat pocket and brushed her fingers over the canister tucked discreetly there. She had the means. She had the knowledge. And more than that—she had herself again.

Her lips curved as she walked past a group of teenagers waiting for the light to change. One of them bumped shoulders with her and mumbled an apology. Erin smiled, nodded, and kept walking—her steps purposeful, spine straight, eyes forward.

The city didn't notice her. But that was fine. She wasn't hiding anymore.

Somewhere behind her, in a small café with scratched tables and sunlit windows, a man with warm hazel eyes was holding a napkin with her number scrawled across it.

And for the first time in a long, long time... Erin felt like her life was just beginning.

Chapter 2

Jim watched as Erin walked away, her figure gradually swallowed up by the rhythm of the city sidewalk. Her stride wasn't rushed. It was fluid. Confident. There was a hint of a bounce in her step, something that hadn't been there when she'd first emerged from the courthouse. And damn if that didn't make his chest feel a little tight.

A grin pulled at his mouth. "Damn," he muttered under his breath, shoving his hands into his coat pockets as he lingered outside the coffee shop. "That could've gone a lot worse."

Had he rambled? Yeah. Talked too much? Absolutely. Asked enough about her? Definitely not.

But she hadn't walked away mid-sentence. She'd smiled. *Twice*. And she'd given him her number—not typed into a phone under pressure, but written carefully on a napkin, like something out of a forgotten romantic movie.

Please let it be real, he thought. *Not just a polite out*. He hated that he even had to consider the possibility. That maybe she'd said yes just to stay safe. Because too many men made it dangerous for a woman to say no.

But he wasn't one of those men. He *knew* that. He'd built his whole career on calculated choices, staying calm under pressure, handling massive egos and razor-thin deadlines without flinching. And yet—*one woman with haunted eyes and a quiet smile had turned him into a damn teenager*.

Still smiling, he made the short walk back to his office, letting the hum of traffic and the slap of footsteps against pavement blur into the background. His thoughts kept circling back to her. Erin. She had a grace about her. But not the polished, performative kind. She moved like someone who'd been through fire and learned how to carry it quietly.

He wanted to know everything about her.

"Sir," Sarah called as soon as he stepped off the elevator, "you've got a three o'clock with legal—Visus Technologies again."

Jim nodded, refocusing. "Got it. And can you loop Toby in? They're going to try and sidestep the integration clauses again."

Sarah scribbled a note, her pen gliding over the page with efficiency. "Already on it. Also, I'll have the updated revenue data from their last quarter on your desk before the meeting ends."

"Perfect. Thank you."

Settling behind his desk, he flexed his fingers and dove into his inbox, scanning through contracts, project updates, and a few sharp-edged messages from one of the city planning departments. Visus was still trying to wiggle out of terms they'd already signed. Typical. But Jim wasn't one to back down. He didn't just play hardball—he designed the field.

Fifteen minutes later, with legal memos and budget breakdowns in hand, he passed Sarah's desk again. She looked up and gave him a sly smile.

"Oh—and the mayor called."

Jim stopped mid-stride. "She did?"

"Yeah." Sarah's grin widened. "She sent over the latest subway coordination data. Said the numbers are stronger than projected. She's thrilled."

Jim allowed himself a rare, unguarded smile. That project had been his baby for months. But it wasn't just the mayor's approval that lit something inside him—it was Erin's voice echoing in his mind, talking about missed connections, animals, and the subtle way she'd started to relax the more he talked.

Her eyes. They still haunted him. Not because they were sad—but because they'd flickered with hope when she finally smiled back.

He cleared his throat, pushed her image away, and stepped into the conference room. Time to work.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, laying the folder of documents on the table with a satisfying thump, "looks like we're going to need legal back in this conversation."

Toby entered a beat later and gave a nod—sharp, silent, efficient. Just the way Jim liked his meetings.

Tony, the finance director, opened with a breakdown of the potential penalties Visus would face if they delayed integration further. Jim had personally ensured the contracts were airtight—suffocating, if necessary. Clause by clause, he had built in triggers that would gut Visus's position if they attempted post-signature manipulation.

One hour later, he walked out of the conference room, feeling the kind of cool satisfaction that came from having every duck lined up, every loophole sewn shut.

Back at his desk, he finally sat—rolled his neck—and reached into the inside pocket of his blazer. The napkin was still there, slightly creased, the ink from her pen slightly smudged where his thumb had brushed over the number earlier.

His grin returned.

No time like the present.

He picked up his phone and began to type in the number, heart thudding—not from nerves, but anticipation. He wanted to hear her voice again. He wanted to know what kind of music she liked. If she drank tea at night. If she read dog-eared novels or collected odd little souvenirs from thrift shops.

Because something in Erin Salazar had stirred him wide awake.

And he wasn't going to let that spark die.

Chapter 3

Erin frowned as her phone buzzed against the scarred wooden armrest of her thrifted reading chair. The number on the screen was unfamiliar—no name, just a string of digits. Her thumb hovered over the red *decline* button.

Could be spam. Could be someone from the courthouse. Could be...

She hesitated. Then hazel eyes flickered across her memory like sunlight through leaves—nervous, earnest, hopeful.

Jim.

Before she could decide, a heavy weight landed on her lap. “Hey, buddy,” she murmured to the hulking, snoring creature that had climbed onto her. A pit bull–poodle mix with a coat like rough velvet and a heart as fragile as eggshells. “I need to grab this. Will you let me move?”

The dog, one hundred and fifty pounds of rescued muscle and deep-seated fear, shifted his head slightly, but didn’t lift it. He just gave a low, contented sigh, his breath warm against her ribs.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she whispered with a faint smile.

As gently as possible, Erin adjusted her position, careful not to jostle the dog’s injured leg. Her hand never left his back—long, steady strokes from shoulder to hip, slow enough to soothe, firm enough to reassure.

Then she answered the call.

“Hello?”

There was a beat of silence on the line, the kind that made the air feel suddenly charged. Then, his voice.

“Erin.”

Just her name—low, steady, and unmistakably him.

A smile broke across her face before she could stop it. Something warm unfurled in her chest, spreading like sunlight across cold tile. She hadn’t felt in... ages.

“Hi, Jim,” she said, her voice softer than she’d meant it to be.

Her hand moved automatically, continuing its gentle rhythm down the dog’s back. She didn’t realize until that moment that the strokes calmed her as well.

Because hearing his voice—the way it held her name like something precious—made her nervous in a way that wasn’t fear. It was possibility.

And that was just as dangerous.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” he asked, his voice slightly sheepish, slightly hopeful.

She could hear the background noise of a keyboard clacking. Office hum. A muffled voice announcing something in a hallway. His life was still running forward—corporate, clean, and functional—while hers was paused in this quiet little apartment full of secondhand furniture and rescue animals.

“No, it’s fine,” she said quickly. “I’m at home with one of our newest shelter dogs. Big guy. Sweetheart. Terrified of the world.”

Jim chuckled. “I get that.”

She could picture him leaning back in his chair, one hand on his desk, the other holding the phone to his ear. Confident in business. But now? She imagined he was leaning forward, just a little—into this conversation. Into *her*.

“I wasn’t sure you’d answer,” he admitted.

“Neither was I,” she replied honestly. “But I’m glad I did.”

Another pause. Not awkward—just full. Like both of them were weighing this moment, this fragile connection hanging in the quiet.

“So,” he said, gently nudging the silence, “is this where I ask if you like Thai food? Or is that too much too soon?”

Erin laughed—really laughed, and the dog lifted his head at the unfamiliar sound.

She rested her cheek against his warm fur. “Thai sounds good,” she murmured, then added with a little tilt in her voice, “assuming you’re not secretly a spider collector.”

Jim’s answering laughter rumbled over the line, low and genuine. “Absolutely not. I’m still recovering from the mental image you gave me this morning.”

Erin smiled again, eyes drifting toward the window, where sunlight spilled across the floor like a soft promise.

Maybe the world wasn’t quite as mean as it had been.

Maybe not today.

Chapter 4

Six months. She'd been free for six months while Lawrence rotted in a prison cell.

Erin stepped through the scratched glass doors of the animal shelter, the familiar scent of disinfectant and kibble washing over her like a blanket she didn't mind wearing. It was safe here. Predictable. Honest. Every emotion from the animals was raw, every behavior driven by truth. No games. No masks.

Her boots made a soft *thud-thud* as she moved down the hallway, bypassing the loudest kennels and the more curious faces, until she reached the back row. There, tucked in the corner of a metal cage lined with an old towel, was a tiny, soot-black kitten. Barely eight weeks old and still trembling every time someone walked by.

"Hey, sweetie," Erin whispered, crouching down and pulling a treat from the pocket of her hoodie—one she'd stopped to buy at the corner pet store on her way in this morning. She slid it between the bars of the cage and watched the small bundle of fluff shift ever so slightly.

The kitten's fur puffed out as she hissed, doing her best to look intimidating. But her eyes were wide with fear, and her limbs were coiled tight—not like she was preparing to pounce, but like she was bracing for the world to hurt her again.

Erin knew that posture. Intimately.

"I know," she murmured, keeping her voice low and melodic. "You've lost a lot." She rested her forearms on her knees, still crouched, watching as the kitten sniffed tentatively. "But we're going to find the perfect family for you. They're going to love you to bits and you'll get all fat and happy, sleeping in sunshine all afternoon."

After a long beat, the kitten took a cautious step forward, then another. Finally, she nosed the treat, took a careful bite, but stayed close to the bars.

"There you go," Erin said softly, reaching in to stroke her. The kitten flinched at first, but Erin's touch was feather-light, circling once behind the ears. "See? It's okay."

The kitten leaned into it—just barely.

"She's feral," said a voice behind her.

Erin didn't startle. She knew that voice. It belonged to the shelter's manager, a kind woman with tired eyes and a heart too big for this under-funded building. "And she's completely black. You know most people still think they're bad luck."

Erin didn't respond right away. She simply kept stroking the kitten, who now purred—soft and hesitant, like she wasn't sure she was allowed to.

"I'll find her the perfect home," she said quietly, more to herself than to anyone else. Her head tilted, eyes thoughtful as she worked through the possibilities. Who would be gentle enough? Patient enough?

The manager sighed. "I shouldn't doubt you. In the six months you've been here, you've placed more animals than the last three staffers combined. No returns either. That's rare."

Erin didn't say thank you. She never quite knew how to respond to praise. But her smile was soft, and her eyes were full as the kitten nudged her fingers with a tiny, velvet nose.

"We'll find you someone," she whispered again. "Jim will help."

A warm, male voice answered behind her. "What am I helping with?"

She swung around too quickly and hit her hand against the side of the cage with a loud *clang*. The kitten darted to the back, and Erin's body went rigid, every muscle primed for a threat.

But it was just Jim. Standing there with that familiar paper bag in his hand, wearing jeans, a soft gray button-down, and that guarded, gentle look he always wore around her—especially when she flinched.

His hazel eyes darkened with concern. "Sorry, Erin," he said quietly, his tone matching hers from moments ago. Slow. Soft. Meant to soothe. "Didn't mean to startle you. I just stopped by to have lunch with you. That's all."

Her hand was pressed against her stomach now, her breath still catching on the edge of memory. But her gaze held his, and she slowly nodded, grounding herself in the reality of the present.

Jim. It was just Jim.

And she *had* missed him.

He'd been out of town on business for a few days, and though she'd never said so out loud, the space between their last conversation and now had felt unusually long.

"I'm sorry," she breathed, trying to gather herself.

"You don't have to explain," he said, dropping the bag on a table while also stepping forward to pull her into his arms.

He held her the way he always did—like she might break, but also like he trusted her not to. His embrace was strong and warm, his chest solid against her cheek, his hand lightly cradling the back of her head. She let herself sink into him, not speaking. Just breathing him in. He smelled like cedar soap and coffee and wind.

"When you're ready," he murmured, "I hope you'll tell me why."

She didn't need him to explain what he meant. She knew he wasn't just referring to her flinching when surprised. It was the way she always sat with her back to the wall. The way she avoided crowds. The studio apartment with a thrifted mattress and a lock she'd replaced twice. No car. Just a battered bike or trusty walking shoes combined with routines that didn't involve trusting anyone fully.

But here she was, in his arms. And she hadn't pulled away.

"I'll tell you," she whispered against his chest. Slowly, she stepped back and looked up at him. "I know you brought lunch again, didn't you?"

He reached out and lifted the paper bag slightly, giving her a mock-offended look. "Of course. Do you think I'd risk taking you out and making you uncomfortable?"

A smile tugged at her mouth, despite everything. "It just feels easier this way."

He didn't argue. He never pushed.

"Well," he said, peeking into the bag, "it's that vegan place you like. I got you the wrap with the roasted chickpeas and whatever weird sauce you like. I also brought a brownie because I figured I'd done something to annoy you this week."

"You didn't," she said, already reaching for the bag.

He held it out with a wink. "Still. It's a peace offering. Just in case."

She took it, their fingers brushing, and that tiny current between them—steady and familiar—settled into her chest.

Safe. That's what this was.

"I missed you," she said, so quietly he almost didn't hear it.

But his smile turned into something deeper—something like awe. "Yeah," he said. "I missed you too."

Erin took Jim's hand, the paper bag of lunch swinging lightly in her other as she led him out into the crisp autumn afternoon. A light breeze tugged at the ends of her hair, carrying the scent of fallen leaves, sun-warmed grass, and distant chimney smoke. This little patch of green, tucked behind the shelter and bordered by trees burning orange and gold, was her favorite place in the city. It felt quiet here. Honest.

They sat at the old picnic table beneath the half-bare branches, the wood worn smooth by time and weather. The bag of food sat between them, temporarily forgotten.

Jim reached out again, this time with deliberate care, and gently took her hands. His touch was warm, grounding. "What happened?" he asked softly.

Erin stared at his hands—long, elegant fingers, the soft calluses along the sides where a keyboard had been his main adversary for years. Gentle hands. Steady. She swallowed once before lifting her gaze to meet his.

"Do you remember the trial of Lawrence Hoffmeier?"

Jim's brow furrowed slightly, his expression thoughtful—then his eyes widened. "Yes," he said, the word carrying a sudden weight. "The headlines about what he did were brutal."

Erin nodded, her lips twitching into the faintest smile. “The woman who initially brought the charges—her name was Andrea. She’s... actually a princess now. Married some prince from one of those countries and she’s deliriously happy now.”

Jim blinked, caught between confusion and surprise. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” she chuckled softly, the sound half-wistful. “She lives in a castle or maybe a palace now. But she’s the reason Hoffmeier was caught. He chose the wrong woman, finally. Someone with power, with visibility.”

Jim’s thumb moved slowly over the back of her hand—back and forth, calming, protective. His silence encouraged her to keep going.

She glanced around the small clearing, taking in the amber leaves rustling overhead, the occasional rustle of squirrels darting through brittle grass. This was where she brought the shelter dogs to run, to stretch their legs and feel something like freedom. It was also where she came when she needed to remember how to breathe.

“I was one of his victims,” she said quietly, eyes fixed on a patch of sunlight filtering through the trees. Her voice didn’t shake, but her body did, just slightly.

She felt Jim’s hands tighten around hers—not too much, just enough that she knew he’d heard her fully. That he wasn’t looking away.

“I was the one who escaped. I ran. I ran straight from that basement to the police station.” Her throat tightened. “But they didn’t believe me.” She blinked back tears. “They said I was a drug addict. That I’d made it up.”

Jim muttered something under his breath—sharp, angry—but she barely registered it. Her thoughts were still tangled in the past.

“Hoffmeier played poker with half the police department,” she continued. “He donated to their fundraisers. Always made sure he was one of them, at least on paper. So when a scared, filthy girl showed up claiming he’d kept her in his basement for weeks, they didn’t even write a report.” She laughed once, bitter and broken. “I finally got free and they made me feel like I was crazy.”

“That’s insane,” Jim said, his voice low and rough with fury.

Erin nodded, squeezing his hand now. “It came out in court—how he positioned himself close to the force to manipulate them. I guess that was always part of his plan. Staying just close enough to power to use it when he needed to.”

She fell silent for a long moment, but Jim didn’t rush her. He just stayed still, one thumb still drawing slow circles, the other hand firm around hers.

“He was...is...a monster,” she said finally.

“I only skimmed the news stories,” Jim said gently. “But I remember enough to know... what he did was beyond horrifying.”

Erin gave a small, broken nod. “The recordings were real. The torture was real. There were ten of us—ten that they confirmed from the videos.” Her voice was steady, even as tears slipped silently down her cheeks. “But I believe there were more. Before the recordings started. Before he got... confident.”

“And the others?” Jim asked, though his voice held a tremor now. “They never found them?”

She shook her head. “No bodies. No names. Just gaps in the timeline and a man who refused to confess. But it doesn’t matter. He was convicted. Life in prison. No parole. Maximum security.”

He exhaled slowly. “Still. If they found the others... he could face the death penalty.”

Erin’s lips quirked into a tired smile. “I don’t want him to die,” she said. “I want him to sit in that cell every day and remember exactly what he’s done. I want the years to grind him down.”

Jim let out a low, appreciative chuckle. “You make a solid argument.”

“And,” she added, sniffing and brushing away tears with the sleeve of her hoodie, “death penalty cases are expensive. This way, I’m saving the taxpayers money.”

“You don’t think people should be executed for their crimes?” Jim asked, his voice quiet—not challenging, just curious.

Erin gave a small shrug, her gaze drifting to the sway of red and amber leaves overhead. “Right now, survival is my goal,” she said simply. “Politics, ethics, capital punishment... those are luxuries I’ll weigh later. Right now, I’m still just trying to breathe without flinching.” She paused, then added with a grimace, “But I guess now you understand why intimacy has been... complicated.”

Jim’s brow furrowed, not with frustration but empathy. He tilted his head, studying her. “I knew something had happened in your past. I just didn’t know how deep it went. I’m sorry.”

Erin let out a surprised chuckle, a soft and tired thing. “Sorry? For being the one man on this planet with actual patience and kindness?”

Then, before she could think her way out of it, she stood and leaned across the picnic table. Her lips brushed his—a short, gentle kiss. Barely more than a whisper of contact. But it was her move. Her choice.

The moment stilled. They both froze, surprised by the smallness and enormity of what had just happened.

She pulled back and sank down beside him again, her cheeks flushed with nerves. “I like you, Jim,” she said softly, her voice almost too quiet to hear over the wind rustling through the trees. “I like you a lot.”

Jim’s eyes didn’t leave hers. His thumb resumed its soft stroke across the back of her hand—steady, grounding. “Yeah,” he murmured. “I kinda like you too.”

Then he added, “I can see a future with you. But if you’re not ready, or if you need space, you just say so. I’ll back off. I won’t push you.”

His words disarmed her more than any grand gesture ever could. There was no pressure in his tone—just quiet promise. And that, more than anything, made her feel safe.

Erin smiled, tears welling again—but this time not from pain. “I’d like that very much,” she whispered. She wiped her cheek with the side of her hand, then exhaled slowly and drew back. “But now, you’d better get back to work. Don’t want your boss chewing you out for skipping meetings.”

Jim tilted his head, his mouth twitching with a quiet smile. “You’ve made a few comments like that,” he said. “And I think it’s time I clarified something... Erin, I *am* the boss.”

She blinked. “What?”

“I own the company,” he said plainly. “It’s a computer engineering firm. We’ve got city and state contracts. A few private ones too.”

She stared at him, processing. “Wait. You own it?”

Jim nodded. “I started it about nine years ago. That first day we met, I’d just come from a city planning meeting about a transportation algorithm we’d written.”

Erin shook her head, smiling slightly. “That’s not how you presented it. I thought you were just a guy who wrote code.”

“I *do* write code,” he said with a grin. “But I also sign the checks.”

She laughed, a bit stunned, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “You were talking about timing the subways and buses better... I just thought—”

“Yeah, the city liked our work. Ridership complaints dropped, efficiency improved. They’ve extended the contract and added new initiatives—digitizing public records, historic archives, library resources. We’re building a platform that links old city maps, letters, reference texts, everything. Cross-referenced and tagged.” He paused, then grinned at himself. “I’m doing it again. Rambling.”

Erin shook her head, eyes soft. “No, I like it. I like seeing you light up. It’s rare. Most people talk about work like it’s a burden. You talk about it like it matters.”

Jim looked at her, quiet for a moment, then said, “It *does* matter. Just like you matter. Even when you don’t feel it. Especially then.”

Her eyes glistened again, but this time she didn’t try to hide it.

“That man... he didn’t just hurt me, Jim,” she said slowly. “He rewired the way I see the world. Took away my joy. My hope. I want to get that back, but I don’t know how.”

Jim’s jaw tightened, but he kept his tone gentle. “He’s in prison. He’ll never touch you again.”

“I know.” She took a breath, steadying herself. “But knowing that doesn’t stop the fear from showing up.”

Jim nodded, thoughtful. “I had this idea, earlier. I was going to ask you to pack a bag and let me take you somewhere—somewhere beautiful. Just get you away for a while. But after what you told me, I realized... you probably hate surprises.”

She gave him a tired, grateful smile. “I do. He used to surprise me with... punishments. Pain.”

“Then no surprises,” Jim said firmly. “Ever. But how about a plan? A road trip. Just the two of us. You choose the direction. I’ll drive, or you can, if it helps you feel more in control.”

She looked at him, still cautious but curious. “A road trip where?”

“To the prison where he’s being held,” Jim suggested, watching her closely. “Would it help... even a little... if you could see him behind bars? Actually see the cell? Know without a doubt that he can’t hurt you ever again?”

Erin stilled.

The thought hit her like a stone skipping across water—sharp at first, but then spreading outward in slow, rippling circles. She hadn’t considered that before. Hadn’t let herself. But now, the idea took root.

She could walk into that place. Look him in the eyes. Let him see her standing, whole and unbroken.

Her lips twitched, and then—slowly, almost cautiously—she nodded. “Yeah,” she murmured, her voice growing steadier. “Yeah... I think that would be amazing.”

A real smile bloomed on her face, one that lit up her eyes and sent heat through Jim’s chest. He laughed in quiet delight, rising from the table and stretching slightly. But as he moved toward her, his energy shifted—warmer, more deliberate.

Then he paused, giving her space. “I’m going to kiss you.”

He didn’t ask for permission. He *gave* it to her—letting her decide.

Erin didn’t hesitate.

She rose from the table and met him halfway. This time, it wasn’t a hesitant brush of lips. It was slow, exploratory—a kiss that asked questions instead of making demands. His hands found her waist, light and steady, while hers slid up his chest, curling into the fabric of his shirt as if anchoring herself.

When she deepened the kiss, just slightly, just enough, he responded with a low groan that sent a shiver through her body—and to her astonishment, it felt good. No panic, no tightening of her throat. Just warmth. Possibility. Desire.

She didn’t pull away in fear. She leaned into it.

It was a victory.

That’s when the dogs started barking—wild, insistent, and totally oblivious to the emotional triumph unfolding outside.

Erin broke the kiss, laughing breathlessly as she stepped back. Her cheeks were flushed, but she didn’t shrink. Didn’t apologize. She just looked up at Jim and smiled, a slow, radiant expression filled with something that felt suspiciously like hope.

“You okay?” he asked softly, brushing a curl back from her face.

“I’m better than okay,” she said. Her hand lingered on his chest for a moment longer before she pulled it away. “That kiss... it didn’t scare me. It didn’t *hurt*.”

Jim’s expression shifted—something fierce flickered behind his hazel eyes, not possessive, but protective. He didn’t say *good girl*, or *I’m proud of you*. He just nodded once, deeply, and that was enough.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He smiled. “Think about it—Marienville. Seeing him locked up. Taking that power back.”

“I think that sounds perfect,” she said. Her voice was stronger now. Clear.

He grinned. “I’ll arrange it.”

Chapter 5

It was a four-and-a-half-hour road trip to the prison, but Jim had created a full itinerary with stops for drinks, leg-stretching breaks, and a playlist packed with classic road trip anthems. Songs like “Life in the Fast Lane” by the Eagles and “Born to Run” by Bruce Springsteen filled the car with energy. Some of his choices made her laugh—especially “I Can’t Drive 55” by Sammy Hagar and, as they neared the town where the prison was located, the on-the-nose addition of “Highway to Hell” by AC/DC.

But as they pulled into the prison parking lot, the atmosphere shifted. Erin’s laughter faded, replaced by a tightening in her chest. Nervousness crept in, the weight of what she was about to face pressing down like cold fog. Seeing Lawrence again—the man who had haunted her dreams and nearly broken her—wasn’t something she’d prepared for emotionally.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jim said, reaching over to take her hand. His grip was gentle but firm, anchoring her.

She squeezed his fingers. “You made some special arrangements?”

He nodded, lips curving in a small, secretive smile. His hazel eyes twinkled. “You’ll see. I think you’ll like them.”

They walked up to the gate together and were greeted by one of the prison guards.

“Mr. Whitlock,” the man said, extending his hand. “Pleasure to finally meet you.”

Jim returned the handshake with a nod. “How’s that incident reporting system going? Still able to track and anticipate inmate trends?”

“It’s awesome!” the guard replied, chuckling. He turned to Erin and added, “Your boyfriend here designed a system that tracks incidents across the prison. It’s helped us anticipate problems before they start. We’ve reduced inmate violence dramatically.”

Erin smiled, leaning her shoulder into Jim. “That’s pretty cool.”

Jim gave her an “aw shucks” look but didn’t downplay it. Turning back to the guard, he asked, “We’re still good for today’s plan?”

“You got it,” the guard said, looping his thumbs through his belt. “Everything’s been arranged. And if you feel unsafe at any point,” he told Erin, his voice dropping a notch, “just let me know. I’ll get you out immediately.”

Erin looked at Jim, unsure what that meant, but nodded.

“This way,” the guard said, leading them through the gates.

Her purse was locked away, her shoes inspected, but she’d worn jeans and a plain sweater today—comfortable and low-key. No zippers. No drawstrings. Nothing that would set off alarms. Jim had dressed similarly, and after a final checkpoint, they were led down a series of dim, echoing hallways until the guard unlocked a door with a heavy click.

“You have ten minutes,” he said, opening it wide. “I’ll be just outside. You can say anything you want. He won’t respond.”

Erin blinked. *Wouldn’t respond?* She stepped in slowly, her heart pounding.

The room was stark—four cement-block walls, a concrete floor, a metal bench behind them. Ahead was a wide pane of glass that looked like a mirror, but Erin recognized it as one-way glass. Beneath it were two buttons.

“If you press the blue button, he’ll be able to see you,” the guard explained. “The green button lets you speak to him.”

She nodded, her stomach twisting as she approached the window. Her hand moved instinctively to her stomach, palm flat. The familiar motion grounded her. But her feet stopped just shy of the buttons.

Jim didn’t follow her in. She glanced over her shoulder.

“You won’t leave, will you?”

He shook his head. “I won’t leave you for any reason,” he said—and it wasn’t just about today. She could hear that in his tone.

Before she could overthink it, the light inside the opposite room flickered on.

Erin inhaled sharply as Lawrence Hoffmeier was led inside. He looked... different. His head was shaved. His face was bruised. His orange jumpsuit was too loose, and the chain around his ankles made him shuffle like a broken marionette. His hands were cuffed, his shoulders slumped.

“I phoned ahead,” Jim said softly from behind her. “Apparently, a serial rapist ranks just above a pedophile in prison. He’s had a rough few months.”

Erin couldn’t look away. The man who had once towered over her in the darkness was now smaller somehow. Humbled by violence. By confinement.

“Can he hear me?” she asked.

“You just have to press the button.”

But even before she could, her anger started to rise—sharp and unexpected. Gone was the fear. Gone was the sick ache of being hunted. What bubbled up now was something pure, something powerful.

Fury.

She stepped forward and pressed both buttons. Lawrence’s head snapped up.

For a moment, he didn’t seem to recognize her. And that only made her rage worse. *She would never forget his face.* But to him, she had been just one more object to use, to break, to discard.

Then recognition dawned, and his face twisted into something grotesquely smug. “Ah, Erin,” he said, stepping forward. “You came to visit me.”

She almost stepped back—almost—but remembered the walls, the window, the cuffs, the chains. He couldn't touch her. He never would again.

She was safe.

And that safety made her bold.

"How'd you get those black eyes?" she asked, her voice cool, her lips curling into a smirk she hadn't realized she possessed.

His expression shifted instantly, smug satisfaction turning to rage. "Don't worry about me," he snarled. "You and I, we were meant to be together. And I've learned from my mistake. I know now how to better—"

She pressed the button again. His voice cut off mid-sentence.

She didn't need to hear more.

Jim moved behind her, silent but present, his warmth wrapping around her like a shield. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her gently back against his chest.

She leaned into him, eyes still on the man who'd tortured her. Lawrence was screaming now—silent rage distorted across the glass. Spit flew. His face was red. He pounded his shackled fists on the walls like a caged animal.

But she couldn't hear him.

And she didn't care.

Guards swarmed into the room behind him. He was yanked to the ground and pinned, still yelling as they dragged him back toward his cell.

Erin watched all of it calmly. Her breath came slow and even.

"I used to beg him," she whispered, turning toward Jim. "I used to cry and plead and promise to be quiet if he'd just stop. But nothing worked. Nothing mattered. He never listened."

Her voice didn't shake. Her hand rose and touched Jim's chest. "Will you take me out of here?"

Jim leaned down and kissed her—soft, steady, solid. "Yes," he said. "Did this help?"

Erin laughed, a little breathless, a little incredulous. "Yes. This was perfect. Watching him behind that glass—seeing him caged, cuffed, silenced—it gave me back something I didn't know I was still missing."

Jim squeezed her hand. "I'm glad."

Epilogue

Erin twisted to the right, balancing the tray of sizzling burgers and hot dogs with both hands as a pack of squealing kids burst through the sliding door. Laughter erupted like fireworks, bare feet slapping against the sun-warmed patio, damp hair flying in all directions as the children raced toward the sprinkler set up in the backyard.

“Slow down!” she called, grinning, even though she knew they wouldn’t listen. They were too wild with joy, limbs full of sugar and freedom, the kind of chaos that only made her heart fuller. Even as she watched, Fred, their pit-bull-poodle mutt, raced ahead of the children, snapping at the water as he gleefully tried to catch the drops. Standing back, looking disgusted with all of the chaos was Ginger, the black-cat that had come home from the shelter all those years ago and had claimed everyone in the house as her personal servant.

At the front of the stampede were her son and daughter—five and seven now—who launched themselves into the arcs of water with reckless delight, shrieking as the icy spray drenched them. Her daughter did a spinning leap while her son dove headfirst through the sprinkler like it was the final lap of an Olympic race. Erin’s laughter bubbled out, warm and unfiltered.

She handed the tray to Jim with a proud, contented sigh, her swollen belly brushing against the edge of the deck railing as she adjusted her stance.

“You look beautiful,” Jim said, his voice low and reverent as he leaned in, his hand sliding over the curve of her belly, thumb grazing just under her navel. “Baby okay?”

“Baby is great!” she replied, resting both hands over the roundness of her stomach. “He or she is kicking like crazy right now.”

Jim leaned closer, eyes twinkling as he whispered, “Good. Payback for keeping me awake last night.”

Erin flushed, biting back a laugh, and gave him a playful shove. She glanced around quickly—but the other couples on the deck were too deep in their own conversations, sipping lemonade and chasing toddlers, to hear her husband’s teasing remark about her current... enthusiasm in the bedroom.

At five months pregnant, her hormones were out of control, and she didn’t even try to deny it. Her skin practically buzzed when Jim touched her. She wanted him all the time—and thankfully, Jim had zero complaints. The same thing had happened during her other pregnancies, which was probably why Jim had given her that smirking, “*Let’s have a third*” speech last winter... and well, here they were.

And she didn’t regret a moment of it.

Letting go of her job at the shelter had been hard—painful, even. But she hadn’t let go of her purpose. Jim had gently, relentlessly pushed her to pursue something more, and she had. Three years of classes, grueling tests, and long hours had transformed her into Dr. Erin Whitlock, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. Now, she was the proud owner of her very own animal hospital—designed and funded by the smartest, sexiest man she’d ever known. And she got to do what she loved every single day.

The smell of grilled meat drifted through the warm summer air. Sunlight filtered through the slats of the pergola, casting lazy golden patterns on the wood beneath her bare feet. Bees hummed around the flower boxes at the edges of the deck, and somewhere inside the house, upbeat music played—one of Jim’s playlists, undoubtedly full of cheesy classics and danceable hits.

Erin breathed it all in—the chatter, the music, the squeals of her children, the faint kick of the baby inside her. It was a symphony of joy, of wholeness. Of victory.

And when the dark thoughts occasionally threatened to creep in—the echo of a basement door slamming, or the ghost of a voice that once told her to *give in to the pain*—she only had to remember *that* day. The day she stood on the other side of the prison glass and saw her monster caged, broken, powerless. She had spoken her truth. Then she had pressed the button and walked away.

She’d never looked back.

Not after all the therapy. Not after every hour of sobbing in the bathtub. Not after learning how to laugh again. Not after learning how to *love* again.

She’d built something beautiful from ashes. A home. A family. A purpose. And the man beside her? He worshipped her. Every damn day. He kissed her like she was the answer to every question. He made her feel safe, wanted, needed.

Erin turned her face toward him and kissed his cheek, the bristle of his five o’clock shadow brushing her lips.

“I love our life,” she whispered, her eyes gleaming.

Jim leaned in, resting his forehead against hers for a moment. “You made it beautiful.”

And she had.

She’d won. Against the odds, against the darkness, against everything that had tried to destroy her.

She had *won*.