Learning Curve

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The Learning Curve

by Zaffie

Summary

During a long, hot summer in Chicago, a serial killer crawls out of the woodwork after ten years, a crime from Erin's past resurfaces, and somehow little Daniel Voight finds himself in the care of his sort-of aunt and uncle.

The rest of it's no piece of cake, but for Erin and Jay, it turns out looking after a baby is the steepest learning curve of all.

Set between S3 and S4. An old fic with updated tags & description, because I didn't know where it would go when I started writing.
Chapter 1

I've had this idea for a while and kept saying I would write it out before S4 started. Hahahaha, no! But watching the episode today was apparently the kick in the pants I needed, so I started this fic. Takes place midway between S3 finale and S4. No spoilers for S4 in this yet, but it's possible that S4 characters/plot threads will begin to appear as the fic continues. No promises.

As a side note, I've turned down prompts for various fandoms before, but recently I noticed that the Linstead fanfic on here was a little thin (THIS IS LAME. HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO SORT OUT WHICH GREAT FICS TO READ AT BABYSITTING? I mean, not that babysitting is exclusively for browsing Ao3 on my phone or anything. But I can't read my own stuff, that's weird and uncomfortable. Everyone else must write more things.) and I keep feeling like writing Linstead because they're fun, but then getting bored of a plot/being unable to think of a plot/not being sure what plots anyone else wants to read.

My super long point here (congrats if you read this far, I almost always skip author's notes, hi, you're my fave and your shirt looks fabulous) is that I'm happy to take prompts for Linstead and Chicago PD at this point. In fact I'm happy to take them in the comments of this fic! Since I don't have anything cool like Tumblr or Twitter. Just hit me up here and in the comments be all "Yo, Zaffie, I have a prompt" and then spell it out. Be as detailed as you want, I'll roll with it! At some point I'll stick all my prompts together in a bunch of one-shots, so just be as random as you like, it doesn't have to connect to anything I'm currently writing/have previously written!

So, to recap, leave prompts in the comments if you feel up to that. If you don't, just enjoy this fic! And enjoy S4! Stay cool, folks. Party hard.

It’s still dark when the knock comes. Early – it has to be early – and Erin finds herself coming awake slowly, blearily. At first she’s half convinced that it was a sound from her dream, but the knocking starts up again, quiet and desperate.

Jay’s elbow is in her face and his leg is draped over her hip. Erin can’t quite keep her eyes open, not yet, but she gets enough awareness of her body to shove Jay away and crawl out of bed. She fumbles her way across the room with eyes still mostly closed; is grateful they’re in her apartment tonight, and not Jay’s. Her questing fingertips hit the door and she turns the handle, forcing her eyes open. There’s a little ambient light coming in through the gaps in the lounge curtains, and leaking under the front door.

Whoever it is, they’re still knocking. They don’t stop as Erin walks past the bathroom and the spare room, across the lounge and through the kitchen. She checks the clock on the oven. It says 1:38, and the clock on the microwave says 1:29, which means that the real time is somewhere in-between the two. Jay keeps telling her to reset them.

The crack of light under the front door guides her to it. Erin’s eyes close again when her hand grasps the handle and she takes a moment, breathes in deep, and forces them back open. She has to
unlock the door – should look through the peephole, because it’s early, and it’s dangerous. Stands on tiptoes to peer through and can barely see anything in the harsh glare of the hall lights outside. Squinting, she takes the chain away from the door, flips the lock and opens it.

Her eyes don’t adjust right away but she hears a woman’s voice. “Thank god. Oh, thank god, Erin.”

Blinking, Erin makes out frizzy hair and a pale face. Olive – it’s Olive – with the baby in her arms. “Olive?” Erin tries to say, her voice cracks and she has to stop. She clears her throat and tries again. “Olive? What – are you okay?”

Olive is babbling. “I don’t know where Hank is, I’ve been to his house and I can’t find him anywhere, he’s not answering his cell, and just – with Justin – and my aunt’s called, it’s a family emergency, and the car seat was in Justin’s car but they took it – the whole thing – for evidence and I haven’t bought a new one because I figured I wouldn’t need to go anywhere but I have to leave, Erin, right now, and it won’t be long, I swear, and I’m so, so sorry to do this to you and-”

The bright light from the hall seems to be kicking Erin’s exhausted brain up into gear. She finds herself reaching out for Daniel. He takes his arms away from his mother’s neck and reaches for Erin in return. “Go,” she says to Olive. “It’s fine, I’ve got him. Do whatever you have to do.”

“Oh thank you, thank you,” Olive breathes, and she is dropping bags on Erin’s doorstep and blurring instructions as fast as she can, a kiss for Daniel’s cheek and suddenly Erin has his warm, sweaty little body in her arms and Olive is backing away down the hallway, still talking, talking…

Erin kind of shuts down when the elevator doors close. She isn’t sure what she’s doing. Standing in the hallway, she stares blankly at the spot where Olive had disappeared. Absently, she bounces Daniel in her arms, pats his back, doesn’t know what else to do.

The baby doesn’t seem quite aware either. He’s sleepy, his head knocking against Erin’s, and his fist curling into the straps of the tank top she’d been sleeping in.

When the light starts to make Erin’s head pound, she nudges the bags inside with her foot and closes the front door. Her legs are tired and her eyes itch, so she folds herself up and sits cross-legged on the floor, leaning back against the door. She allows her eyelids to flutter.

Daniel has curled into her. She can feel him breathing, his mouth open against her collarbone. His soft hair brushes against her chin when her chest moves up and down. He’s tiny, but warm and heavy and real against her. He’s drooling on her skin.

Nephew, Erin thinks, in the loosest sense of the word. He should be with his grandfather in a crisis. She wishes she knew where Hank was. He’d gone off-grid after shooting Justin’s killer and Erin has tried to respect that. He’d gone off-grid after shooting Justin’s killer and Erin has tried to respect that. She just can’t. She doesn’t respect the shooting, or the vanishing act Hank had pulled immediately afterwards, leaving Olive and Daniel and Erin and the 21st District with a hell of a mess to clean up.

Officially, Hank is on leave, and is grieving. Officially, no one knows what happened to Kevin Bingham. Unofficially, Intelligence knows, because Erin told Jay and Olinsky, and Olinsky told the rest. Everyone else knows that Intelligence knows, but no one talks about it. Erin has the sense, though, that there will be hell to pay when Hank gets back.

Erin takes her hand off Daniel’s back and rubs her eyes. She gets to her feet, staggering a little when the weight of the baby throws her off balance, and she carries him down the hall and into her room. “Jay?” she whispers. “Are you awake?”
He grunts.

“Can you get up?”

Another grunt. Erin thinks that was the drawn-out ‘no’ grunt, rather than the more promising ‘mm-hmm’ sound of the ‘yes’ grunt. She’s not entirely sure how to wake him up. Usually she smacks him around or she yells at him, but she’s got the snuffling of Daniel’s sleepy breathing against her and his sticky cheek on her shoulder.

Where is she supposed to put a baby down to sleep? She doesn’t want to risk bringing him into the bed. She sleeps restlessly and Jay sleeps with reckless, leg-flinging, snuggling abandon. One or both of them could roll over onto the little boy, Erin thinks, and she doesn’t want to risk it.

Daniel crawls, she remembers. Does he walk yet? She isn’t sure. How old is he? She can’t do the maths in her head, not when she’s this tired, can only think back to May and picture that birthday party as the last happy moment.

There’s a cardboard box in the lounge. It pops into her head, suddenly. It had held the new mini-fridge, supposed to tide her over while she’s between full-sized fridges, which will be a while. Since she’s blown all her fridge savings on a mini-fridge.

Somehow, through a haze of mental fog and scratchy, sleep-filled eyes, Erin drags the box into the room and sets it behind her bed. She stuffs it with blankets until it’s a little nest, and she folds down the sides so that she can reach in and she lowers Daniel down into it.

He whines when she pulls him away from her body, grumbles when she sets him into the mound of blankets. Erin climbs into bed and puts her hand into the box, wrapping it around Daniel’s little belly so that he knows she’s still here. She strokes her thumb along his back and tries to close her eyes.

Of course, now that she’s in bed and perfectly comfortable, she can’t sleep. It doesn’t help that her arm is losing circulation where it’s pressed against the cardboard, of course, but Erin is suddenly panicking. Daniel will somehow squirm his way down under the blankets and suffocate in the night. He’ll chew on the cardboard and choke. Something terrible is going to happen and it’s going to be on her.

Erin gets up, lifts Daniel up, and puts him on the edge of the bed. She keeps one hand on him to make sure he’s not rolling, and she settles and resettles the blankets. She folds them tightly and pulls them right to the edges of the cardboard and makes sure there’s no way for him to roll down underneath.

Daniel gives a hiccup which is on the verge of a sob and kicks out at Erin’s arm. His little shoe hits her, which makes her think that she should take them off. She pulls each one away from his little feet, peels off his socks and eases off the little jacket that he’s wearing. He’s so warm underneath it almost makes her worried. She picks him up again and he snuggles against her, burrowing in. He must be so tired, Erin thinks.

She sits with him for a little while, until she feels his breathing even out and turn into snuffles. Daniel’s body becomes heavy with sleep in her arms and Erin lowers him back into the cardboard box. She keeps a hand on him anyway, just in case.

Jay comes up behind her when she settles down on her side in bed. He kisses her temple and tries to whisper something that she doesn’t understand.
“You’re asleep,” she tells him. “You can’t talk properly.”

He nods, like he agrees, pulls her closer to him and settles down. His breathing and Daniel’s snuffles take her down into a warm spiralling blackness. She sleeps.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Wrote most of this before I watched ep 4x02, the last little bit about 15 minutes into the episode, so there are no spoilers. Not even any spoilers for 4x01 yet! Go me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jay wakes up at 6:15, which is early but not unpleasant. He spends a little while under the warm blankets, curled around Erin with her hair going up his nose when he breathes, just to test himself. He’s half-expecting to fall back asleep, but he doesn’t.

Once he’s sure that he’s awake for good, Jay scoots back over to his side and climbs out of bed. Erin, he notices, is right on the edge of her side. Hair covers her face; she’s been growing it out, and Jay likes it – and her arms are dangling off the bed and into a cardboard box.

Hm, Jay thinks. He walks past the bed and the box, out the door and into the bathroom.

It’s only on his way back into the bedroom that Jay really pays attention to the box. It’s big, and he knows it was in the kitchen last night because he helped Erin unpack the mini-fridge. So what’s it doing in here?

Jay approaches the box gingerly and peers inside, half-expecting to find some sort of kitten or puppy that Erin had rescued in the middle of the night. Instead, there’s a baby sitting in there and chewing on the corner of a blanket.

“Huh,” Jay says. He bends down.

The baby looks up at him and opens its mouth, dropping the blanket. It points at Jay. “Ahbababa?”

Jay examines the baby. It’s wearing overalls, and has a fair chunk of brown hair and a round little face with wide deep blue eyes. Jay thinks it looks kind of familiar. In fact, he’s pretty sure there’s a photo of this kid on Erin’s phone. More than one.

“Babe,” he says, touching Erin’s face.

She rolls away from him and scrunches down deeper into the bed. Okay.

Jay returns to the baby. “Hey, little dude,” he says, feeling like it’s probably a little dude. It’s hard to tell with babies.

The baby stares up at Jay, opening and closing his tiny little mouth. Jay wonders if that means ‘hungry’ – like a baby bird, maybe. There’s no chirping, but Jay’s not a complete idiot. He can feed a baby. Probably.

He puts hands under the baby’s arms, a little gingerly, in case the kid protests. There’s no sound. Jay lifts it up and out of the cardboard and plunks it down on the ground. Baby sits there and looks around, but nothing else happens.
At a bit of a loss, Jay turns back to Erin. He puts a hand on her shoulder, rubbing the warm skin. “Erin?”

She’s either ignoring him or she’s sleeping more deeply than she ever has before. Jay takes the phone from her bedside table and unlocks it. He scrolls through her photos until he finds one of the baby. Definitely the same kid, Jay thinks. Sitting by itself, being carried by Erin, by a blond-haired woman and then – oh. That’s Justin Voight, and Jay’s boss on Justin’s other side, and both of them cooing over the baby.

Jay knows whose baby this is now. This is the Voight kid, little Daniel. He still has no idea what Daniel is doing here.


Think like a baby, he tells himself. He gets down on the floor and looks around. There are a lot of clothes, and some shoes. Erin doesn’t pick up after herself. There are a couple of tiny baby socks on the ground, which is new, and one tiny baby shoe. Jay looks around for the other tiny baby shoe and glimpses half of it sticking out from under the bed. Bingo.

He gets right down and puts his face against the floor, peering under the bed. Sure enough, Daniel is down there, lying on his stomach and playing with the shoe.

“Gotcha,” Jay tells him. He stretches long arms under the bed, grips Daniel, and pulls the kid out. “Why’d you go under there?”

“Baa,” Daniel replies. He has a firm grip on the shoe and he waves it, violently, nearly clocking Jay in the head. “Ahhbaa.”

Jay sets Daniel up on his feet, checking to see if the kid can stand. He can. Good. Jay stands up, too, and gives Daniel a little prod towards the bedroom door. “That way.”

Daniel takes a stumbling step, stops, and turns to look up at Jay with his mouth hanging open. Jay nods and points at the door. Looking a little punch drunk, Daniel staggers through the door and into the hallway, where he hits a wall and falls over on his butt.

Jay grins. “Get up, buddy.”

Looking very serious, Daniel puts both hands on the floor and pushes himself up. He starts again, down the hallway. Stops by the bathroom door and walks in.

“No,” Jay says, “don’t go in there.” He follows Daniel in and finds the kid reaching for the toilet seat. Jay grabs him around the middle and pulls him away. Daniel shrieks, and Jay can’t tell if it’s a laugh or a scream, so he just sets the kid on his feet in the hallway. “Go on.” A nudge to the back of the boy’s head.

Daniel gets right back to walking.

Progress is slow, but they’re both in the kitchen when Jay hears Erin wake up. He’d been going through the bags which are strewn around the front door. There’s a thud from the bedroom, followed by Erin’s panicky yell. “Jay?”

“Kitchen!”

“Do you have the baby?”
It sounds weird, coming so easily from her. Feels just as weird when Jay calls back, “Yeah!” and looks at Daniel, sitting beside him and taking things out of the bag. There are already half a dozen baby safe cups, bowls and spoons tossed on the floor.

Pounding footsteps in the hall signal Erin’s arrival. She pauses at the door, seeking Daniel out with her eyes, and then she swoops down and picks him up, kissing his cheeks and running fingers over his belly to make him squirm. Daniel squeals with pleasure.

“Sorry,” Erin says to Jay. “I woke up and he was gone. Freaked me out.”

“It’s fine, I’ve got it,” Jay tells her, which is true. He pauses, figuring out how to phrase his next question, and then says, “So, ah, why is Voight’s grandkid in our house?”

“Don’t say it like that?”

“Say what?”

“Grandkid. Like he’s some kind of mini Voight.”

Jay shrugs and looks at the bags so that he doesn’t have to meet her eyes. “I’m not a big fan of Voight right now. Not after what he did to you.”

“He didn’t do anything to me!”

“Oh, so it’s just a hobby of yours, digging up bodies and hiding them from Crowley?”

They’ve gotten louder than either one of them intended and abruptly Daniel bursts into loud, noisy wails. He struggles against Erin’s arms when she tries to shush him.

“I’m sorry,” Jay says.

“It’s got nothing to do with Voight. Olive turned up last night and said it was an emergency. She’ll probably be back tonight, or tomorrow at the latest.” Erin pushes Daniel’s head into her shoulder and rubs his back. “Shh, baby, it’s okay. You don’t have to stay here,” she adds.

Jay frowns. “Who, me?”

“Yeah. If you want to wait at your apartment while I’m watching him.”

“What, so I don’t get to spend my weekend with you because of the kid?”

“Like you said, he’s a Voight kid. It’s a Voight problem.” Erin shrugs. Daniel has quieted down and she puts him on the floor and hands him a little plastic spoon. He looks at it curiously.

“No, it’s your problem. For now. And my job is to help with your problems,” Jay tells her. “We’re partners and partners.”

Erin laughs. Daniel bangs his spoon against the carpet and she runs her fingers through his fine hair. “So you’ve got my back?”

“Exactly,” Jay says. “I’ve got your back with this and everything else. Which means I’m gonna stay and help you with the kid. Okay?”

Daniel bangs his spoon against Jay’s knee.

“Okay,” Erin says. She leans forward and kisses him, making it slow. When she draws back she’s
smiling. “You’re a good partner.”

“I am,” Jay grumbles. “Thank you for noticing.”

“Are you going to cook breakfast?”

“I might. What do babies eat?”

“There’s probably something in here for him,” Erin says, putting her head down and rummaging into the bags. “Oh.” She draws out a pack of diapers. “I forgot. He must be soaked, poor kid.”

Jay takes the spoon off Daniel and points it at Erin. “Division of labour. You do diapers and I’ll do toast. And find baby food.” Daniel whines and reaches up for the spoon, but Jay pulls it back out of his reach. “No, little dude. No hitting with spoons. Go get clean.”

“Can you find clothes for him, too? He’s been sleeping in these.”

“I’m on it,” Jay says. “Some of us know how to actually search bags and not just dump them on the floor.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Some of us don’t dump all the dirty laundry on the floor either.”

“I only do that if I’m in a hurry!” She pulls Daniel into her arms and stands, holding the diapers.

“Sure,” Jay says. “Better not do that when we move in together.”

Jay watches her face closely, waiting for something to change. They’ve never talked about it before. He feels as if he should be holding his breath, waiting to see what she does.

Nothing happens. She shrugs and says, “Whatever. Bring the clothes into the bathroom when you find them, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

Just like that, she leaves the room, and Jay taps his fingers against his knees and thinks that it could definitely have gone worse. He’s been wanting to ask for a while, but he was going to test the waters first. Find out how she felt about it and then actually ask, not just blurt out some future laundry scenario he’d concocted in his head.

She didn’t laugh or cry or yell or anything, though. He’d say that went well.

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Erin pins Daniel down with a hand on his belly and tries to entertain him by making stupid faces. It’s not working. He doesn’t like lying on the cold tiles with only a towel between him and the floor, and he doesn’t like being on his back and staying still. He kicks and twists from side to side, reaches for things that Erin keeps having to push away from him. The toilet brush, for one.

“Ma-ma?” he says to her.

“Mama will be back soon,” Erin tells him. She’s going to call Olive’s mobile as soon as it’s a more reasonable hour. After 8, maybe. “Daniel, can you say Erin?”
He stares at her and then returns to his grabbing and wriggling. He’s fixated now on the tap beside the toilet and he’s trying to get to it with increasing desperation. “Unh, unh!” he grunts, trying to squirm away.

Erin puts her hand more firmly on his belly, tries to do up the sides of the clean diaper one-handed. She’s not great at this. Vaguely – very vaguely – she remembers Teddy being a baby, and watching Bunny – or, more often than not, one of Bunny’s friends or boyfriends – doing this for her brother. He was cute, then. He’s not so cute now. Erin doesn’t know where he is or what he’s doing, and Bunny won’t tell her. She’s not even sure if Bunny knows.

Jay tries to open the bathroom door and crashes it against Erin’s leg. “Hey.”

“Oh,” she says at the same time.

“Oops. Didn’t know you’d be kneeling on the floor.”

She rolls her eyes. “What did you get?”

He crouches down beside her, holding her shoulder, briefly, for balance. “A shirt, some pants. Is there anything else? Some magical baby-wear thing I don’t know about?”

“Nope, shirt and pants sounds fine. Divide and conquer?”

Jay consents to hold Daniel while Erin wrestles him into the clothes. Somehow, it’s just easier for Jay to lift the little boy up and distract him. Perched on Jay’s knees, Daniel is less frantic to escape. He allows Erin to force the shirt over his head and puts his arms through when she helps him. He reaches for the edge of the sink and explores the bathroom cabinet with his fingers while Erin steps his little legs through the baby jeans and tugs them up over his diaper.


“I’m not a total amateur. Is there toast?”

“Uh huh, and scrambled eggs, because I thought they might be soft enough for the kid,” Jay explains, jerking his head at Daniel. He keeps his hands under Daniel’s arms and rises from his crouch, leaving Daniel dangling in the air. The toddler gurgles. Jay glances down at him. “You like that, little dude? Try this.” He swings Daniel back and forth, around in a circle, lifts him high and drops him down fast. Daniel giggles, kicks his legs and pats at Jay’s hands when they stop.

“Mo-ah.”

“What’s that? More?”

“Mo-ah,” Daniel repeats.

There’s a strange sort of tightness in Erin’s chest as she watches them together. It’s not that she’d never pictured it – except, she realises, she hasn’t. She can’t let herself go that far, not even inside her own head. She’s too afraid. Instead, she’s made assumptions. Assumed that she’ll always be putting her work first, that she and Jay won’t last anyway. Something will go wrong and they’ll be over. Even if nothing does go wrong, Hank will kick one of them out of Intelligence and the resentment will haunt their relationship and turn everything sour.

Erin’s always been so sure of it that she’d never wondered; about moving in with him, about staying with him, building a life together. About kids.
And she’d always loved kids, always, and still does, but when she was a teenager all she’d seen were crappy parents and she’d thought; not me. If she was going to become a crappy parent then she would never be a parent and that was that.

Only then there’d been Hank, and Camille – Camille, who had done so much for Erin, who had reminded her how to hope and dream and live again. The kids thing had rekindled in her mind and she’d thought; someday. But then there was work, and she loved her work. She’d picked up the odd stray and imagined herself like Hank, pulling kids out and setting them on the right path, and she’d thought that was maybe enough. She’d dated a string of temporary, foul-mouthed, bad-tempered men and never let anything get serious.

Kelly Severide had been the nicest guy she’d dated since she was a kid and even he hadn’t made her feel like settling down. That had burned fierce and fast and hot; all about the pleasure and the passion.

Somewhere along the line, Erin knows, she’d just told herself that it was never going to happen and fooled herself into thinking that she was okay with that. Except – she’s not.

She’s thirty-one, now, and there’s Jay and he’s perfect. He’s a partner, on the job and off, and he’s never let her down. He would be a father. He would do it right. Erin just can’t quite summon the courage to think about taking that step.

“Hey,” he says suddenly. He’s staring at her, still holding Daniel. “Are you okay?”

“Hm?” Erin shakes her head, driving away the thoughts. “What? Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You looked all – mopey.”

“Mopey?” she snorts. “I don’t mope.”

“Uh huh, sure. Should we go and eat food?”

“I think we should,” she returns, reaching for Daniel. “Come here, bubba.” He goes into her arms easily and she sets him on her hip and pushes Jay towards the door.

Erin calls Olive while they eat. She’s got the phone tucked between her shoulder and ear, holding Daniel up on the counter with a hand at his hip and poking little bits of toast into his mouth. Jay finds himself watching – just watching. Erin’s eyes are on Daniel, her attention somewhere in-between the baby and the phone. She looks in control; like she’s got this, she knows what to do.

Jay loves that look on her. He sees it at work – the focus she gets when she’s driving, or the empathy that shines through when she interviews suspects. Jay sometimes wonders if he would have fallen as hard if the two of them worked some office job, something nine to five. It’s the emotional highs and lows of policing which let the sharp, contrasting sides of Erin’s personality come through so clearly. The steely backbone and the soft eyes.

“Hi,” Erin says, “it’s Erin. Daniel’s doing fine but I wanted to talk to you. Call me back when you get a chance? Thanks.” She pulls the phone away from her ear, hits ‘end’ and tosses it on the counter with a sigh. “Straight to voicemail.”

“She might still be asleep,” Jay points out. “It’s early.”

“I know, but wouldn’t you want to call and check in on your kid?”
“Maybe her phone’s out of battery.”

“Hm,” Erin hums noncommittally. “Here.” She takes a larger piece of toast and moves it towards Jay. He bites it out of her hand and Erin laughs. “I didn’t want you to eat it, idiot. I wanted you to break it up for the baby.”

“Too late now,” Jay says through his mouthful.

Erin looks at her phone. “I just want to know if she’s planning on getting home today at all. Should we be buying Daniel a crib or something?”

“Doesn’t he already have one? We could go pick it up from – where was Olive living?”

“With Voight, I thought,” Erin says. “I just assumed she moved in there after Justin. But then Voight went AWOL… maybe she was never there. I don’t think he would have left if he had Olive and Daniel relying on him.”

Jay drums his fingers against the counter. “There’s a thought. Have you tried calling Voight?”

“He doesn’t answer.”

“Text him. Leave a message or something. Tell him we’ve got his grandkid and he should come home.”

“I’ll try,” Erin says, but she looks doubtful.

Daniel spits a piece of toast onto the counter and chuckles.

“Ew,” Jay says.

“Try again, bubba,” Erin tells the kid. She opens her mouth, “Ah,” encouraging him, and when he opens his mouth she pops another piece of toast in.

Daniel spits it. This time, it lands on the kitchen floor.

“I think he’s done with eating,” Jay says.

“I think so,” Erin agrees. She looks at Jay. “Do you want to go out somewhere? Take him for a walk or something?”

“Sure,” Jay says easily, “that could be fun.”

“I mean – that’s sort of what we were planning to do with our downtime anyway.” Erin chews on her lip.

“You don’t have to look so worried,” Jay tells her. “I don’t care if I spend time with you and the kid comes as part of the package. I’ve still got your back.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” She leans in and pecks his lips.

“I love you,” Jay says, seriously. “Really.” He wants her to know he means it – needs her to know.

“Does that extend to letting me shower first or-”

Jay laughs. “Go ahead, you shower hog. I’ve got the kid.”
“Thanks,” Erin tells him, sliding Daniel down the counter for Jay to grab. She brushes past Jay, a hand on his bicep, cheek pressing against his shoulder blade, fingers trailing across his back. “Really, thanks.”

“That’s why you’ve got baby-watching back-up!” Jay calls after her.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed - I'm trying to get chapter lengths up because I reckon that's a bit more fun. Updating should be more or less weekly. We'll see if I stick to that, anyway.

Don't forget, if you have any random Linstead prompts, the comments of this fic is a good place to put them! I'm planning on a big series of one-shots/prompts soon, so fodder for that is always appreciated.

Big shout out to everyone who gives kudos and comments! You guys are so cool. You deserve jelly beans.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Phew! Sorry I'm a bit behind on my updating schedule, but my house got new carpets (they are da bomb now they're done, but it was miserable when we had to move all the furniture and me and my laptop literally had to live in the cupboard under the stairs (Harry Potter eat your heart out) and so I was late to watch the episode and late to finish up this chapter! It is a loooooooong chapter though.

Hope you enjoy! As always, I welcome comments because they're cool. Duh.

They decide to make a day of it. Jay crams snacks, water and sunblock into a bag along with his wallet and Erin’s apartment keys. Erin reminds him to add spare clothes, which he does, and diapers, which he also does.

Still no baby car-seat, so they take a couple of buses instead.

Daniel likes the buses; sitting beside Erin, on Erin’s lap, or standing up on the seat and pressing palms and nose to the glass. Erin carries him when they switch buses, but Jay is the one who scoops the kid up when they finally get off outside the Lincoln Park Zoo.

It’s a Sunday and there are crowds. Jay holds Daniel in one arm, keeping the kid up high so that their faces are close together. Erin hangs on to Jay’s free arm. He likes being able to feel her there next to him.

Daniel looks around at all the people and babbles. He says, “Bagah! Bye-bye, dohbe godeh,” and switches his gaze to Jay, as if he expects Jay to understand, somehow.

Jay’s not sure exactly what to get out of this, but he says, “Sure, little dude,” and that seems to work.

Erin pulls Jay’s arm down and laces her fingers through his. He glances at her, quickly, but she’s staring straight ahead. Her sunglasses obscure half of her face and her hair falls in dark waves around the rest of it. Her hair is browner than it used to be. Nicer this way; Jay would always associate those pale highlights with the messy, angry Erin who had come back to them after Nadia’s death.

He sees it sometimes when he closes his eyes; Erin standing above him with that blood on her hands, down her shirt, and he remembers how lucky he is. Lucky that she came back. Lucky that she came back for him.

“I’m thinking polar bears,” he says to Erin.

She snorts. “Polar bears?”

“Yeah, polar bears. I love ‘em. Always have.”

“Oh really? This is new. You’ve never told me this.” She tucks herself closer against his side, smiling up, bright and beaming.
“I don’t think you’ve ever asked,” Jay says. “You’ve never asked me,” and he mimics her voice, “Hey, Jay, what are your feelings about polar bears?”

“Shut up,” she laughs.

“And I would have said,” Jay puts on a ‘Jay’ voice, extra deep and growly, “Well, Erin,” but he doesn’t get any further than that because Daniel lets out a massive belly laugh and twists in Jay’s arms. Nonplussed, Jay looks at the toddler. “Is he – listening? To us? Can he understand?”

“I think he just liked your funny voice,” Erin coos, leaning across Jay to stroke Daniel’s arm. “Didn’t you, bubba? You liked that funny voice.”

“Gah bah gah,” Daniel says, reaching out for Erin’s face. He grips her sunglasses suddenly and without warning, pulls them off and throws them on the ground. “Abah!”

“No,” Erin tells him gently, stooping to retrieve the sunglasses before they get trampled. She slides them back on. “No touching Auntie Erin’s sunglasses.”

“No!” Daniel shrieks. “No!”

“Exactly. No sunglasses.”

“No bababa!”

Jay grins, catches Erin’s eye. “Close enough,” he says.

They take a map at the entrance and try to figure out where to go. Erin suggests doing it in order; working their way through the closest exhibits first.

“Nah,” Jay says. “I’m not super keen on seeing the waterfowl lagoon.”

She smacks a hand up against his chest and says, “Hey. Just because you’re a polar bear purist.”


“Shut up,” she laughs. “What the hell is a nanulak?”

“A polar-grizzly hybrid,” Jay says proudly. “People keep trying to call them pizzly bears but I feel like that’s just unmajestic.”

“Unmajestic. Is it.”

“Yes, it is.”

Erin looks up and grins. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but it looks like you’re out of luck. No polar bears.”

“What? But – the last time I was here, there was definitely a polar bear!”

“Not anymore,” Erin says.

“Do you have to look so gleeful about it? I feel wounded.” Jay juggles Daniel from his left arm to his right so that he can put his left hand over his heart and pout at Erin. Daniel takes advantage of the move to try another snatch at Erin’s glasses.

“Whoa,” she says, dodging backwards out of the way.
“He really likes those.”

“Daniel, you wanna try them on? Then maybe leave them alone?” Carefully, Erin pulls her sunglasses off and moves them slowly towards Daniel’s face, keeping her movements steady so that she doesn’t accidentally poke him in the eye. The glasses slide on easily and Daniel looks around behind the comically large lenses. He tilts his head up to try and keep them on his nose, but they slide around. Erin laughs and whips out her phone to snap a picture just as Daniel shakes his head violently, like a dog shaking off water, and the sunglasses fly away and land on the ground again.

“He doesn’t like them,” Jay reports.

Erin pushes the sunglasses up onto the top of her head, holding back waves of hair, and comes in close to kiss Daniel’s chubby cheeks. “You’re too cute, bubba,” she tells him. “What are Jay and me going to do with someone so cute?”

“Take him to see the black bears,” Jay says immediately.

“Okay, that’s actually perfect,” Erin agrees, “because the Pritzker exhibit is really close to us and it has a ton of cool stuff. Like, red wolves and beavers and kestrels type cool.”

“Bears,” Jay insists.

Daniel looks at him intently and tries, “Buuh.”

“Good job, kid.”


“No Mama,” Erin tells him gently. “Mama isn’t here, Daniel, but you’re gonna see her soon, okay? Really soon.”

“Mama?”

“No, Daniel.”

The kid starts fussing a bit in Jay’s arms; wanting to get down, maybe, or just angry that his requests for Mama are going unheard. Jay has to twist both arms around to hold the boy. “He’s wriggly,” he says to Erin. “Do I let him down?”

“No way, we’ll lose him in this crowd.”

“Isn’t that why you hold kids’ hands?”

“Yeah, but his hand is tiny and his walking speed is-”

“Slow,” Jay completes. “Gotcha. No getting down, kid.”

Daniel continues to flail. “Aaaaaah!”

“No,” Jay tries again. “No, dude, no.”

Erin says, “Turn around,” and when Jay obligingly presents his back to her she digs into the backpack and pulls out a packet of small, teddy-shaped graham crackers. “Hey! Daniel. You want some teddies?”

Daniel spots them when Jay turns again and starts nodding immediately, reaching out his chubby
hands and opening and closing his fingers in the ‘gimme, gimme’ gesture.

“Distraction,” Erin tells Jay with a wicked grin as she passes over a couple of crackers. “Works every time.”

“I feel like I recognise this method,” Jay says dubiously. “Like maybe you’ve used it on me a few times.”

“Maybe.”

“Is this why we can never have the conversation about why you turn the heating in the apartment down so low?” Jay frowns. “Wait. Is this why you keep making out with me when I try to have the conversation about the heating?”

She winks, flirting, running her fingers down his arm. “Are you saying you don’t like it?”

“No,” Jay says. “Yes. Wait. I don’t know.”

“Works every time!” Erin crows, and she stands on her toes to lean past Daniel and press a kiss to the corner of Jay’s lips.

He slides his free arm around her waist to hold her there, making the kiss longer than Erin had probably intended, but that’s okay. Daniel is munching on teddy grahams and the crowds part easily around the three of them, leaving them in their own little island. Jay and Erin and this child, who isn’t theirs, but…

…maybe one day.

And then Daniel spits chewed up graham cracker in Erin’s ear and it really just absolutely murders the moment.

The dirty puddle tantrum is the tantrum which finally breaks them.

Over the course of the day, Erin has fended off the ‘otters’ tantrum, the ‘bears are scary’ tantrum, the ‘you cannot eat litter out of the trashcan’ tantrum, the ‘you cannot eat dirt off the ground’ tantrum and the ongoing ‘no sunglasses’ tantrum by presenting Daniel with a series of snacks. Usually these will distract him and hold his attention for a few minutes. If they’re lucky he’ll put something in his mouth, but Jay’s not convinced that the toddler has swallowed anything yet.

His favourite snack was the orange, which he refused to let Erin peel (they narrowly dodged another tantrum) and carried around with him through the rest of the zoo.

Erin’s methods aren’t entirely snack presentation; she’s managed to halt tantrums by tickling the kid, too, or asking him to mimic animal sounds, which seems to be his favourite topic of conversation. Jay and Daniel passed a pleasant fifteen minutes making ‘moo’ sounds at each other when they found the Farm-in-the-Zoo section.

Jay’s not as creative as Erin is about tantrum distraction. He’s effectively halted the ‘we left the cows behind’ tantrum, the ‘I have to wear clothes’ tantrum, the ‘I dropped my orange’ tantrum and the ‘a leaf touched my face’ tantrum by scooping Daniel into his arms and keeping the kid there with brute force. It’s been unpleasant for all of them.

They’re still going strong, though, by 3 PM. Then Daniel spots a muddy puddle on the ground
and is just absolutely enamoured. Erin doesn’t mind letting him crouch by the puddle, stare at the puddle, babble to the puddle and put his fingers in the puddle, but she stops him gently when he tries to walk into the puddle.

“No, Daniel.”

He turns around to stare at her in a haughty, astonished way, eyebrows quirked up as if he’s saying ‘but why?’ and Erin shakes her head. After a moment, Daniel turns back to the puddle. He hunkers down on his haunches and takes one or two practice bounces, bobbing up and down with his little hands on his knees, and then he launches himself into the puddle.

Erin is too late to stop him. To make matters worse, Daniel only moves an inch or two into the puddle but he can’t keep his balance, staggers, and sits down hard. Water splashes Erin and Daniel. He takes a moment to absorb his surroundings; mud on his shoes and hands, soaking wet pants, damp shirt and drops of water running down his face and hair. Daniel’s face crumples. He opens his mouth wide and howls.

Trying to comfort him, Erin reaches forward and rubs his arm, saying, “Shh, shh, bubba. It’s okay, it’s okay.”

It doesn’t help. Apparently enraged at her soothing efforts, Daniel’s howls turn into full-blown roars of combined anger, frustration and sorrow, and he flings himself backwards to get away from Erin’s hand on his arm. That sends him deeper into the puddle, with water sloshing over his shirt-front and neck, and he clocks his head on the concrete underneath the puddle. Erin winces, and Daniel screams.

“Wow,” Jay says, looking down at them. “Just wow.”

With wet, muddy hands, Erin uses her wrist to push the sticky hair back from her forehead and looks up at Jay in exasperation. “Can you stop just standing there and saying wow? Actually help?” Her tone comes out more cutting than she meant it to.

He squats down beside her as Daniel starts flailing his legs, sending water showering over both of them. “Sorry,” Jay tells her.

“I’m not really mad,” Erin says. “I’m… tired.” It makes her look at Daniel in a new light, and she says, “He’s tired, too.”

“Well, yeah,” Jay agrees. “We have run him kinda ragged this morning.”

“I didn’t think,” Erin mutters, annoyed with herself. “I forgot how little he still is.” Flooded with sympathy, she reaches towards Daniel again. This time he lets her pull him from the puddle. She lifts him up and cradles his wet, muddy, angry little body in her arms, pressing him against her chest. “I’ve got you, Daniel.”

Jay stands up first, with one eye on Erin. She can feel him watching her as she rocks back onto her heels and rises, still holding Daniel. The toddler is crying against her shirt, and mud, water, tears and snot are all soaking in, right through to Erin’s skin. It’s disgusting and sticky and she wants to recoil from this baby who is a pit of endless mess and stink.

Instead, she readjusts Daniel in her arms and pulls him closer to her, swaying on her feet a little to try and rock him. The swaying seems to help. He goes slack against her, his body getting heavy as he presses his face further into her chest. Erin feels Jay’s arm go around her shoulders. Jay presses a kiss to the top of her head and Erin feels his breath in her hair as he chuckles.
“What’s so funny?” she asks, tilting her head to look up at him. His eyes are bright with laughter and really green in the afternoon light filtering down.

“The way he threw himself backwards,” Jay says, trying and failing to curb his grin, “and kicked his legs. Kid’s got a melodramatic streak.”

He’s staring right at her with that grin and those happy eyes and it makes Erin melt a little. She leans into Jay’s arm and reminds herself that she’s got back-up. This isn’t just about her and Daniel and not knowing what to do. Erin’s not alone in this.

“I love you, you know,” she says, nodding up at Jay.

“I know,” he says, mock-serious.

“Han Solo,” Erin teases him.

He ducks his head to kiss her, says, “I love you too,” and then adds, “but I’d love you more if you wore your hair like Princess Leia.”

Erin snorts and almost hits him, but Daniel is too heavy in her arms. “You wish.”

“Come on, Leia,” Jay says, shouldering the backpack again and prodding Erin down the path, “let’s go home.”

Erin can’t help keeping it going for one more joke, so she glances at Jay over her shoulder and says, “I’ve got a baaaad feeling about this.”

Daniel falls asleep on the first bus. Actually, Erin has a sneaking suspicion that he’d been mostly asleep since they left the zoo and started walking, but he’s properly out by the time she sits down, grateful to be able to hold his weight in her lap for a little while. He’s heavy.

When Erin looks at his little face, pressed against her chest, his eyes are closed. His long lashes brush his cheeks and he moves steadily up and down with the rhythm of Erin’s breath and his own. He’s got a fist curled into the sleeve of Erin’s t-shirt and he’s drooling on her. A lot.

“Do you think he’ll wake up and chuck a fit if I take him?” Jay wonders.

Erin shrugs. “Better not to risk it.”

“Are you sure you’ve got it?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.”

She has got it, all the way back to her apartment, although Erin is a little surprised to realise just how much a sleeping fifteen-month-old boy seems to weigh. Her arms are genuinely burning when they get in the door, and she makes for the couch immediately, fully prepared to just sink right down onto it and veg out for a few minutes.

Jay grabs her around the waist and whirls her away. “Uh-uh-uh,” he tuts.

“What?”

“You’re way too muddy for the new couch.”
“It was new like nine months ago, Jay.”

“Give me the sleepy dude, and you go and wash up. Change, or whatever.”

“Are you sure?”

“You can’t be comfortable in those clothes,” Jay points out, and she’s not, she’s really not, but she doesn’t want to let Daniel go. Not when he’s tucked so firmly in her arms, pressed so tightly against her, clinging to her even in his sleep.

“I don’t want him to wake up,” she says, looking at Jay.

“He won’t wake up if we’re careful,” Jay tells her, “and you have to put him down eventually, Erin.”

Okay, so, Jay’s got her all figured out. Erin sighs and nods. She turns so that Jay can find the places Daniel has fisted his hands and gently unwind them, and then Jay positions himself next to her and holds out his arms and Erin gently, so gently, slides Daniel over and moves herself away.

“Got him,” Jay says, looking uncomfortable with his hands up almost at his chin and both elbows sticking out. “Actually, no, I don’t. Help.”

Erin takes some of Daniel’s weight while Jay repositions the kid. When they’re both settled Jay gives her the nod.

“Okay,” Erin says. “I’ll be really quick. I’ll just wipe my face and change my clothes.”

“What are we going to do about little Mister Mud over here?”

“Bathe him,” Erin returns immediately, “but let’s see how long he sleeps, first.”

“How long are you supposed to let babies sleep? Won’t he stay awake all night, or something?”

“Okay, so we’ll wake him up when I’m done. You’ve got him until then?”

“Yeah, I’ve got him,” Jay confirms.

Jay’s not actually sure what to do with the kid. He sways a little, shifting his weight from foot to foot, trying to keep Daniel steady. There’s a little snuffling sound that makes Jay look down, nervous that the baby has awoken, but Daniel is still out. He smacks his lips in his sleep.

Jay moves his eyes over the boy’s chubby cheeks, his soft face, the slack bow of his lips and the long, dark curves of his eyelashes. He wonders if he can see any of Voight in this kid. Any of Justin Voight, even. Is Daniel going to grow up just like them? Will he steal or cheat or lie or break the law? Will he one day murder a man?

“I’m going to watch your back, buddy,” Jay whispers to the baby. “You’re going to be a great little dude.”

He feels as if the odds probably aren’t looking good, though. Daniel’s grandfather is… well, is Voight. His father was a troubled young man who tried to do the right thing at the end and died for it. His mother…

Huh. Erin hasn’t had a call all day, Jay thinks. Unless Olive has texted her and Erin hasn’t
mentioned it, this kid’s mother has been AWOL for more than twelve hours without even trying to contact them and check on her kid.

Before he can think about it too much, Erin bursts back into the room in a fresh t-shirt and daisy dukes, eyeing him anxiously.

“Is it okay?”

Jay wants to laugh at how anxious she sounds; how perfect she needs everything to be for this kid. Erin gets attached too easily. She always has, and Jay used to worry about it, back when they were partners and he knew she wouldn’t share with him. Now, Erin tells him everything, even things he doesn’t really care about, or want to know. It’s better than the other way around, though.

It’s different, though, her being attached to Daniel. He’s not just some kid they’ve picked up off the street; not part of a case, not someone Erin can’t fix, no matter how hard she pretends to be detached. This is, more-or-less, her nephew. Jay understands the anxiety.

“Everything is great,” he says, keeping his voice low. “My little buddy is still sleeping, and still…” he glances down to check, “yep, still drooling on my shirt.”

“He’s a bit of a drool-machine,” Erin agrees. She comes over to stand next to Jay, running her fingers across the expanse of his back and letting her hand come to rest at his hip. Erin blows a long breath out. “Okay. Should we try and wake him up?”

Jay checks the clock, and it’s been just over an hour since the puddle incident. He’s not sure how long Daniel needs to be sleeping for, but an hour seems like a good length for a midday nap. Maybe.

“Sure,” he says to Erin. “Go for it.”


Jay says, “You want to take him?” and Erin nods and puts her hands under Daniel’s armpits, pulling him out of Jay’s arms.

“Hey, baby,” she murmurs to him. “Hey, there you are, sleepyhead.”

Daniel blinks open exhausted eyes. He doesn’t do anything; stares at Erin’s face and then rocks his face back and forth against the shoulder of her clean t-shirt, smearing it with mud and snot and drool.

Erin laughs. “I didn’t think about that.” She ducks her head down to kiss Daniel’s face and he pushes her away.

“No,” he says.

“Yes, bubba. Time to wake up, gorgeous boy, open your eyes again for me.” She kisses him again, his cheek, the baby-soft curve of his neck, and then she blows a raspberry against his forehead.

Daniel’s eyes fly wide and he giggles, but only a little.

“Let’s go,” Erin says to him gently, “let’s go and have a bath, Daniel, okay?”
It’s not a baby voice that she’s using, exactly, but her tone is different when she speaks to Daniel. Different when she speaks to their younger victims, too, or even the older ones. It’s like a wall drops away and there’s that empathic, maternal side of Erin shining out.

Jay loves it. He loves her. “I’ll run the bath,” he suggests. “Maybe he’ll wake up quicker in the bathroom? If he sees the water?”

“Or he’ll try and escape,” Erin says, but she follows him down the hallway and through the bathroom door, taking her hand away from Daniel’s back to flick on the heating lights. The room fills with bright yellow glow. It’s July, so too warm to be using the lights, really, but cosy.

Daniel yawns and Jay looks over at him. “Aw.”

“He’s cute,” Erin agrees. Her eyes get soft when she looks at Daniel. “So cute, aren’t you, sweet boy?”

Daniel rubs fists into his eyes and Erin lowers them both down to the floor, until she’s sitting with Daniel in her lap. While Jay leans over the tub to turn on the water, Erin unlaces Daniel’s shoes and peels off his little socks.

“Arms up,” she tells him, and tugs his little shirt off his chest, tossing it on the floor. She works his jeans down his legs, too, and then says, “Oh. I forgot to grab a clean diaper.”

“I’m on it,” Jay says, stretching up from his cramped spot by the tub. His arms are a little stiff from holding Daniel in the same position for so long. He can only imagine how sore Erin must feel, after the long bus ride. “The ones in the backpack are still clean, right?”

“Those are great.” Erin looks down at Daniel in her lap, wearing only his diaper, playing with one of his socks. “He must be starving. Maybe make some more toast? It’s the only thing he’s swallowed so far, I think.”

“I’m on it,” Jay says. He puts one hand on Erin’s head for balance, steps over her while she swats at him, and leaves the room.

It’s incredibly satisfying to put Daniel down into the tub. He’s been absolutely filthy all day, plastering his hands and his face on everything, licking stuff randomly whenever Erin is too slow to stop him, covered in mud and dust and spiderwebs. There had also been Erin’s first super gross poopy diaper change, which had taken place in the public zoo toilets and been… an experience.

Actually, Erin had been a little surprised that she’d managed to avoid the dreaded diaper for this long in her life. She’d spent plenty of time around kids; taken care of friends’ babies before, for a few hours, but the kids had always been old enough to go in the potty, or their parents had returned before any diaper changing had been necessary.

Erin wishes she could have avoided it for longer, but that’s life. And it helps that Daniel is practically related. Regardless, she’s been wanting to clean him all day, so it doesn’t matter whether or not she’s kneeling painfully on wet tiles. It doesn’t even matter that she has to lean over at a weird angle to hold Daniel upright and stop him from flinging himself face-first into the water.

Her back hurts, though, and her shirt is filthy and Daniel’s body gets more slippery the more soaked he gets. Erin doesn’t have a smaller tub, or a baby bath seat or anything remotely useful. She
spares one hand from Daniel to push her hair away from her face and then, decision made, she lifts the baby out of the tub and sets him on the bath mat.

He complains, because he likes the water. “Buh-buh!” he yells at Erin. “Buh!” and he toddles over and tries to climb back into the tub. The side is too high, but it keeps him distracted long enough for Erin to peel off her gross shirt and shuck the daisy dukes (because denim and water are a bad combination) and climb into the tub in her panties and bra. She sits, and then lifts Daniel up and over the side, setting him down in-between her knees.

Daniel is a little interested that Erin is in here with him. He crouches in the water and looks at her over his shoulder, and then he pats her knee and sits down with his back to her, splashing happily.

From this angle it’s easier for Erin to make sure he doesn’t drown. She cups water in her hands and pours it over his body, rubs at the tougher stains with a washcloth. There’s a little more urgency to it now, because she’s got this nagging fear that he might pee in the tub, but it’s a lot less hard on her back. And her knees.

Jay walks in and says, “Huh.”

“I know,” Erin nods, “it’s weird.”

“I mean… I guess it’s saving water?” He sits on the edge of the tub.

Erin laughs at him. “I couldn’t get a proper grip on him from out there,” she explains. “He’s a baby, it’s not like he cares.”

“No, but I think you look awesome,” Jay says, leaning over to steal a kiss. “And your panties are almost see-through.”

Startled, Erin glances down. “They’re not!”

“I said almost. A guy can dream.”

“Ja-ay.”

“What?”

“Stop being stupid and bring us toast.”

“You’re a very demanding girlfriend,” he says. “Do you really want to eat toast in the bath?”

“Oh. Actually, no.”

Jay smirks, that annoying lilt to his mouth and those cocked eyebrows which always used to piss Erin off because he looked so damn sure of himself. Now, though, it’s a little more endearing, so all she does is roll her eyes and turn Daniel around in the bath so that she can start working on his face.

He leans heavily against Erin’s knee and tries to twist his head away from her, surging this way and that and causing the bathwater to slosh around.

“I gotta do it, bubba,” Erin tells him. “Just stay still a moment more, sweetheart.” She scrubs mud from Daniel’s cheek, under his chin, away from the little creases in his neck. She’s not even sure what’s going on with his nose, which is caked in dried snot and mud, but she leaves that for last.

It proves to be the trickiest. Jay puts a hand behind Daniel’s back to stop the kid from scooting away to the far end of the tub, and Erin swoops in and nose-wipes at top speed.
Daniel whines in protest, but he goes back to playing in the water as soon as it’s over, a hand on Erin’s leg, the other hand smacking up and down to splash. Erin rubs the washcloth over his hair, which he also doesn’t like, but it’s done too fast for him to complain.

“There,” she says. “Does he look clean?”

“Sparkling,” Jay assures her. “You’ve got mud behind your ear though.”

“Where?” Erin asks, half-lifting a hand to her head. Jay gets there first.

“Right… here,” he murmurs, dropping his fingers into the tub and lifting them up to rub against Erin’s skin. It’s kind of absurdly sweet, and Erin has to swallow her smile because she doesn’t want him knowing exactly what he does to her, this insufferably loveable man.

Jay skates his fingers beneath her ear and along her jaw almost absent-mindedly, just staring at her. Erin leans into his hand and he brushes his thumb along her bottom lip, softly, and his face comes closer…

The phone buzzes. Erin isn’t sure whose phone it is until she recognises Olinsky’s ringtone and says, “That’s mine.”

“Where?” Jay wonders, already turning away and searching the bathroom.


“Found it,” Jay says. He fishes the phone out and goes to press it to his ear, and Erin shakes her head violently to stop him.

“No! On speaker, put it on speaker and don’t say anything.”

He pouts. “I thought we were done with the whole ‘secret relationship’ thing.”

“Just…” Erin can’t explain why she wants to pretend that Jay isn’t at her house late Sunday afternoon; that they’re not walking some kind of weird line between a domestic, toddler-raising partnership and that new-relationship, hot-and-heavy need to touch each other, to kiss each other all the time. She just doesn’t want Olinsky to know. “…okay?”

“Okay,” Jay agrees. He answers the call and puts the phone straight onto speaker.

Erin says, “O, what’s up?”

“Case just dropped,” Olinsky says, his voice a little scratchy through the phone. “A big one. Antonio wants everyone in.”

Crap. Erin looks between Daniel and Jay desperately, even as she finds herself saying, “I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Good,” Olinsky answers. “Tell Halstead.” He hangs up the phone.

Jay says, “You’re supposed to tell me we have a case.”

“He’s Voight’s grand-kid, I mean, he’s a CPD family
“But-”

“No, Erin, seriously. That’s the safest option for everyone. No one can get mad at you for trying to keep little mini-Voight safe, can they?”

“I guess not,” Erin mumbles.

“The whole precinct knows Voight is gone. All you have to do is say that Olive dumped him in our laps last night with no warning – which is true, by the way – and we didn’t expect to get called in today – also true – and you need him to be with people that you trust. Okay?”

When he lays it all out like that, it sounds so simple. Erin says, “Okay.”

“Good,” Jay nods. “So get out of that bath and maybe keep wearing your skivvies while you get Daniel dressed.”

Erin laughs, “Nice try. Nice try. You dress the kid and I’m going to dress me.” She pulls the plug and stands up, passes Daniel to Jay and steps over the side. “Let’s go.”

They both spring into action.
Platt sees them walking into the precinct and her eyes get wide, and then her mouth drops open and she says, “No. Oh, no.”

“C’mon, Sarge,” Jay says, “we haven’t even asked yet.”

She’s shaking her head, moving around the desk and pointing at Daniel. “I don’t know what you two have been up to and I don’t want to know. Take your kid to day care.”

Erin jogs Daniel in her arms and says, “You wanna go see Aunty Trudy?”

“He doesn’t!” Platt says.

“It’s not our kid,” Jay tells her, “it’s Voight’s kid. I mean, grandkid. And we just need someone to watch him for, like, an hour. Okay?”

“Please,” Erin chimes in.

Jay is pretty sure that’s what makes Platt change her mind, because she’s always had a soft spot where Erin is concerned. Either way, she rolls her eyes and says, “So this is the little Voight, huh?”

Erin says, “This is Daniel,” beaming at the boy in her arms, holding his face up close to hers and leaning in towards him.

“Uh huh, and you want me to do what with him? Stash him in a storage closet somewhere? I’m a busy woman.”

“We have to go upstairs,” Jay says. “His mom’s out on an emergency, it’s all very complicated and we didn’t have any warning about this case-”

“Stop,” Platt interrupts, “just stop. You’re breaking my heart here, Halstead.” The stony look on her face remains unchanged, but she’s got her eyes fixed on Erin and the baby. Abruptly she holds out a hand and snaps her fingers. “Hey. Burgess.”

Burgess is in her civvies, bag slung over her shoulder and trailing after Garcia towards the door. She says, “Yeah?” a little nervously.

“Come here,” Platt tells her.

“Uh, actually, I need to… go…”

“No you don’t. Get over here.”
Burgess drags her feet towards the desk, casting a last longing look back as Garcia exits the precinct, mouthing ‘sorry’ over his shoulder.

Reluctantly, Burgess says, “What is it, Sarge?”

“You like kids, right?”

“…I guess.”

“Didn’t I hear you had a niece?”

Burgess smiles, suddenly, as if she can’t help it. Her face lights up as she says, “Yeah. Zoey. She’s great, she’s turning twelve in a few months, actually, and—”


“Um.”

“Just say okay.”

Burgess looks from Erin to Platt and back to Erin. “Is he-?”


“Huge,” Jay agrees quickly.

Burgess is wavering, he can see it in her face. She says, “How long?”

Platt says, “Few minutes, tops. Don’t even worry about it, he’ll probably fall asleep. Kids sleep a lot. Just pick him up and walk him over there,” she gestures behind her, “and sit in a chair and wait for him to sleep. Okay? Okay! Nice work, Burgess.” She plucks Daniel out of Erin’s arms and pushes him into Burgess’ arms and says, “Have a great time, you two.”

“Thank you!” Erin calls, and she’s already running for the stairs, so Jay follows her, palms open the cage and holds the door open. Erin is shouting, “I’ll owe you one!” down the stairs at Burgess, who is standing there with Daniel up against her hip and looking more than a little shell-shocked.

Antonio is standing by the board instead of Voight, and even though it’s been like this since May, Erin still finds herself doing a double take as she weaves over to her desk. She feels eyes on her but doesn’t look around; forces herself not to look at Jay, either. It’s not as if they’re fooling anyone any more, but Erin still finds herself trying to keep it subtle, keep it out of the workplace.

“That’s everyone,” Antonio says, and then he frowns and does a head count and says, “Wait, where’s O?”

“Here,” Olinsky says, appearing beside Ruzek. “I’m still here.”

“Right.”

Before Antonio can even start talking, Erin is taking in the white board. There are photos plastered up on it. Victims, and a witness sketch of the perp, and crime scene images. Erin gets a sinking feeling in her stomach. She knows this case. It’s fifteen years old but she knows the details
backwards and forwards. She knows the police work done on it, and she remembers reading about it in the papers and she knows the case, intimately and personally.

Automatically, Erin finds herself running her eyes down the row of victims; photos of their faces, taken before they died. She knows their names, but her gaze stops on the photo in the middle of the line of seven. The woman in the photo looks young. She has dark blond hair with even darker roots, pulled back in a messy ponytail and her head is tipped back in a laugh. There’s a hand on her shoulder. Erin knows exactly whose hand it is; who’s been cropped out of the picture, and Erin finds herself saying, *I’m sorry, I’m so sorry* in her head, over and over.

Antonio smacks his hand against one of the crime scene photos. “Most of you probably recognise this from the news a while back,” he says. “The Asterisk killer was really big back in 2000.”

“Asterisk killer?” Ruzek asks. “Why would they call him…” Antonio moves his hand from the board and the question dies out in Ruzek’s throat, because the crime scene photo shows the lower half of a woman’s naked torso, and carved into the flesh of her stomach is a bloody symbol; *

“He’s been inactive for almost eight years,” Erin says. “Completely inactive. Vanished. They said he was either dead or-”

“Incapacitated,” Antonio finishes. “It’s looking like it was the latter.” He flips the board over – there isn’t enough room on it for more – and reveals the lone photo of an eighth woman sitting on the other side. “This is Nicole Tanner. They found her this morning. She was twenty-nine years old, had a husband and a young son.” He points to the crime scene photo. There, on the body, is the same asterisk calling card.

“Couldn’t that be a copycat?” Ruzek asks.

Antonio shakes his head. “We’ve got a DNA match to the previous seven victims.”

Atwater scratches his arm, frowning. “Uh, wait. They have DNA on this guy?”

“Yes,” Erin says. “He’s left DNA and prints at every crime scene.”

“But nobody’s ever caught him?”

“No,” Erin says.

Olinsky says, “*Obviously* not, Atwater.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“So if he wasn’t dead,” Erin says, “where’s he been for the past seven years?”


“Yeah, but then his prints would be in the system,” Olinsky says, rolling his eyes up towards the ceiling. “Does no one think before they speak?”

“Right, so, the way I see it,” Antonio continues quickly, clearly trying to maintain control of the situation, “we have two angles to approach this from. Solve the fresh murder – the Nicole Tanner murder – like it’s any other Intelligence case, and at the same time, figure out what could have stopped the Asterisk from killing in the intervening years.”
“Maybe look for similar patterns in other countries?” Erin suggests. “He killed more-or-less once a year, every year.”

“I can access records,” Mouse pipes up from the back of the room. “Look for any other cases with these markings or this DNA.”

“I’ve got contacts I can speak to,” Olinsky agrees.

Antonio says, “Okay, so, Ruzek, you and Atwater go over the files from the last seven cases. Make sure there are no connections between past and present victim, nothing that anyone’s overlooked. Halstead, Lindsay – the family’s already been notified, but not interviewed.”

“We’ve got it,” Jay says promptly. “Parents or husband?”

“Both,” Antonio says. “I don’t care what order you do it in. O, can I have a word?”

Olinsky says, “Yeah,” and he and Antonio retreat back into Voight’s office.

Erin watches the door close behind them and wishes that it were Voight in there. She needs him here for this. Antonio is doing his best, and he’s got Olinsky backing him up, but neither of them are Voight and Erin wants this case solved.

Jay is waiting for her out in the passageway. In a low voice, he asks, “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Erin says.

Jay looks at her. “Erin.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” she tells him.

Kim has no idea what the baby wants and it’s driving her insane. Completely and utterly – insane.

It’s been forty-five minutes, but who’s counting, right? And she’s sitting on the bench in the locker room with the baby on her lap and he’s still wailing. At least he’s in a cuddle phase. So far, Daniel (and she only learnt his name ten minutes in, when she went out to ask Platt) has switched between flailing out of her grasp and clinging to her arms. Neither option seems to placate him, but Kim feels less guilty when he cuddles into her than she does when he tries to run away.

Also, her sister keeps texting and reminding her of all the fun that she could be having. Which Kim thinks is just blatantly unfair.

She’s been trying to distract herself by theorising about how Erin and Jay ended up with a baby. To be fair, it was certainly more fun in the first ten minutes, before Platt told her that little Daniel Voight was practically CPD royalty and deserved to be treated as such and “so no, you can’t go home, Burgess.” Kim had been juggling theories up in the air but they’d mostly revolved around ‘secret love-child’, and ‘babysitting Voight’s grandson’ is a lot less fun.

Daniel squirms, suddenly, doing his best to get out of her arms and onto the floor. His sobs increase in volume and he starts babbling, too, along with them. Kim strains to hear, in case it’s important.

He’s saying, “Ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma ma,” and Kim isn’t sure if that’s just baby talk or if he wants his Mama.
“Daniel,” she tries, lowering him to the floor because she’s genuinely afraid he’s going to twist out of her arms.

He ignores her. “Mama, ma ma ma ma, Mama,” he cries, and he’s definitely calling for his Mama now.

“Your Mama isn’t here,” Kim tells him.

Big, fat tears roll down Daniel’s chubby cheeks. “Mama!” he wails. “Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama. Mama, Mama!”

In desperation, Kim bends down to his level, squatting on her haunches. She catches one of Daniel’s little hands and says, “Hey, hey,” turning him to face her. A finger under his chin to try and lift his head up and when they make eye contact, Kim says, “Mama?”

Daniel widens his eyes and opens his mouth. “Mama.”

“Mama,” Kim repeats.

A look of relief flitters across Daniel’s face, because finally, finally, someone is speaking his language. The tears begin to trail away and Kim stands up, still holding his hand, and says, “Let’s go, Daniel.”

“Mama?”

“Mama.” Kim leads him towards the locker room door and thinks that she’ll take him back out to the front desk and beg Platt to find some other way. She’s really not cut out for this.

Daniel tightens his grip around two of her fingers and toddles along beside her. He’s cute, but Kim’s not about to be fooled by that. She’s suffered through too much screaming already. She does stop walking, though, when Daniel abruptly crouches down by the door and jabs a finger at the floor.

“What is it?” Kim asks, stooping.

“Oh, oh,” he says, pointing still.

It’s an ant. Kim spots it beside Daniel’s finger, crawling across the linoleum. It’s tiny, black, and apparently endlessly fascinating. Daniel rocks backwards until he falls on his diaper-clad butt, and he sits there staring at the ant with an ‘O’-shaped, astonished mouth.


“Ahhh,” he says. That might actually be a genuine attempt. Kim thinks she wouldn’t mind watching him for another ten minutes, maybe. Ten minutes isn’t going to hurt. It’s not as if she’d had anything planned for the evening.

“Hey, uh,” Kevin’s voice says from somewhere above her head. Kim looks up.

“Hi, Kev.”

“Lindsay sent me down here to see how you’re doing with the little guy.”

“Um,” Kim says. “He found an ant? Before that he was crying like crazy.”

“Okay, so, we’ve got a case and Halstead and Lindsay, they’re out.”
“Out, like, out of the precinct, out?”

“Right.” Kevin confirms, nodding, “so this is sort of a long-term kind of babysitting situation. If that’s all right with you.” He flicks his tongue across his lips nervously, keeping his eyes on Kim. She sighs.

“I mean, is there anything else I can do with him?”

“Drop him at the fire station?”

“Kev, I was being serious.”

“Vanessa was a cuter baby than this,” he says, looking down at Daniel. “Around this age she kinda liked the really simple stuff – like ants, I guess – or stuff that was really cool to look at. Or touch. Bright things, or shiny things. But, uh, no fire. She really wanted to touch the fire.”

Kim puts her head on one side and watches Kevin talk. She knows that he’d practically raised Vanessa – and done a hell of a job with his brothers, too – but he doesn’t talk about it much. Especially not at work. “You’re probably a lot better at this than me,” she says.

Kevin shrugs, nodding, “Maybe, yeah. But I’ve got a case and you look like you got this.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I come upstairs if I need help urgently?” she asks.

He considers it, and nods again. “Yeah, you can do that. Or I’ll just come down again. I’m looking out for you, right?”

“Thanks,” Kim says, gratefully.

“And, uh, see if he needs food or juice or something. Or a diaper change. That can make them scream a lot.”

She rolls her eyes. “I knew that.”

“Just checking,” Kevin says, grinning just that little bit so that Kim knows she’s being teased. “I’ll see you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, “go catch bad guys, you show-off, and I’ll stay down here with the baby.”

“You got it,” Kevin agrees and he’s gone.

Daniel is still watching the ant very intently. It’s crawled probably all of three inches across the floor. Kim touches his shoulder and says, “Daniel? Hey. Daniel.”

She thinks maybe he hears his name, because he jerks a little bit, like he meant to look up at her but the ant was just too attention-grabbing. He runs his little finger along the ground towards it and says, “Ahhhhh.”

“Good memory,” Kim tells him. She’s thinking that they should go to the vending machine and find some baby-appropriate snacks, because actually Kevin’s right and she hadn’t really considered that he might be thirsty. Hungry, sure, but thirsty… no. But as long as Daniel is happy watching an
ant, maybe she shouldn’t disturb him. He seems so peaceful right now.

It lasts all of six minutes, and then the ant crawls into a tiny crack under the wall and Daniel’s fury knows no bounds.

Jay keeps quiet while Erin drives them to the Tanner’s family home. It’s a big place, nice-looking, and they find a park across the street and walk down the sidewalk towards the house.

Jay asks, just once, “You good?”

“Yeah,” Erin says, nodding. “Yeah, I’m good.”

They ring the doorbell and a tall man opens it. He has steel-grey hair and dark eyes beneath slanted, angry eyebrows, and the second he sees them he asks, “Have you caught the bastard yet?”

“We’re working on it,” Erin tells him.

“Mr Tanner?” Jay asks.

“That’s right,” the man says. “I’m Nicole’s father. Tell me what you know.”

“Sir, could we come in?”

“Is that really necessary?” the man asks, frowning. “Just tell me what you know.”

Erin steps forward, into his space, so that he has no choice but to open the door a little wider. She’s so much shorter than him that it doesn’t come across as a threatening move, and her voice is gentle as she says, “Actually, we’re going to need to ask you and your wife some questions.”

“Why?” the man snaps. “We’re not suspects, are we?”

“Let us inside,” Erin presses him, and she sounds sympathetic and calm but there’s a hard light in her eyes which makes Jay pay attention. It makes Mr Tanner pay attention, too, and with some muttering and shuffling he finally moves back and lets them into his house.

There is a woman standing in the hallway wearing a fuzzy sweater, hugging her arms to herself as if she might fall apart if she let go. Grieving, Jay thinks. He’s seen this all before. The woman has a kind, wrinkled face and short blond hair.

“Mrs Tanner?” he checks.

“Elizabeth,” she says, teary-eyed. “Please, ask us anything you need to.” She unfolds her arms and crosses the hallway to her husband, hanging on around his elbow. Jay gets the sense that she’s keeping him in check.

“Did you want to sit down?” Erin starts. “This might be-”

“No,” Mr Tanner interrupts. “Just ask us your damned questions and find out who did this!”

“Trust me, Mr Tanner, our team is on it,” Jay says. “Did Nicole have any enemies? Anyone at all who might have wanted her dead for personal or professional gain?” It’s a long-shot, given the serial killer’s tag on her body, but he has to ask.

“No one,” Mr Tanner insists. “Never.”
“Nicole was a sweet girl,” Elizabeth Tanner whispers. “She was just… our sweet girl.”

“Mrs Tanner, is your son-in-law here?” Erin asks suddenly. Jay glances over at her, because they’d been told the husband would be somewhere else. Maybe she’s heard something.

Elizabeth looks a little startled. Her eyes flick up to the ceiling before she can control herself and then she says, “Yes. Yes, he’s upstairs with Matthew – the baby.”

“Would it be all right if I went up to have a word with him?”

“Please, go on,” Elizabeth nods.

“Don’t say anything in front of my grandson,” Mr Tanner tells Erin gruffly.

Jay watches her disappear up the stairs and then he says, “Had Nicole mentioned anything concerning recently? Any fears about being followed? Unpleasant encounters with strangers? Anything that seemed at all odd to you – as parents?” but he keeps half of his focus on the ceiling, on any sounds up there, any sign his partner might be in danger.

It’s not right to be splitting his focus like this and Jay knows it. He can’t say for sure whether he would still be straining to catch any noise from upstairs if he and Erin weren’t together. It isn’t only since they’ve started – dating, or whatever this is – that he’s kept an eye on her. They’re partners. It’s what they do. And he’s been protective of Erin since the first day they’d worked together. Jay hadn’t meant it to happen, and he knows, even if he’d never say it, that at least part of it is because she’s just so damn small. Smaller than him, smaller than the rest of the team and smaller than most of the perps they collar.

Still. She can take care of herself.

“Christopher,” the husband introduces himself. “Christopher Mooney.”

“Different last name,” Erin notes.

Christopher laughs, a little self-deprecatingly. “Nicole didn’t want to change it, and I was fine with that. I thought, we’re a modern couple, you know?”

“But Matthew…”

“Has my name.”

“How’s he doing?” Erin asks, looking back towards the bedroom door. It’s still slightly ajar, and if she angles her head just right, she can see inside to where the little boy is curled up under the blankets.

Christopher blows out a breath. “He doesn’t understand. He can’t – I mean, how could he? Matthew is two years old. I’m not sure he even knows what dead means. All I can say is that Mommy’s never coming home and I don’t think he believes me.”

“Were there any warning signs?” Erin asks. “Anything at all that Nicole might have said, or done, which made you think she was afraid? Anxious? Maybe changed the way she commuted, or switched parks with Matthew?”

“I’ve been wracking my brains,” Christopher says, “and nothing is coming to me.”
“No strange interactions that she mentioned – at work, maybe?”

“She worked in retail,” he murmurs. “What kind of psychos would she be meeting there?” The man sighs and drags a hand down over his face. “I haven’t slept since they found her last night. Matthew’s been asking for her.”

He looks as if he hasn’t slept, Erin thinks. She almost starts to feel sorry for him, this man left alone with his confused toddler, before she reminds herself that she’s a cop. She can’t close any avenues of suspicion, no matter how much she wants to. She can’t trust this man. It’s entirely possible that he looks like he hasn’t slept because he’s been up all night murdering his wife.

“If you think of anything,” she says, “call me. Straight away. Even if it seems like something completely insignificant.”

Christopher takes her card and stares at it blankly. “Thank you.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Erin tells him, and she claps him on the shoulder and heads back downstairs, where Jay is wrapping up with the parents.

They say goodbye to Elizabeth, who sees them to the door, even though Mr Tanner has vanished deeper into the house.

“Please find out who did this to my baby girl,” she begs them.

Jay promises that they will. Erin finds a lump swelling in her throat and can’t manage to say anything at all. She steps back, behind her partner, and lets him shield her from the door. He follows her down the front stairs and onto the street and then Erin feels his hand on her shoulder.

He still hasn’t asked her what’s going on. Erin’s grateful to him for that – for giving her the time to turn it all over in her own mind. It’s time to tell him, though.

She waits until they get close to the car and then she tosses him the keys and says, “You drive.”

“Seriously?”

“Don’t gloat.”

They slide into their seats and Jay turns to look at her. “You’re going to tell me what’s going on, aren’t you?”

“Uh huh,” Erin says. She stares straight ahead, keeping her face flat. If she’s going to cry, she wants Jay to be driving.

He starts the engine. “You know, you don’t have to. If you’re not ready. I can wait.”

“It’s relevant,” Erin says. “I have a history with this case. You need to know.” She sighs. “So does Antonio, probably.”

“Start with me,” Jay tells her.

She nods. “Start with you,” she agrees. “Fifteen years ago, when the first body dropped, I was a kid. Still living on the streets, maybe two months away from moving in with Voight. I remember all the girls talking about what had happened. She was a street-kid, that first one. Nineteen years old.”

“All the girls?” Jay asks.
Erin feels his gaze on the side of her face and she very deliberately doesn’t look at him, because if she sees his kind eyes she’s going to cry. “You’ve seen my record, Jay.”

“So – you knew her?”

“Not the first one. There were some similarities, enough to make me worry about going out at night, but it didn’t hit close to home.” Erin takes a deep breath. “His fourth victim. Ashley Rhodes.”

“Also nineteen,” Jay recalls, “they found her almost straight away, along with the third victim.”

“Amanda Baker,” Erin nods. “She’d been missing for a year, but Ashley had only just gone. It was two days after she disappeared that they found her, and they think they were only a few hours too late to save her life. She was…”


“Right,” Erin says. She won’t have to rehash the whole thing, she thinks, and that makes her feel better. She’s not just telling her partner about this. She’s telling a fellow cop. “I knew Ashley. We met when we were kids, and our paths just seemed to intersect all the time. At first it was her mom and my mom, both junkies, going to the same place to shoot up and we’d trail after them and try to bring them home. Then it was foster care – we ended up at the same place, somehow. When we got older, we tried to help each other out. It might be me living on the street one week, and Ashley would try to get me food, let me and Teddy sleep in her room, do whatever she could for us. The next week she’d be the one out on her ass, and we’d let her share our breakfast, smuggle her and her kid brothers into the basement.”

“You were close,” Jay notes, reading between the lines as always.

“Yeah. We were close. We didn’t stop being close until – Voight. Me and Ash, we were the same age when I met Hank. Doing the same things. Getting into the same kind of trouble. But – he picked me. I guess I was just in the right place at the right time, but I was the one who got plucked up off the street and into a family, and Ashley… Ashley…”

“She didn’t,” Jay says quietly.

Erin looks out of the window at the traffic lights, watching them slide and blur with the tears that are filling her eyes and threatening to fall. She blinks them away, pulls herself together. “She got murdered by a psychopath, Jay, and it could have been me.”
Chapter 5

Jay glances over at her as they wait in traffic on the way back to the precinct and says, “Pizza and movie tonight?”

“You read my mind,” Erin laughs. “Are you sure you’re good to stay over again?”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I’ve got enough clothes.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Erin says gently.

Jay smiles and turns to look out of the window. “It’s getting late,” he notes, gazing at the red-orange light of the setting sun.

Erin checks the car clock and says, “Oh, my god, we’ve left Daniel with Burgess for hours.”

“Crap, you’re right,” Jay says, sitting upright. “Wow. How mad do you think she’s going to be?”


“You’re going to see it today. Step on the gas, woman.”

“Yeah, because rear-ending a guy in an Audi is exactly how I wanna end the day,” she jokes.

Erin dashes into the precinct first, taking the stairs in three massive leaps. Jay is somewhere behind her, she knows. On her six as always.

Burgess is sitting behind the front desk – in Platt’s swivel chair, of all things, the chair which Platt is extremely particular about. Even Hernandez, who is shorter than Erin, isn’t allowed to change the settings on Platt’s chair when he takes his desk shift.

Daniel’s face is pillowed against Burgess’ chest. His little cheek is mashed into the skin above her t-shirt, and his lips are slack. He’s got one arm snaking around Burgess’ waist and his legs draped over her lap. There’s some drool, Erin notices, but Burgess doesn’t look like she cares. She’s got her arms around Daniel’s body and is looking down at him with a kind of awestruck tenderness.

Platt is watching both of them, but she snaps her gaze around to Erin quickly enough. “Your boy’s conked out,” she says.

Burgess lifts her head at that. She looks a little embarrassed when she sees Erin. “Lindsay. He just sort of fell asleep on me, sorry.”

Erin shakes her head. “Don’t be sorry,” she says. “I should be sorry for leaving you stuck with him for.” She checks the time on her phone, “almost four hours.” Geez.

Jay comes up beside her and leans on the desk. “You’re the best, Burgess,” he says.

Erin steps around the desk and Platt props her hands on her hips. She jerks her chin down at a cardboard box on the floor. “Bought him a car seat,” she says. “Don’t know how you two got him over here without one and I don’t want to know.”

“Thanks,” Jay tells the older woman.
“Uh huh.”

Erin bends over Burgess and smiles at Daniel’s little sleepy face. “I’m sorry he’s drooling on you.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. As long as he keeps looking that cute,” Burgess laughs. “Do you want to – how do we do this?”

“I’ll just… grab him,” Erin says, leaning forwards and sliding her hands underneath Daniel. She levers him up and into her arms. He murmurs a little at the transition, but Erin gets him draped across her body with his face pressed into her shoulder and he settles back down.

Burgess glances down and uses her t-shirt to wipe the damp spot on her skin. She stands up. “Thanks for the chair, Sarge.”

“Whatever,” Platt grumbles. “Why don’t you all go home, or something? It’s half-past seven, for Pete’s sake. Don’t you people have lives?”

“Seriously, Kim,” Erin says, taking one hand out from under Daniel and gripping Burgess’ shoulder, “thank you. So much.”

“Yeah,” Burgess nods, smiling, “any time.”

Erin spins around, pressing her chin against the top of Daniel’s head, and finds Jay hefting the box containing the car seat. He jerks his head at the door, lifting his eyebrows, and Erin nods. Jay glances at Platt.

“I’ll help you fit this in your car,” he says, a little too obviously. “You’ve got your hands full.”

Platt takes a sip from her coffee mug, eyes fixed on the computer. “You guys are fooling everybody,” she says sarcastically.

Erin stares at her. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing. You go home. Have fun. Burgess?”

“Yeah, Sarge?”

“Next time, don’t be such a pushover. You shouldn’t let people steal your Sunday afternoons like that. Honestly,” Platt scoffs.

“Uh, thanks. I’ll take it under advisement.”

“Right. Also, the next time you go to Molly’s, tell that jumped-up firefighter that I’ve traded you my favour.”

“Herrmann?”

“That’s the one. You make sure he follows through.”

“What favour?”

“Free drinks,” Platt snaps. “But it’s only for one night, so don’t get all excited. Now get out of here.”

A slow smile spreads over Burgess’ face as she says, “Goodnight, Sarge.”
Erin hefts Daniel a little in her arms to peer over his body as she navigates the steps out of the precinct. Burgess holds the door for her, and then jogs off down the sidewalk, calling a goodbye over her shoulder. Probably off to Molly’s already, Erin thinks, and she has a momentary urge to follow.

Daniel snuffles against her shoulder, reminding her exactly why she can’t.

Jay has the back door of the car open and is bent over the interior. He emerges frowning and says, “I think that’s it, but honestly, I have no idea.”

“Just make sure the seat is strapped to the car,” Erin advises. “Then all we need to do is strap the baby to the seat and we’ll be fine.”

“Seat is definitely strapped to the car,” Jay confirms. “I can drive, if you want to sit in back with him.”

Erin considers it, but shakes her head. “He’ll be okay,” she says. She ducks down to get inside the car, lowers Daniel down from her body onto his seat. He moves around and mumbles something, half-opening his eyes, but he sinks down into the seat quickly. Erin lifts his arms to slide them through the straps, buckles the harness between his legs and closes the car door as quietly as she can.

For a moment, it’s just her and Jay.

He says, “Hey.”

“Hey,” Erin returns, quietly. She leans into him, feeling his arms come around her, and draws a deep breath.

“Hell of a day, huh?”

“Yeah,” Erin agrees.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m exhausted,” she admits. “And Olive hasn’t called. I’ve had my phone with me all day and there’s nothing, Jay. Not a text or a voicemail or a missed call. Just nothing.”

“So maybe she’s still busy with the family emergency,” Jay says. “That’s not unheard of, right? Too busy to get to a phone?”

“But this is her kid,” Erin points out. She pushes her face against Jay’s shirt. “You smell like sweat.”

“I’ll shower when we get back to yours.” He rubs a hand along the back of her neck. “Care to join me?”

“Mm, yes,” Erin says, and then steps back and frowns. “Can we even do that? With Daniel? Don’t we have to supervise him?”

“Not if he’s asleep.”

“What if he suffocates while we’re in the shower?”

“How do you think people find the time to have more than one child?” Jay says.

“They hire babysitters and go to a hotel. Duh.”
He scoffs. “No they don’t.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll see if he settles at home,” Erin says, and she taps her hand against Jay’s hip. “For the record, though, you in the shower is exactly what I need after a day like this.”

“I’ve gone from house husband to boy toy,” Jay muses.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Can I drive?”

“No.”

“Exactly,” Jay says infuriatingly, and he grins at her, teasing, and steps around her to get into the passenger seat.

Erin stands with her hands on her hips, surveying the cardboard box. “How do you feel about a late-night trip to Ikea?” she asks Jay.

He laughs. “Nice try.”

Trying to get some kind of routine going, Erin had woken up Daniel when they got home, changing him into his PJs while Jay made dinner. They’d eaten, tried to feed Daniel bits and pieces, given him a sippy cup of milk, which he seemed to appreciate, and now Erin was tucking him into his box-bed.

“Tomorrow, then?” Erin suggests. “How early does Antonio want us in to work on this thing?”

“It depends how many leads we have left to chase down,” Jay says quietly. “I don’t know about you, but this is feeling a little like one of those cases that never ends.”

Erin nods slowly. She sighs and reaches backwards blindly, and Jay steps towards her until her hand makes contact with his chest. “I’m glad you’re here,” she murmurs.

“You know I wouldn’t trade this,” Jay tells her. “Not for anything.”

“Mmhmm,” she murmurs, going up on her toes to press a kiss against the line of his jaw. “So, Daniel’s asleep.”

“He is,” Jay agrees, rocking his weight onto his back foot and pulling Erin closer.

“Still up for that shower?”

Erin wakes up to her phone buzzing with the text message alert. Blearily, she reaches over to the end table and swipes it unlocked. Her eyes find Antonio’s name on the notification and she flops back onto the pillows and groans.

“What?” Jay mumbles. He’s still got his face mashed into the bed, hair sticking up on one side. They’d both woken three times in the night when Daniel cried. The first time was easy; Erin reached over from the bed and reached into the cardboard box to rub his back, and he quieted. The second time she got up with him, took him to the kitchen and put more milk in his sippy cup, warmed it, and let him drink a little before he went back to bed.
The third time had freaked both of them out, because Daniel had screamed and when Erin had plucked him out of the box there had been tears streaming down his face. She’d held him close and he’d quickly gone quiet, but it had scared her. She’d been awake for a long time after that.

“Just Antonio,” Erin murmurs, unsure whether or not Daniel is sleeping right now. “Hold on,” she adds, grabbing Jay’s arm as he starts moving, “let me read them before you get up.”

“Oh,” he says. “Okay.”

The most recent text is a call to arms; an order to get down to the station, that they’re going to delve deeper into the Asterisk case and run through each individual case again as if it were brand new. Erin presses her lips together and frowns. The older texts are from last night. Antonio mentions his sister, Gabby, just started fostering a kid. That she has a family friend babysit him during her shifts. That the friend might be willing to take Daniel.

“Did Platt tell everyone?” Erin wonders.

“Everyone what? That you’re my girl?” Jay asks, pulling her close to him and pressing his nose to the crook between her neck and shoulder. “You’re my favourite.”

“I know,” Erin says, “shh. Let me read these.”

Then she has a text from Antonio’s sister – who, when did Gabby get her number? Erin has a hazy memory that it was some time when the woman was bartending. It’s a little weird now that she and Jay are more officially together – except, Erin also doesn’t really mind. She has this feeling that Jay is hers, that he’s always been hers, and anyone else has just been a placeholder.

Huh. That’s an interesting new feeling. Erin glances down at Jay where he’s resting his head on her shoulder and thinks that she’ll have to delve a little more into this, one day.

Gabby backs up Antonio’s babysitting suggestion, and adds that she’d totally be willing to do it on days when she’s off-shift and just with Louie. There’s an unspoken ‘not every day’ tagged onto the end of that, and Erin gets it, wanting to bond with the foster son. It’s still nice of her to offer.

Finally, Erin finds a text from Olive. Her heart jumps into her throat when she opens it, and she wants to hear that everything is okay, that Olive will be back soon, that they’ve been freaking out over nothing.

It says; I’m sorry, Erin. I can’t do it anymore.

A horrible sense of dread settles in the pit of Erin’s stomach. She texts back; Can’t do what? Is everything okay? When are you coming home? Daniel misses you.

She knows even as she sends it that it’s too much pressure. There must be a way to talk Olive down from whatever ledge she’s on, but it’s early, and Erin is exhausted, and scared, and she’s not thinking clearly.

Hoping that she hasn’t messed up her only chance, she adds; Call me. We can talk this out together. It’s going to be okay.

“I’m up,” Jay announces, sitting suddenly. “We have to get up now, right? Because I’m awake enough to get up, so if you say we can go back to sleep I will be pissed.”

“We have to get up,” Erin confirms. “And we have to drive Daniel to a babysitter.”
“I thought you said you weren’t going to trust just any random old babysitter?”

Erin has already dashed off a text to Gabby Dawson. She sends it, and says, “We’re not taking him to a random babysitter. We’re taking him to Antonio’s sister. Or, possibly Antonio’s sister’s family friend. I don’t know if Gabby’s on shift today.”

Jay frowns at her, scratching behind his ear. “Gabby?”

“Yeah.” Erin licks her lips. “Is that okay?”

“Um. I think so. Is it okay with you?”

“I like her. You obviously like her,” Erin says, wiggling her eyebrows.

Jay groans. “Stop it.”

“Bet you played Scrabble.”

“Why do you bully me like this?”

“You sound proud.” Jay notes.

“I’ve tamed the infamous Scrabble man,” Erin laughs, and she presses a kiss against the back of his shoulder. “Never again to troll the streets of Chicago at night, looking for a lonely Scrabble partner.”

Jay twists around and kisses her full on the mouth, bending them backwards until he’s hovering over her on the bed. “You’re right,” he says, pulling his face away, far enough back to make eye contact, “I’ll never play Scrabble again. You’re it for me.”

“You’re lucky I suck at Scrabble,” Erin says, every time Jay’s lips pull away from her own. “Now you can win every game.”

He moves down to suck at her pulse point, his stubble scraping against the soft skin of her throat. “You don’t suck at Scrabble, baby. You’re the best Scrabble I’ve ever had.”

“I think we’re getting our metaphors crossed,” Erin tells him, tugging on his hair to bring his lips back up to hers.

“Triple word score,” Jay whispers, and he kisses her, long and slow and wet and perfect.

Daniel says, “Mama-ma?”

Erin laughs; can’t help it. She pushes Jay back and grins at his pout and says, “Oops.”

“Right,” he announces, sitting on his haunches, “didn’t I say I was awake? I’m awake.”

The phone Erin has dropped somewhere on the bed starts buzzing, vibrating rhythmically with a phone call. She glances at the screen and it’s a blocked number, which could be anybody. “Jay, honey…”

“You don’t have to call me honey to get me to change the baby,” he tells her.

Erin laughs. “Thanks, sweetie,” she croons, and she rolls onto her stomach on the bed and
answers the phone. “Hello?”

There’s a little spark of relief in her when the person on the other end isn’t Olive. The sun is creeping around the edges of the curtains to fill the room, and her boyfriend has just walked out of here holding an adorable baby. Erin isn’t ready to be dealing with someone else’s problems.

Jay glances up from his cereal when Erin walks into the kitchen. “Who was it, babe?” he asks.

Daniel, crouching on the counter beside Jay’s bowl, sneaks a little hand out to steal some of Jay’s cinnamon toast crunch. Jay notices, but he doesn’t bother stopping the kid. Daniel needs to eat.

“Babe?” Erin says, laughing.

Jay shrugs. “Trying something out.”

“It was Gabby,” she says. “We can take Daniel over there as soon as we’re ready – she gave me an address.”

“Gabby’s going to be looking after him?” Jay checks. He’s not sure how he feels about his ex-girlfriend looking after his current girlfriend’s sort-of nephew. There’s a lot of convoluted relationship drama in there.

“She said she’d introduce us to Cindy,” Erin explains, leaning past Jay’s shoulder to pinch some of his cereal. She grins at Daniel. “Hey, sweet boy. Cindy is the one who takes care of Louie, apparently.”

“You’re both cereal stealers,” Jay complains. He gets an arm around Daniel when the kid stands up, tugs him back down to a sitting position. “No standing on the counter, little dude. Who’s Louie?”

“Gabby’s new foster son. He’s three.” Erin ducks to pull a bowl out of the cupboard between Jay’s knees, stands up and takes the packet of cinnamon crunch. “She sounds very happy.”

“That’s good,” Jay says, turning away from the counter and opening the fridge. He pulls out the milk and turns back, preparing to hand it to Erin, and finds Daniel standing on the edge of the counter and starting to tip.

Erin lunges at the same time as Jay, but Jay is the one who gets a solid grasp on the kid. He presses Daniel against his chest with one arm, tightly, and sets the milk on the counter.

“We maybe shouldn’t be putting him up here,” Erin says. She’s gone white.

Jay’s heart is pounding like crazy. “Maybe not.” He’s still got Daniel against his chest, holding the kid too tight, probably, but he can’t make himself unwrap his arm. Not yet.

Soft fingers against his hip, sliding up under his shirt, and Erin is pressing herself against him. “It’s okay,” she says. “We’re okay. Daniel’s okay – aren’t you, bubba? And next time we’ll know to watch him.”

Slowly, Jay unwinds his arm and lets Daniel sit on the counter. The kid looks utterly unperturbed by what just happened. He reaches out for Erin and babbles a little, and she takes him onto her hip, pressing kisses to the top of his head.

“Sorry,” Jay says.
“Like I know what I’m doing,” Erin tells him. “We’re both figuring this out. For the record? I’d rather be figuring it out with you than by myself.”

Monday is intense. They interview Nicole’s boss, and he points them towards one of her co-workers, who directs them to another co-worker, who admits to following Nicole on lunch breaks ‘once or twice’ and ‘flirting a little’. There’s nothing interesting there, apart from a creepy guy, but he mentions he thought some barista was into Nicole, which leads them on a wild goose chase through three little coffee places before they find the barista.

The barista in question is seventeen years old and has a face covered in pimples. He’s petrified from the minute they start to talk to him and promises that he barely spoke to Nicole. He thinks the last time she was in here was on Saturday afternoon, a few hours before she went missing. He doesn’t remember her speaking to anyone.

Antonio calls them back after that because toxicology reports are in, and Erin gets about five minutes to perch on the edge of Jay’s desk and listen without really listening. Immediately afterwards they’re up and off again, because an attempted abduction has been called in and it might be connected.

When they get there, the victim is nineteen, blond-haired, sitting in the back of the ambulance and trembling with a blanket draped over her shoulders. Her attacker, she says, had a knife and tried to force her into his car.

Erin takes the girl’s statement with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. She doesn’t think that this incident is related to Asterisk – but doesn’t that just make it worse? How often does stuff like this happen? Too often, Erin thinks. What sort of a world is this to be living in?
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sorry, sorry! Stuff, you know how it is. Accept my humble apology. You're super cool, I'm sorry, you have phenomenal eyebrows. They're stunning. Wow.

Not the longest chapter, but hey, I've taken an extended hiatus from this fic because I'm just a lazy person and some is better than none, right! And here's hoping I wrap this up soon. Yay! If you're still reading/leaving kudos/commenting, thanks so much!

Jay reaches out and snags Erin’s arm; tugs her back towards him as she tries to walk away from the car. She steps in, close, and puts a hand on his chest, fingers curling in.

“What?”

“Just – don’t get sucked in,” Jay says.

“I know.” Her eyes are dark as she looks up at him, framed with curling lashes. He can’t read her face. Erin’s never exactly an open book, but she’s always been able to telegraph her feelings to Jay when she wants to. He can understand what she’s thinking from across the bullpen.

Today, she’s closed off.

Jay keeps his hand on her arm. “I mean it. I’ll seriously ask Antonio to pull you off the case.”

Erin shakes her head. “You won’t.” She pulls away. “Don’t worry about me.”

When Erin starts walking towards the crime scene, Jay trails a few steps behind. She’s trying so hard not to show any emotion, not to let anything out, but Jay knows exactly when she gets close enough to see the body. Her shoulders tense up. One of her hands starts to curl into a fist before she stops it.

Jay catches sight of the body a second later. The woman is face-down. There is dried blood on her hair and her naked back. Both of her hands are covered in it. There’s a bloody handprint on her thigh, just below the line of her jogging shorts. More blood is congealing on the ground a few feet from the body.

She’d been alive, Jay surmises, when she was left here. She’d tried to drag herself away. Looking at the blood on her hands, he’d say that she’d been trying to hold her throat together; keeping pressure on the wound. Somehow she’d managed to roll over onto her front and crawl – on her elbows, it looked like, because they were covered in dirt.

The clear desperation behind her movements makes Jay wince. He can’t imagine what this was like – he doesn’t want to.

Erin is still, looking down at the body. She sucks in a shallow breath and Jay moves towards her automatically. Without lifting her eyes, Erin shakes her head. She doesn’t want him near her.

Jay crosses the muddy ground, keeping clear of any crime scene markers, and finds Olinsky on
the other side. He glances back to check on Erin and sees her pacing around the body, taking it all in.

“How long?” he asks Olinsky.

“We’re not sure,” the older man says. “Working estimate is that she’s been here about an hour, maybe two. Man walking his dog called it in twenty minutes ago.” Olinsky jerks his head towards a man standing at the edge of the crime scene, holding the leash of a border collie. Atwater is with the guy, head ducked down, talking in a low voice.

“How do we have an ID on her?” Jay asks.

“Nothing yet.” Olinsky stares over at Erin, who is crouched by the head of the body. “Why don’t you and Lindsay head back to the precinct and get a head start on searching missing persons?” he suggests, his voice deceptively calm.

Jay is more than willing to grab any offer which allows him to get his partner out of here. “Done,” he says promptly. “I’ll text you anything we get.”

Olinsky shakes his head. “Nah, text Ruzek. Kid checks his phone at least twenty times a minute. He’ll get any message before I do.”

“Right,” Jay laughs. He gives Olinsky a nod as farewell, and picks his way back through the mud to Erin.

She lifts her hand without looking around as he gets near her, palm raised, fingers wiggling. She knows he’s here.

Jay slides his fingers in and laces them through Erin’s, bracing his arm as she uses him to lever herself up to her feet. “What did O say?”

“He wants us to go back,” Jay tells her. “Start trying to find out who our Jane Doe is.”

“You don’t have to lie,” Erin returns, her face blank. “I can handle it, Jay. I’m not some fragile-”

“I’m not lying,” he interrupts, “and I know you can handle everything. You can stay out here in the mud and the wind if it makes you feel tough, Lindsay. I’m going back to the precinct, though. And I’m taking your car, so…”

“You called me Lindsay,” Erin notes. “It’s been a while.”

“Well, yeah. It feels a bit, um, obnoxious to be calling you by a surname when we’re sleeping together.”

That manages to draw a smile out of Erin. She says, “Okay, let’s get back.”

Jay is watching her over the screen of his computer. Erin can feel his eyes on her, but she won’t look up to meet his gaze. Not yet. There’s too much sympathy in there – and understanding, which scares her more than she’d like to admit. He knows her so well. Too well, some days.

She can sense Voight’s empty office just as clearly, a black hole off to her left, trying to suck her attention and emotions away. Erin ignores the office, too; stares at the cursor on her screen even though she’s not doing anything.

They’re getting nowhere with this case. They’re getting nowhere and the worst part is that Erin’s
more worried about everything else in her life. The problems whirling through her mind are all Voight, Justin and Daniel, Olive and Bunny. Erin has been thinking about her mom a lot lately, without meaning to. It’s like having Daniel around just brings all of those feelings back up to the surface.

Atwater clears his throat. When Erin looks up at him he says, “Got an ID on the Jane Doe, I think. Fingerprint match.”

“Text me an address,” Erin says, already up from her chair. She glances at Jay and he nods and gets to his feet to follow her.

Erin can feel his presence at her back all the way down the stairs. He wants her to talk, she knows that. He thinks that talking it out will help, somehow, but Erin knows it won’t. It never helps. It just brings everything back up again, things that she’d thought she dealt with a decade ago.

God, it seems so long now. She’d been eighteen, just barely, fresh out of school and yet already knowing where she was going to go, and what she was going to do. Straight into the police academy, following in Voight’s footsteps and trying, trying so hard to do some good. To make something out of the chance he’d given her. It’s hard to look back, to remember who she was then. Not a cop, and she’d never met Halstead – or anyone in the unit, really. She’d only been living with Voight a few years, and Justin was just a kid. Not someone’s dad. Not dead.

They climb into the car together in silence, slam the doors and Erin pulls out into the road.

Her phone buzzes and she fishes it out of her pocket and hands it to Jay without a word.

“It’s Cindy,” he says. “She wants to know what Daniel eats.”

“I have no idea,” Erin says. She lifts a hand to brush her hair out of her face and leans her elbow against her window. “God, isn’t that pathetic? Tell her maybe toast, or cereal, or crackers?”

Jay says, “I texted her that we don’t have a clue and then I wrote ‘help’ with three exclamation marks and the big grin emoji.”

“It’s not a grin,” Erin says, exasperated. They’ve had this argument so many times. “It’s a grimace, Jay, now she thinks we’re grimacing at her. Or at Daniel, which is even worse.”

“It’s a grin! A big happy grin!”

“Since when do grins show every single tooth?”

“Clearly you’ve never seen a really happy grin.” Her phone buzzes again and he says, “Atwater’s got the address. Take a left up here.”

Erin changes lanes and increases their speed.

When they do arrive at the house it’s a big solid brownstone, and they find a park on the road just outside it. Jay gets out first, and he’s the one who knocks at the door. Erin hangs back a little. She’s willing to let him field this one.

A man opens the door and says, “…Yes?”

“CPD,” Jay explains. He flashes his badge, tucks it away and checks Erin’s phone again. “We’re here about, ah, Emily Yates?”
The name Yates sends a shiver up Erin’s spine, even though she tries to ignore it.

“Oh,” the man says, pulling the door open wide. “Come in, please. Emily is my wife. She’s at work right now, but-”

“Is there anyone else here, Mr Yates?” Erin interrupts, and it makes her skin crawl, calling him that.

He says, “Jake, please,” and that’s a relief. “My daughter is upstairs – she was supposed to be at the sitter’s but-”

“Why don’t we sit down?” Jay suggests. He glances at Erin over the man’s head and his eyes say, *I’ve got this* and Erin believes him. She backs up a little, looks around the hallway. It’s a nice house. Pictures of the daughter set out on a cabinet beside the coatrack, and wedding photos hanging on the wall over the stairs. Memories of a family whose life is about to change.

Jake has a hand up over his mouth, shaking his head slowly, and he keeps saying, “Are you sure? Are you-”

“Pretty sure,” Jay says. “We’ll need a – an ID on the body, if you can find someone to stay with your daughter… how old is she?”

“Nine,” Jake murmurs, knuckles pressed against his lips. “Emily – what happened?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Jay tells him.

“Oh, god.” The first tears start to come to Jake’s eyes. “How am I supposed to tell Maddie?”

“We can help you,” Jay suggests, even though it’s the last thing he wants to do, “if you feel it would be better.”

“No,” the man says. “No, I’ll do it. But I want to be sure first. I need to see her. I’m… there’s no one I can leave Maddie with.”

“If you like, my partner can stay here with your daughter,” Jay offers. “I can drive you down to the morgue and you can make a positive ID.”

Jake whispers, “The morgue. How can this be happening?”

“I’m sorry.” It’s the sixth or seventh time that Jay’s said it, but it feels as though it’s never going to be enough. He rises from the couch, rubbing his hands down the legs of his jeans. “Would you like to go?”

“Yes,” Jake says. “Yes.”

Jay steps into the hallway, finds Erin leaning against the front door. He knows immediately that she’s heard everything; can see it in her face. He doesn’t ask about watching the kid, but he meets her eyes and then looks up the stairs.

Erin nods, sliding away from the door and towards the staircase. Her hand touches against Jay’s hip, fingers curling in his beltloop. For an instant, she leans her forehead into his chest, and then Jake is in the hall and Erin is stepping back as though nothing had happened.

“I’ll keep your daughter company,” she says to Jake. “Her name’s Maddie, right?”
Jake looks distracted, eyes darting around the room. Fixing on the wedding portrait of his wife and sticking there. “Yes,” he says. “Maddie.”

“How’s she feeling?”

“It’s just a sniffle – it’s nothing, really, but she wanted to stay home and the babysitter didn’t want to get sick and my wife,” he pauses, gasps a little, manages to say, “my wife thought maybe she just needed some TLC.”

“She’ll be okay with me,” Erin promises.

Jake tears his gaze from the photograph. “I’ll need shoes,” he says.

Erin climbs the stairs while Jay leaves the house with the husband. She hears the front door slam when she’s halfway up, and apparently the sound carries through the house. A little voice calls, “Daddy?”

It’s enough to make Erin speed up, getting to the top of the stairs and walking down the hallway, checking each room as she comes to it. The little girl’s bedroom is decked out in blue, and there are stars painted and plastered on every surface.

“Hey,” Erin says, and the girl’s head jerks to her, eyes wide with fright.

“Who are you? Where’s my Daddy?”

“It’s okay,” Erin says quickly. “I’m a police officer. You wanna see my badge?” She pulls it from her belt and tosses it onto the bed.

Maddie reaches out and grabs it, her eyes still on Erin, suspicious as hell. She turns the badge over and over in her hands before she repeats, “Where’s my Daddy?”

“He had to go down to the police station for a little while, to help us out with something really important. He asked me to stay here and look out for you. Is that okay?”

“I guess,” Maddie says, reluctantly. She drops the badge on the bed. “I’m nine. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“He said you weren’t feeling very well.”

Maddie sniffs, gives a pathetic little cough. “That’s true.”

“Can I come in?”

“Okay.”

Erin takes a couple of steps into the room and sits on the floor. “I like all your stars.”

“Thanks,” Maddie says, still nervous. “I like them glowing at night. It was my Mommy’s idea. Because I used to get a bit scared of the dark.”

“Me too, when I was a kid. I wish I’d had stars that glowed.”

“They’re good,” Maddie agrees. “They help.” She puts one finger into her mouth and chews on it, nervously. “When will my Dad be back?”
“Not long. We’ll just have to talk to pass the time. Is that okay?”

“Uh huh.”

“Your name’s Maddie, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Erin. What grade are you in?”

“Fourth grade, in September.”

“Nice,” Erin says, smiling. “I liked fourth grade.” It’s a lie. She doesn’t remember much of fourth grade; doesn’t think she went to school often that year, because Bunny had been ODing, drinking herself to death and Erin and Teddy had gone into care, for a minute.

“I haven’t met my new teacher yet. Last year my teacher was Mr Stranger, and he was a bully.”

The name makes Erin laugh. “Mr Stranger?”

“Uh huh.”

“That’s a great name.”

“He was mean. Mommy said I just had to grin and bear it, because teachers are in charge.” Maddie frowns a little. “The police are in charge, too.”

“Yup.”

“Is it fun?”

“Being in charge?” Erin says. She thinks about it. “Not really. Keeping people safe is a lot of responsibility. It’s scary, sometimes.”

“I don’t like scary things.”

Erin remembers the scariest thing of all, thinks about the news that might be coming to this little girl. “Me neither,” she says, “but sometimes scary things happen. Do you know what then?”

Maddie shakes her head, long blond hair flipping from shoulder to shoulder. “No?”

Erin says, “You get really brave.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Filler chapter, pretty much. Had to get things moving but it was getting too long so I snipped this part off and figured I'd post it separately.
This fic is now (I think officially after this chapter, but it might be after next chapter) the longest one I've ever written. By far. Which I did not expect or intend or even notice until I was looking at old stuff the other day and realised none of it really exceeded 20,000 words. Is it embarrassing how long this one is? Yes. So I hope you enjoy it. Also, I hope I figure out how to wrap it up soon yeesh. This is going on forever.

Daniel wakes up in the middle of the night crying.

It’s not the little sniffling, either, the soft hitching sounds which mean that Erin will be able to soothe him down quickly. It’s full blown, hysterical sobs punctuated by desperate screams.

Jay rolls over in bed, groaning, his face pressing into Erin’s shoulder. She feels his mouth on her skin, lips and teeth and tongue. It’s enough to make her want to stay in bed with him, to wake him up properly and have him touch her until everything else goes away.

She pulls herself away from him and takes two steps across the room, out through the open door and into the spare room across the hall. She bends, dipping into Daniel’s crib to lift the baby boy into her arms.

“Sweetie,” she murmurs, “Daniel, baby, what’s wrong?”

He squirms to get away from her and screams, “No, no, no!” It’s a shock. He likes to cuddle; he’s always been a cuddly little thing, and Erin can’t ever remember him trying to escape her.

She hugs him tighter. “Daniel,” she says, “shh, it’s okay. It’s okay, Erin’s here. I’m here, okay? I’ve got you, it’s okay. You’re safe with me, my sweet boy.”

Daniel stops fighting her, collapsing against her side, but he won’t stop crying. His whole body heaves with the strength of his sobs. Erin runs her hand over his back, up and down, pressing in tightly. His pyjamas are soaked with sweat. Erin can feel heat seeping through her thin tank top onto her skin.

She presses her lips to Daniel’s forehead. “What happened, baby?” she wonders. “Did you have a nightmare?”

Jay, in the bedroom, makes some sound halfway between a grunt and a yawn. Erin turns to look at him, feeling a surge of guilt. He shouldn’t be putting up with this kind of crappy half-sleep just because he wants to stay near her. Daniel isn’t his responsibility. The fall-out for Olive’s choices shouldn’t be landing on Jay as well.

She shifts Daniel to prop him against her hip, but he clings to the front of her tank top and brings forth a renewed burst of sobs. Carefully, Erin picks her way across out of the spare room. She pulls the bedroom door to, and then pads down the hallway and into the lounge, thinking that Jay will
probably fall back asleep once it’s quiet. Waking up takes him a long time.

Erin had meant to sit on the couch, but Daniel cries harder as soon as she tries to lower them both down. She keeps standing, instead, rocking foot-to-foot, doing a slow, swaying sort of walk up and down and around. The motion makes Daniel’s head heavy and he sets it down against her chest.

“Mama,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” Erin whispers. “I don’t know where your Mama is.”

The living room is dark and quiet, drawing in around them. Erin’s eyes seek out the shadows of familiar objects in the room. She swings back and forth, rocking Daniel with her, rubbing his back. His feet dig into her ribcage and his fast, choked breathing slows and becomes more steady, punctuated with the occasional hiccup. Erin presses her cheek against the top of his head, baby-soft hair tickling her skin.

Daniel’s little head pops up fast. “Bott-uh,” he says, hand patting at Erin’s neck. “Mook.”

“Yeah, sweetie?”


He nods fast, “Uh, uh.”

“Okay,” Erin says, feeling a surge of relief. This is something she can do. “Let’s get you some warm milk, yeah? That will help you sleep, won’t it, bubba?”

Daniel puts his head back down on her shoulder and gives a long, jerky sigh. The end of the tears. He doesn’t protest this time when Erin shifts him onto her left hip, wrapping her arm around him and leaving her other hand free to get everything. She opens the fridge, grabs the milk, finds Daniel’s baby bottle and unscrews the lid one-handed. She pops the flaps of the milk carton and pours that in, then closes the lid and sticks it in the microwave.

It feels like she’s accomplished something after that. She stands a little off to the side, rocking Daniel again, watching the microwave numbers tick steadily down. Erin presses the button to open the door before it can beep, and then she tips a couple of drops of milk out onto the inside of her wrist. Not too hot.

The wrist thing sticks in Erin’s mind, even after she’s given Daniel the bottle and he’s drinking happily. Where had she learnt to test the temperature like that? A vivid memory comes back to her, of doing the same with baby bottles before. How old had she been? Thirteen, fourteen? Just starting to work the streets, pre-Charlie, pre-Voight. She doesn’t even remember where Bunny and Teddy had been.

She’d tried so hard to play at being an adult, act like she was all grown-up. The other girls had seen right through her. A few had taken her under their wing – they’d seemed much older at the time, but thinking back now they can’t have been much more than nineteen. Erin remembers one girl had a baby; a little thing, tiny enough to fit in Erin’s arms.

The girl had paid Erin as a babysitter. Kept her in the apartment at nights, safe from the streets for another couple of weeks. Erin hasn’t thought about her for years. What had her name been?

Daniel holds out the bottle. “Mo-ah.”
“No, bubba. No more.” Erin takes the bottle from him and sets it on the counter. “Come on, sweet boy. It’s time for bed.”

Daniel burrows against her. “No.”

Erin holds him up absently, swaying side-to-side. The babysitting gig had been short-lived, because… why? All of her memories are foggy, tainted by drugs, hunger and fear. Still, Erin is sure that something had happened. Something bad. The girl had come home injured, or bleeding, and she’d taken the baby from Erin and…

It’s not important. Erin doesn’t want to remember, anyway. She has a new life now – she’s not the same person that she was – it’s pointless to dwell on the past. Daniel is still against her, smacking his little lips. Moving slowly, keeping a steady rhythm for him, Erin rocks the little boy back down the hallway and into the spareroom. She slides him down into the crib slowly and kisses his forehead. He’s still warm.

“No,” he says, worming a hand out between the bars of the crib and grabbing at the boxers Erin is wearing. “No.”

She crouches down and holds his hand with her own. “It’s okay, bubba. I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here, see?”

Daniel leans his head against the bars of the crib. He watches Erin warily.

“Lie down,” she says, softly. “Lie down, Daniel.”

He puts his head down on the blankets, knees curled beneath his body, butt sticking up into the air. He leaves his arm sticking out through the bars, and Erin keeps a hold of his hand.

…the girl had been bleeding, stumbling, and she’d told Erin not to go. She’d said it wasn’t safe, but Erin had been frightened, scared enough to just hand over the baby and leave fast. After – how long? – a couple of days, maybe, Erin had come back, but the girl and the baby had been gone.

Daniel’s hand falls limply from hers. He’s sleeping again. Erin stands up and stretches her arms over her head, walks back to her room and her bed and crawls in beside Jay. She curls up facing away from him, but scoots over enough to feel the bare skin of his chest against her back. It’s nice just knowing he’s there.

Erin wakes with a name on her lips. She blinks up at the ceiling for a second and thinks, Sydney. And the baby had been Jonah. It’s not much to go on, but it’s a start.

Jay’s head is inches from Erin’s own, his arm draped over her middle and their legs tangled together. Erin twists her neck to try and get a look at the end table. She reaches out for her phone and checks the time. It’s quarter-to-seven and there’s already sunlight spilling over the top of her curtains. Probably not too early to go in to work. Early to wake Jay, though. A little unfair to him.

Erin considers this, and then she turns her face towards his and says, “Hey.” Her noses presses against his and then she kisses his lips.

Jay mumbles something unintelligible, but he doesn’t move away.

“Wake up,” Erin says, and then she kisses the line of his jaw, stubble rough against her lips. She slides her mouth down to his neck, shifting a little in the bed. Jay’s arm wraps around her tighter, but
Erin pushes it away and crawls on top of him. “Jay,” she says.

He mumbles, “Uh huh?”

Erin pulls off her tank top and kisses Jay’s throat, moves higher to his lips. He reciprocates, this time, both hands coming up to rest on the small of her back.

When Erin lifts her head his eyes are open. He smiles, crinkling them up. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she says.

“It’s early,” Jay notes. His fingers trace up her bare spine and Erin shivers.

“I have to go to work,” she says. “Got a lead I want to follow up.” Her knees press into the bed on either side of Jay’s hips. “I was hoping you’d stay here with the baby.”

“Mmhmm,” Jay says, hand spanning her ribcage, thumb coming up to brush at the underside of her breast. “So you thought you’d bribe me?”

Erin grins, says, “Something like that,” and leans down to kiss him again.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

So, Nanditha was the one who sort of requested that I do a bit with Daniel sick, and Jay playing the overprotective father type. I've tried to follow through with that, while still sticking with the whole 'new at this kid thing' theme, so I hope it worked out, and that everyone likes. :) Especially Nanditha, obvs, and thanks for the prompt for the fic.

I'm trying to wrap this up now so hopefully only a few more chapters to go and we'll be all finished by, oh, let's say the end of April? I have goals you guys.

Jay’s still a little dazed from the morning’s events, not quite awake yet. He dozes off while Erin is in the shower, wakes up again in time to watch her get dressed and leave. She flashes him that dimple in the doorway and then she’s gone and Jay is alone in a rumpled bed. And on babysitting duty.

So that’s a thing that’s happening. Jay takes another couple of minutes to stretch, arms and legs spread across the bed, but then he rolls out and gets himself into the shower. He accidentally uses Erin’s shampoo, probably because it’s not even eight in the morning. He tries to cover it up by using his own shampoo afterwards. He doesn’t want to go into work smelling like Erin. That’d be weird as hell.

And why is Erin going to work anyway? As far as Jay’s aware, there’s nothing new for them to be working on. The fire that had been lit under the case was starting to die down, as more and more available avenues were exhausted.

He heads into the spare room once he’s dressed, pushing the door open and saying, “Little buddy?”

Daniel is awake, Jay sees, but not sitting up. That’s unusual. His little face is red. Jay reaches down to pick him up – and he can practically feel the heat coming off the kid from inches away. Geez. Jay gets Daniel up and holds him and the little guy starts crying, rubbing his face against Jay’s shoulder. No words.

Carefully Jay plasters a palm across Daniel’s forehead. Okay, no way this is normal. He’s gotta be running a fever. Is there a thermometer in Erin’s apartment? Jay tries to think, but there’s no reason why he’d know where it is. He says, “It’s okay, Daniel,” and carries the baby with him into the bathroom. He rifles through the cabinets; under the sink, over the sink. It’s in the tall cupboard next to the bath where he finds one of those ear-thermometers. Can you use them on kids?

Whatever. Jay’s gonna try. He says, “Hold still, buddy,” and tries to put the thermometer inside Daniel’s ear. It does not go well.

Daniel screams and flails so hard that Jay nearly drops him. He twists and turns his little body, lunging around and yelling. Tears squeeze from his eyes and run down his cheeks.

This is ridiculous, Jay thinks. The kid is burning up. He’s gotta be 102 degrees. What’s the protocol for this situation? Straight to the hospital? Shit, he can’t think. He doesn’t even know if anything else is wrong with Daniel. How’s he supposed to ask him?

Jay decides there’s only one thing for it, carts Daniel through into the living room, finds his phone charging on the kitchen counter, and calls Will.

Will answers the phone with, “Yeah, what? I’m busy.”

“Okay,” Jay says, “but it’s important. There’s this kid-”

“What?”

“No, shut up and just listen. I’m…” he hesitates, searches for the right word and comes up with, “…babysitting this kid, and he’s got a fever, and-”

“So ring his parents,” Will says.

“Would you let me finish?”

“Sorry.”

“His mom is out of town and he’s staying with Erin, which isn’t the important part. He’s seriously hot, like, I touch his skin and it’s practically steaming. I can’t figure out what’s wrong with him. What do I do?”

Some of the urgency must have gotten across, because Will goes silent for a moment, considering it. “Okay,” he says eventually, “what are the other symptoms?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he crying?”

“Yeah,” Jay says, “he was, but now he’s gone quiet again. He seems pretty tired.”

“Right, and is he sick? Vomiting or diarrhoea?”

“No,” Jay says. “I mean, I’m pretty sure not. I haven’t checked his diaper this morning.” He’s almost expecting a ‘look how domesticated you are’ crack from his brother, but apparently Will is deep into doctor mode.

“Coughing? Sneezing? Wheezing?”

“Uh, his nose is a little snotty? It’s usually a little snotty.”

“Eyes weeping? Or red?”

“I dunno,” Jay says. “He was crying.”

Will says, “Okay. Look. I can come over and have a look, or I can call Nat and ask her, but unless it gets worse, it’s probably just a cold. Why don’t you take him down to a pharmacy? Buy some baby Tylenol and see what they say there, all right?”

“Yeah,” Jay says. “I can do that.”

“And if anything changes then you can call me again or take him straight to a hospital. Got it?”
“Yup.”

“Are you sure?”

“Thanks, Will,” Jay says, and he hangs up. He sighs, lifts Daniel a little higher and looks at the kid’s sad, snotty, tear-stained face. “I can do this,” he repeats, mostly to himself, but then he says, “We’ve got this, little buddy,” and gives Daniel a smile.

Daniel pouts back at him, little lower lip sticking out, more fat crocodile tears slipping down his cheeks. It’s not the most inspiring look.

“That’s okay,” Jay says, “because we’ve got this. Come on, little dude, we’re gonna get you dressed in some clothes and take you to the pharmacy.”

Erin has been fumbling her way through databases for almost an hour, searching arrest records, witness information, anything she can get her hands on. Trying to find some kind of information about a girl named Sydney who was tricking down where Erin was living seventeen years ago. So far, she’s coming up blank, which doesn’t surprise her. It’s a pretty broad set of parameters.

She’s so involved, leaning forward into the computer screen, that she doesn’t hear Atwater come in. Doesn’t even notice him until he clears his throat.

“Wow. Hi,” she says. “I didn’t see you. What are you doing here?”

Atwater bends over his desk, fumbling in the drawers. Comes up with his phone and waves it at her. “Forgot this,” he says. He’s got a toothpick in his mouth and a baseball cap jammed on his head and he looks more relaxed than usual.

“You managed to live without your phone all night?” Erin jokes.

“Yeah,” Atwater says. He smiles at her. “Figured I’d want to have it on me today, just in case anything drops, y’know?”

“Uh huh. Doing anything fun?”

“Paintball,” he says, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. “Thought I’d take all the kids, make it a family thing.”

“Your brothers, right?” Erin checks. “And little sister?”

“Yeah.”

“It sounds fun.”

“I hope so,” Atwater says.

Erin smiles at him, broad and friendly. She likes Atwater. “Have fun,” she says.

“Aight.” He looks her up and down. “Don’t work too hard.”

“Never,” Erin says.

Her head whips back to the computer as soon as he’s halfway down the stairs. On the desk, her phone vibrates, which is probably Jay. Erin tells herself that she’ll check it in just a minute, and digs
deeper into her search.

Daniel starts crying in the car and doesn’t stop all the way to the pharmacy. The sound reverberates in Jay’s skull until he swears there are multiple babies back there crying. It’s actually physically painful, that’s how loud it is.

It’s a relief to finally park and get out, and he’s desperate enough that he gets out and shuts his door and just stands there for a second, relishing the quiet. He goes around to the back after a second and reaches in to unbuckle Daniel and pull the boy out. The toddler is still hot with fever, even though the air conditioning in Jay’s car had been on full blast.

He juggles the kid up into his arms and says, “Right, let’s go get you something, okay?”

A woman walking past turns to look at them; smiles knowingly. Jay isn’t sure whether she’s smiling at him, or at Daniel, or both. It occurs to him that she probably assumes he’s the boy’s father – and, why wouldn’t she? Except, Jay’s not sure how he feels about that.

He doesn’t really remember ever thinking about kids much. Maybe once or twice, in his early twenties, when he and Allie had been in a steady relationship and it had seemed like it would last. She’d had a great family. He’d loved her. He hadn’t imagined ever wanting it to change.

They’d fallen apart, in the end, after Ben and when Jay went to Afghanistan. He thinks that maybe Ben had been why he’d stopped thinking about kids. He’d been a great little guy, eight years old and smart as a whip, funny and easy to talk to. Knowing what happened to that kid burned in Jay’s skin. He was still hurting over it, nearly a decade later. He couldn’t even imagine how Allie felt. How her parents felt.

The kind of world where that stuff happens – people like Lonnie hurting children like Ben, or anything else that Jay sees at work – it’s not the sort of place he likes to imagine bringing a kid into. Not when he really thinks about it. Not if he couldn’t protect them.

“Come on,” he says to Daniel, which isn’t really necessary. The boy has stopped crying, anyway, and is leaning his head against Jay’s shoulder. There’s a lot of trust there, and it makes Jay angry all over again. He carries Daniel inside and looks for a counter somewhere, or someone who he can ask questions.

He’d texted Erin half an hour ago, before he got in the car. She hasn’t replied yet. Jay thinks that’s weird, wonders if he should write to her again, but he’s got Daniel to be thinking about now, snotty and feverish as he is.

They find a woman to help without too much trouble. She looks young, round-cheeked and acne on her forehead, and Jay’s not entirely convinced that working here for five minutes exactly qualifies her to help. Still, she coos over Daniel and finds him Tylenol and gets them up to the counter for a rapid chat with one of the actual pharmacists, so Jay can’t complain.

He leaves with painkillers and absolutely no idea how he’s going to hold Daniel down long enough to get them in his throat. Approach the toddler like he’s a suspect? Restrain him with force? Trick him into drinking it somehow?

“It is time,” Jay says to the kid as he buckles the straps of the car seat, “to call in the big guns. By which I mean Auntie Erin.”

He gets into the driver’s seat and checks his phone and Erin still hasn’t texted him back, which is
frustrating. She’s probably got a lead, if she’s this distracted. Should Jay really be bothering her? He glances in his mirror at Daniel in the back, cheeks red and puffy and eyes swollen from crying. Yeah, Jay decides. As soon as he gets home, he’s calling. This is worth it.

A name pings up on Erin’s screen and she stares at it, blinks, and stares again. This is it, she’s sure it is. She can feel the name opening old memories, cracking them wide. It’s the son who ends up getting Erin the name. She finds ‘Jonah Elliott’ for a misdemeanour crime and it sounds right, it’s in the right area, and she digs a little deeper and finds his mother. One Sydney Elliott. Arrested three times for soliciting between 1999 and 2004. Jonah Elliott is now eighteen, and he’s mentioned here as having been picked up on drug charges multiple times, starting when he was twelve – geez, that’s young – but not being arrested officially until he was fifteen. There’s an address here. It’s recent.

Erin’s phone rings and she checks it, absently. It’s Jay, his face bright on her screen, caught mid-laugh. She smiles when she sees it, but she doesn’t pick up. She can’t. Not now. She’s so close, she can feel the breakthrough buzzing at the base of her neck. Instead, Erin puts the phone back on the desk and just lets it ring out.

Jay says, “That’s weird. She’s not picking up.” He glances over his shoulder at Daniel. The poor kid is all tuckered out, head slumped against the rest of his seat, eyes closed, breathing fast and snuffly. Sounds like he’s got a blocked nose.

Trying to keep it quiet, Jay gets out of the driver’s seat, bringing the pharmacy bag with him. He goes around to Daniel’s door and pops it open; bends down to slide the sleeping boy’s arms out of his harness. Daniel barely moves, even when Jay gingerly hoists the toddler up to sprawl against his shoulder.

“You’re really done for now, huh, buddy,” Jay murmurs. He closes the back door as quietly as he can, juggles Daniel and Erin’s car keys as he goes to open the door to her building. He’s not surprised that Daniel sleeps through the lift ride, dozes as Jay gets them into the apartment and continues to nap when he’s put down on the couch.

With free arms, Jay rifles through the pharmacy bag, finding medication and reading instructions. He considers waking Daniel up to give him some – but, surely it’s better to let the kid sleep. Right? Sleep is healing?

He tries Erin again, but the phone rings through to voicemail for the second time. Jay considers calling Will – but, he doesn’t exactly want to bug his brother. Besides, he expects more questions about Jay and Erin and Daniel will be forthcoming, and Jay doesn’t want to think about that. He texts Will instead, to say that he’d gone to the pharmacy, and that Daniel is sleeping now.

There’s a reply immediately, which probably means Will has been waiting for an update. Or he was just on his phone doing Duolingo again. Will has been trying to learn Spanish for ages. In Jay’s opinion, the desire has come from a healthy dose of competition between his brother and some of the other doctors at Med.

Will’s text says, See if he’ll eat anything.

Jay replies, He doesn’t usually eat much. We haven’t figured out what he likes yet.

Will sends emojis of different foods and a question mark, which Jay ignores. Instead, he writes
back, *He’s sounding kinda wheezy. I’m not sure how to get Tylenol into him. Hold him down?*

*Bribe him,* Will suggests, and then, *kids love bribes, dude, how do you not know this?*

Jay texts, *I don’t have kids.*

There’s no reply after that, probably because Will is lost in his own thoughts. And, Jay thinks, his brother is really the last person who should be judging him about wanting a woman who comes with baggage. Daniel isn’t even *Erin’s* kid. It’s just that Jay seems to have pulled himself into this circle of Voights; a circle which, he has to admit, is getting smaller and smaller. It really is just Hank and Erin left now – and Daniel, of course, and probably Olive. Maybe Olive?

Jay leans over the counter and checks on Daniel, who is still on the sofa, and still fast asleep. He snaps a quick picture with his phone, sends it to Erin. After that he’s bored. He decides to cook, with nothing better to do. An omelette. With cheese melted in. If that doesn’t convince Daniel to eat, Jay doesn’t know what will.

“I don’t see why I should tell you anything,” Jonah says stubbornly.

Erin sighs, looks for patience, and taps her foot against the doorstep. “You don’t remember this, but I used to know your mom. We were friends, okay? I used to babysit you.”

“Yeah,” Jonah says, looking very pointedly down at her badge. “All the friendly neighbourhood cops used to babysit me.”

“I was thirteen, you moron, I wasn’t a cop.”

“I’m not hearin’ anything convincing coming outta you.”

Erin says, “Jonah. I need to talk to Sydney. Okay? Is that so hard? She’s not in any trouble. I just need to ask her about something that happened years ago. Someone who attacked her.”

Jonah sticks his hands in his pockets. “Someone attacked Mom?”

“Yeah.”

He rubs a hand backwards through dark, curly hair. He’s got nut-brown skin and blue eyes, looks familiar enough that Erin thinks he must take after his mom. “If I tell you, you swear nothing bad’ll happen?”

“Only good things,” Erin promises. She turns to look at the car, parked by the side of the road. “Look, why don’t you just come with me?”

“Yeah,” Jonah says. “Yeah, all right. I come with you, I make sure Mom is okay.”

“Done,” Erin says promptly. “Now, get in the car.”

“Uh huh, and you’re sure it’s not all some trick to get me down to the station?”

Erin rolls her eyes. “I wouldn’t need some trick, idiot.”

“You are not very polite.”

“Yeah,” she says. “I’ve heard that before. Look, just get in the damn car, would you?”
He walks with her down to the sidewalk and gets in the car.

Erin checks her phone just before she gets in too, and it’s a mistake. There are missed calls from Jay, texts and a photo which are displayed on her lock screen. She reads part of one; Where are you? and immediately wishes she hadn’t. Yeah, she’s dumped Jay with Daniel, but she’ll go back to them as soon as she’s wrapped up here. She just needs to talk to Sydney Elliott.

She just needs to solve this case.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

It's been a while, because frankly I'm a slacker. Much appreciation to everyone who is still reading/leaving kudos/comments. You are tremendous human beings! I hope someone gives you chocolate. Within the next week. So look out for that.

Tylenol soaks the front of Daniel’s shirt, red stains around the boy’s mouth.

Jay holds up a third, freshly-filled syringe. “Okay, Daniel,” he says, serious voice on. “If you open your mouth and swallow the medicine, you get a cookie.” In his other hand, he waves the cookie, tantalisingly.

Daniel watches it wave back and forth, stretches out his little hands and makes ‘gimme, gimme’ motions, but doesn’t open his mouth. Which isn’t entirely unexpected. This is harder than Jay had thought.

“Open your mouth,” he says, slowly. He opens his own mouth, to demonstrate. “Ahhhh.”

Daniel is giving Jay some major side-eye, standing up on the couch, mouth tightly closed. This isn’t going to work.

“If I have to pin you down again, I will do it,” Jay says warningly, although the last two times he’d tried that it hadn’t worked well for him. “Open your mouth for a cookie, Daniel.”

“Ookie,” Daniel says. “Ah, ah.” He opens his mouth, points at the cookie.

Finally, Jay thinks. A breakthrough. He moves the syringe forwards.

Daniel’s jaw slams shut like a steel trap.

“No,” Jay admonishes. “No cookie. Open your mouth for the cookie.”

Instead, Daniel sits down on the couch and starts to wriggle his way forwards, preparing to climb down. Jay sighs and puts his knee behind Daniel, prepared to catch him if the kid should slip. The toddler is fine, though, making his way onto the floor and padding across it on slightly more unsteady legs than usual.

Curious, Jay follows Daniel into the kitchen area, which smells strongly of eggs.

Daniel points at the counter. “Pah.”

“Pah?”

“Pah!” Daniel insists. He reaches both hands up, fingers wiggling.

Jay sets the Tylenol syringe on the counter and bends to lift Daniel up. He shows him the plate of egg. “It’s an omelette. You want some?”

“You want some omelette?”

Daniel nods, enthusiastically. He stretches for the plate and Jay grabs the little reaching hand and pulls it back. Daniel says, “Yes, yes!”

“Okay,” Jay says, “you can have some omelette. If,” and he picks up the syringe, “you take your medicine first.”

Daniel stares at him.

“Open your mouth,” Jay says, and opens his own mouth. He points the syringe inside it. “Then swallow the medicine. Then omelette.”

“Let?”

“Yes. After you swallow this.”

Daniel looks from the eggs to the syringe and up to Jay’s face. Encouragingly, Jay opens his mouth and says, “Ahhhh.”

Reluctantly, Daniel opens his own mouth. “Ahhh.”

Yes, Jay thinks. Finally. A breakthrough. He points the syringe and squirts it, the liquid hits Daniel’s tongue, the kid’s face screws up, and he spits. Everywhere. Tylenol splatters the kitchen counter and the floor. More on Jay’s shirt. More on Daniel’s… everything.

“Let,” Daniel says. He grabs for the omelette.

“No,” Jay tells him. “You have to swallow the stuff.” He grabs the Tylenol bottle, puts the syringe in and draws the plunger up, preparing another dose. “Okay, buddy, let’s try this again.”

Sydney opens the door and Erin can see the girl she knew in this woman’s face, but it’s hard. Like looking at a reflection in water, trying to see past all the ripples.

“Hi,” Erin says. “You probably don’t remember me, but my name’s Erin…” she pauses, tries to remember if she’d been going by a different name back then. Yes, she had, she realises, and she quickly corrects herself, “…Shelby-”

Sydney cuts her off. “Lindsay,” she says, and smiles. “Oh, my god, you look exactly the same. Still gorgeous.”

Erin tries to laugh, hears how forced it sounds, and stops. “Yeah,” she says. “That’s me. You’ve got a good memory – it’s been nearly twenty years.”

Jonah chimes in quickly. “Mom, she’s a cop.”

Sydney looks Erin up and down. “Really?”

“Yes,” Erin says, pulling her badge and holding it out. “I just want to ask some questions.”

Immediately Sydney’s face closes off; goes cold and hard. “I don’t know anything.”
“It’s not like that,” Erin protests, but the woman is looking at her son.

“Jonah, what’d you bring her here for?’”

“She said you got attacked!”

“I’m fine,” Sydney says to Erin. “You can go now.”

“This was years ago,” Erin tries to explain. “Back when I knew you – when I used to watch Jonah. You remember?”

“Of course I remember. What does that have to do with anything?”

“You came home one night,” Erin says. “You told me someone had hurt you. Do you remember? You were bleeding – you had cuts on you.” Erin touches her own abdomen. “Here.”

Sydney sighs. “I don’t know how you remember, but…” she lifts her shirt. There are scars there, silver-white and faded with time, but still clear. Two thin lines, crossing over each other. Like a plus symbol, or-

-the beginning of an asterisk.

“Sydney,” Erin says, “this guy, the one who did this to you? He’s killing women again. I’m trying – my team is trying – to find him. To catch him. I need you to tell me everything that you can think of.”

“It was a long time ago, Erin.”

“I know that. Believe me, I know, but this is the best lead we’ve got.”

Sydney sighs and puts a hand up to rub at her temples. “I don’t remember what he looked like. It was a long time ago. He was a white guy? Brown hair, I guess. He wore a hood, and it was dark. I couldn’t see his face. But I remember him talking to me. He said his name was… Jacob. Like in the Bible.”

Erin says, “A last name? Anything?”

“Sorry. Just Jacob. He talked almost the whole time but I didn’t – I was too frightened, mostly.” Sydney takes a deep breath. “I remember saying please. Begging him. I said I had a son. Then he got up.”

“What?”

“He was lying on me, carving me up,” Sydney says, and her hand curves around to where the scars lie, hidden beneath her shirt. “I’d said please so many times, and then I said I wanted to go home to Jonah. To my baby. And he took his knife and cut the ropes and then he just got off me and walked away.”

Erin stares. “He left? You didn’t escape?”

“I was tied up,” Sydney says. “I couldn’t move until he cut me loose. I don’t know why he did.”

“After you mentioned Jonah,” Erin checks.

“That’s right. The second I said ‘my baby’ he was just up and leaving. He didn’t say anything else. I was too scared to go to the cops. It was my fault for getting in his car, right?”
“No,” Erin says. “Never.” She steps in for a hug, quick and then over. “Thank you, Sydney. And – thanks for what you did, when I was a kid. Getting me to watch Jonah. Keeping me off the streets.”

“I figured I’d try,” Sydney says, shrugging. “Looks like it worked. You really made something of yourself.”

“Yeah,” Erin says. “I did.” She shakes Jonah’s hand, says, “Stay out of trouble,” and heads back to her car with the new knowledge pounding in her head. She has to look into this further, because suddenly a pattern is starting to present itself. God, this is the breakthrough Erin needed. Finally. Finally. She’s going to crack this case wide open, catch this bastard once and for all. She can feel it.

Her phone rings as she gets back into the car, and, elated with her victory, Erin picks up.

“Lindsay.”

It’s Jay’s voice. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’ve been calling you for hours.”

“Sorry. Following a lead.”

“By yourself?”


“Okay, well, can you come home? Daniel’s sick.”

“How sick?” Erin asks, and then shakes her head. “Wait, it doesn’t matter. I’m on my way back.”

Daniel is asleep by the time Erin bursts into the apartment. She says, “Hey, hey,” and lowers her volume as soon as she sees him. “What happened?”

“He’s okay,” Jay says. “Little man just conked out.” He glances down at Daniel. The kid is laying half in Jay’s lap like a puppy, his head on Jay’s thigh, one hand curled around Jay’s knee. “I got some Tylenol down him in the end and I think the fever is dropping. It’s hard to tell.”

“Does he need a doctor?” Erin goes down on her knees beside the couch, leans over to look at Daniel.

“I don’t know. I called Will-”


“I think he’ll be okay, if the fever drops.”

“Yeah,” Erin says, and she’s got a hand on Daniel’s head. “He is warm. Damnit! He was warm last night, too. I should have noticed.” She sighs, obviously annoyed with herself.

Jay is curious as hell about what she’s been doing all day but he forces himself to wait. Let her come to him. She’ll share when she’s ready. Instead he says, “Maybe we should call Olive.”

“You know what?” Erin says. “You’re right. It’s been too damn long. I’m going to call her.” She
gets up, slides a hand into her back pocket and pulls out her phone. “Are you okay here?”

Jay looks down at the little boy sleeping on his lap, mouth slack, eyelashes fluttering. “We’re okay.”

Erin leans over and pecks him on the lips before she leaves the room, phone already halfway to her ear. Jay can half-hear her from the other room, but she doesn’t sound like she’s having a conversation. No pauses.

He turns his gaze to Daniel again and rubs a hand over the boy’s sweat-sticky curls. Poor kid must be so exhausted. There’s a snuffling hitch to his breathing now which makes Jay think that the little guy’s nose must be all blocked up.

Erin strides back in and sighs, throws her phone on the couch cushion beside Jay and flops down herself.

“Voicemail?” he guesses.

“Yup.” She drags a hand through her hair. “I’m gonna get my laptop. There’s something I want to look into.” Standing up again, Erin glances over into the kitchen. “Is there any food?”

“Uh, I made eggs. But then we ate them all.”

“You both ate them?”

“Yeah, I made him an omelette. He ate it. Like, devoured it, pretty much.”

Erin stares. A smile tugs at the corners of her lips. “Jay! How did you do it?”

Jay shrugs, tries not to smirk. “I guess I’m the kid whisperer.”

“Sure,” Erin says, laughs a little. “Sure.” She grabs her laptop from the table and brings it back to the couch, starting to type while she’s still moving. “I went to visit one of the previous victims today.”

“Don’t you mean their family?”

Erin shakes her head, decisively. “Nope. A girl I remembered from,” she hesitates, carries on, “a long time ago. My old life. Some guy attacked her and it was a long-shot but I thought… anyway. It was the guy.”

“Wait. The Asterisk?”

“Yeah.”

“But she’s still alive?”

“Yeah,” Erin repeats. “And, you know what’s really interesting?”

“No.”

“She had a kid. She says, when she told him about her baby, that was when he let her go.”

Jay frowns. “So? What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know yet.” Erin twists the laptop towards him so that he can see the screen. “Look. The
first seven victims are all young – the oldest was twenty-one. We’ve got Jessica Schultz, nineteen, a street-kid. No family. Sarah McKenzie, eighteen, an only child. Amanda Baker, eighteen, runaway. Ashley... and then Samantha Taylor, twenty-one, Brittany Glenn, seventeen, Megan Reilly, twenty. No family, any of them, besides parents.”

“Okay,” Jay says. “So he tried to pick victims who wouldn’t be missed.”

“Yeah,” Erin says, “but that’s not it. Look at the newest victims. Nicole Tanner was twenty-nine and had a husband and a son. Emily Yates was thirty-two and had a husband and a daughter.”

Jay looks at her, uncomprehending. He can see from the look on Erin’s face that she thinks she’s got something, but… “I don’t get it.”

“They have kids,” Erin says. “He’s suddenly switched it up – he’s started targeting women who have kids.”

Something on the screen catches Jay’s eye and he leans closer, careful not to jostle Daniel out of his lap. “Hey, that’s Emily Yates’ husband, right?”

“Yes?”

“Joshua Yates?”

“Yeah.”

Jay stares at the name on the screen. “So why’d he tell us to call him Jake?”

Erin’s mouth drops open and for a second there’s just stiff, frozen silence in the room and then Erin says, “Shit, Jacob, she told me he called himself Jacob,” and at the same time Jay’s phone begins to ring. Daniel startles awake at the sound.

Jay turns to look at the screen and says, “Antonio,” and answers on speaker.

Through the phone, Antonio says, “I’m texting you an address. We’ve got another body.”

Daniel starts to cry.
Look I've been binge-watching Dark Matter okay. Busy busy busy.

Also, I only just watched the Chicago PD season finale. Gotta say I was disappointed. Not much happened, and Lindsay's leaving again. Only this time it's for reals, apparently, because Sophia Bush is also leaving? Which feels like a crappy ending to Lindsay's character imo. Couldn't they have written her out nicely? Instead of having her be the only cop on the show ever to be punished for beating on some guy? Yeesh.

Idk you guys, I'm not sure yet whether I'll keep watching the show (I mean, Atwater is still my fave) but I'm kinda bummed about how quickly they go through female characters. Like, Antonio's partner got killed in the pilot, then there was Sumner (anyone remember her?) and then Burgess' new cop partner was there for about five minutes, can't remember her name. Burgess is in and out of Intelligence like a jack-in-the-box and a new female cop arrives to signal Lindsay's exit. Hm. There's no rule which says you can't have more than two women at a time, you know. (And Platt. I love Platt.)

ANYWAY. On with the chapter. Tell me what you're thinking about the season finale/new PD with no more Lindsay (AND no more Linstead RUDE). Enjoy the read and I'm sorry I made you wait for it :D

It’s a race to get out of the apartment.

Erin’s fumbling with her keys as she races down the stairs, and Jay’s behind her, saying, “I don’t think we should be bringing Daniel, Erin-”

“We don’t have time,” Erin says. “I can’t believe we didn’t know it was him – oh, my god, we just left her there with him…”

She vaults the last few steps, staggers into the wall at the end of the stairwell, and lurches around the corner towards the front door. God, if they’re too late. That kid could be dead already, and they’d never know. He’s had her for at least a day; closer to two, by now. Erin just wants to find her. She’s known kids who died and kids who went missing and it’s the missing ones who stay with her. That lack of closure which haunts her.

“Erin!” Jay is calling. “Slow down!”

But she can’t slow down, because her heart is pounding and her head is aching with all the new knowledge. The signs she should have picked up on. Shit, shit, shit. They’re going to be too late, Erin feels it, and there’s already another body, and what if it’s her? Little Maddie, blond hair and bright eyes.

Erin’s into the driver’s seat already, her hands tight on the wheel, boots tapping against the pedals. “Hurry up!” she says, and Jay opens the back door and leans to buckle Daniel in.
“We shouldn’t be taking him,” Jay says again.

“So stay here!”

“I’m not letting you go off on your own.”

“Get in, then,” Erin snaps at him.

She slams her foot down on the gas as soon as Jay’s butt touches the seat, before his door is even properly closed. He yanks it shut and says, “Erin!”

“He’s had her this whole time, Jay.”

“Okay, so we call Antonio, we get officers out looking for the girl…”

“Her name’s Maddie,” Erin says tightly. “She’s nine. Her mother’s been murdered and we left her with a serial killer. We left her.”

“Hey!” Jay protests. “It’s not like we knew.”

“We should have!”

The car slides around a corner and Daniel cries out from the back. Erin doesn’t even glance at the mirror. She hardens her heart and builds a wall around her mind, shutting out Daniel, and Jay, and anything else that might distract her. She’s going to find this kid. This one, she plans to save.

Jay knows he’s not going to catch up with her when they pull up at the Yates’ apartment. He doesn’t even get out of the car, just watches Erin storm up to the front door and start pounding on it.

“You okay, little man?” he asks, turning towards the back.

To his surprise, Daniel is out cold – little head leaning against the seat, snot dribbling onto his lips. The car ride had been crazy wild, but apparently the power of illness and Tylenol combined was too much for the kid.

Jay calls Olinsky. “Hey,” he says.

“Where are you?” the other man asks, his voice crackling through the phone.

“Um. At Emily Yates’ house.”

There’s a pause, and then Olinsky says, “The victim?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Erin thinks that we met the killer here.”

“Are you serious?” Olinsky asks.

“When we came to interview the husband,” Jay explains. “He introduced himself with the wrong name. Jake, instead of Joshua. Then Erin tracked someone down – from her old life, she says – and this woman claims to have met the perp. She said he called himself Jacob. Jacob, Jake.”
It isn’t until he tries to actually lay it all out that Jay realises how ridiculous it sounds. They’re here on a hunch, on the word of a woman who could easily be lying, or misremembering something from decades ago. Maybe there’s a completely innocuous reason why Joshua Yates uses Jake as a nickname.

Olinsky says, “What are you doing, Halstead?”

“I don’t really know,” Jay admits. “Erin…”

“Erin’s got more skin in the game than the rest of us. You know this.”

And he does, he knows, and he should stop her, really, talk her down or something but-

“We’re partners,” he says to Olinsky. “I’m not going to let her run all over Chicago chasing this guy down on her own.”

“You’re partners,” Olinsky says, and he’s laced the word with all of the double meaning it can possibly hold. “Maybe you shouldn’t just blindly follow where she leads.”

Jay glances out the window and he sees her then, coming out of the apartment with her face set and her jaw tight. He knows what she’s found. “O, I gotta go.”

“You’re a good cop, Halstead. Don’t let your personal life get in the way of that.”

“This isn’t that,” Jay protests. “This is a lead, okay? I’ll keep you guys updated.” He hangs up as Erin gets back into the car. “Well?”

“House is empty,” she says. “Most of the clothes are gone from Maddie’s dresser.”

“Maybe her father took her away? I mean, her mother just got murdered – maybe a trip isn’t out of the question.”

Erin shakes her head. “Something’s wrong here, Jay. I know it.”

He wants to argue, and yet he doesn’t. Two sides of him fighting and he can’t decide which one is right and so he keeps quiet, lets Erin start the car again. She drives slowly, this time, defeated, heading towards the precinct.

Jay moves to open the back door when he gets out at the precinct, but Erin gets there before him. She unbuckles Daniel and pulls the boy out into her arms, cradling his sleepy body close, cheek pressed to the top of his head. She rocks side-to-side a little, soothing him until his eyes flutter closed again, and then she wraps both arms beneath his body to hold him up and carries him inside.

So Jay closes the car and locks it and follows Erin. He’s fully expecting her to leave Daniel with Platt again, but she doesn’t. Just walks straight past the front desk and up the stairs and ignores everyone who stares.

He has to jog to catch up, to palm the door open for her, and she doesn’t look at him but she walks up with Daniel. When they get to the bullpen she settles into her chair with Daniel tucked against the front of her body and she puts one hand on his back and the other on her computer mouse.

Jay decides he’s not going to comment. He sits at his desk opposite and keeps his eyes on her over the top of his computer screen.
There’s a tightness to Erin’s face and she presses her lips together into a thin line. “Stop staring at me.”

“What?”

“You heard.” She still hasn’t looked at him.

“Do you want me to… take Daniel…?”

“Nope,” Erin says, popping the ‘p’. “Olive dumped him in my lap and he’s staying there.”

“Um. Okay.”

Now she looks up, hazel eyes blazing with fury. “Could you do some work, please? Instead of nagging at me?”

“I’m just worried-”

“Worry about Maddie.”

“Erin-”

“I’m serious, Jay,” she says. “I’m fine. I just need to find that little girl. Got it?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I got it.” He turns his face down towards his computer.

Still, after a couple of minutes, he can’t resist another look. Just to see if she’s still mad. She is; her eyebrows are drawn down sharply, and there’s a frustrated set to her mouth. But then she ducks her head a little and inhales right against Daniel’s hair, drops a kiss to his head with her eyes still on the screen. So casually – naturally.

And she’s stubborn, pig-headed and bull-natured and she’s got these demons from her past that she can’t let go and she never lets him in and-

—and Jay finds himself thinking about Mom’s ring for the first time since she died.

Erin trawls back through the surveillance camera opposite the Yates’ brownstone, searching through the last few days for anything that makes her intuition spark. She watches Emily Yates leave on Wednesday morning for the last time, and shifts her legs slightly, careful to keep a hand Daniel. His little belly rises and falls under her fingers. She’s turned him around, his back against her front, and his head is tipped right over. Completely tuckered out, the poor little guy.

She puts her lips to the top of his head, humming softly as she fast-forwards through the morning.

A silver car pulls up on the street opposite the brownstone and a man gets out. Erin hits play, watches him walk up to the front door and ring the bell. Watches the door open, but the man doesn’t step in. A second man steps out, and they walk down the stairs together and along the street, deep in conversation.

They know each other, Erin thinks. And there’s a similarity to the way they walk, matching strides. Something ticks in her head and she waits for the idea to come to her.

For a little while they’re out of sight of the camera. When they come back, they’ve got their heads close together, an engaged discussion. They reach the bottom of the stairs and one of them walks up.
The other one raises a hand in farewell, heads back to the silver car and drives away.

The door to the brownstone closes. Erin fast-forwards again, and, sure enough, the next people to arrive are her and Jay.

How is this possible? She rewinds and watches again to make sure. Emily Yates leaves. No one enters the apartment. The man in the silver car, arrives, walks, and leaves. *No one enters the apartment.*

For the first time, Erin considers something she hasn’t wanted to. Is it possible Jay’s right? That this is just paranoia? Joshua Yates and the ‘Jake’ they met are one and the same. ‘Jacob’ the murderer is nothing more than a twenty-year-old story from a drug-addicted former prostitute.

But there’s a buzzing in Erin’s mind, and a restless feeling in her legs which tells her that she knows something. She just… doesn’t know that she knows it yet.

She runs the plates on the silver car, to feel like she’s doing something. They come back registered to Joshua Yates, which isn’t any help at all. It’s the opposite, actually, convoluting an already complicated case further.

It bothers her, as she watches the footage of them walking down the street again. Who is this man who turns up in Joshua Yates’ car, speaks to him, and then leaves?

Her phone buzzes. A text, she thinks, ignoring it. Only then it buzzes again, and a third time, too rhythmically to be text messages, and Erin shifts up off the seat and digs into her back pocket and hits ‘answer’ without checking who it is.

She puts the phone to her ear. “Lindsay,” she says, glances down at Daniel in her lap and drops her tone a little.

Then on the other end a breathy female voice says, “Erin?”

Erin sits up straighter. “Olive?” She sees Jay’s head whip up instantly. Erin asks, “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Olive says – *whispers,* really – “I’m okay. I’m sorry, Erin, I’m so sorry.”

Jay tips his head at her, holds his hands up. *Where?* Erin can see the question written all over him.

She asks, “Where are you?”

“Don’t worry,” Olive says. “I’m with Hank. We’re on our way back to Chicago.”

“…Hank?”

Jay frowns. Erin shrugs at him, gives him her best *hell if I know* face.

“He got your texts. He came to find me – talked me round. I freaked out, Erin. I’m sorry I did this to you.”

“It’s fine,” Erin says automatically. “Hank’s coming back to Chicago with you?”

“Yeah,” Olive says. “He’s going to help me and Daniel pack up and then – we’re going back to live with my sister, actually. She takes good care of me, and she’s great with kids. Have you met my sister?”
“No.” The thought runs around Erin’s mind. *Sister.* She reaches for the mouse, rewinds the footage until the silver car arrives, and hits play again.

“How’s Daniel?” Olive asks, the words coming out in a rush, as though she’s been waiting to ask.

“He’s okay,” Erin says. On her screen, the man gets out of the silver car and walks towards the door. He’s wearing blue jeans and a coat – long, brown – a light coat, but still unusual for the summer. “Actually, he’s had a little bit of a cold. I think he’s over the worst of it, though. He’s sleeping right now.” The man who opens the door is in a blue t-shirt and grey sweats. “He misses you,” Erin adds as an afterthought. “He’s always talking about his Mama.”

Olive’s breath comes out in a whoosh. “I miss him too,” she breathes. “My baby. I should never have left him.”


“We’ll be there by tomorrow evening,” Olive says. “Hold on. Hank wants to talk to you before I go.”

“Okay.” The men are still off-screen.

There’s a crackle on the line and then a familiarly rasping voice says, “Erin?”

“Hey,” she says. “Where’ve you been?”

“Busy.”

“Are you coming home?”

“Sure am.”

“For good?” Erin asks. She watches the men walk back onto her screen, still going slowly, talking to each other.

“I don’t know,” Voight says.

“You should know,” Erin says, “that I didn’t tell anyone about what happened. They’ve said that you’re on grief leave, but there’s still a spot waiting for you in Intelligence.”

He grunts. “Hm.”

Erin says, “And we miss you.” She sees something on screen and grabs for the mouse, jabbing the pause button a second too late to catch it. Rewind. Pause. There.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Voight says. “Give my grandson a kiss from me, okay?”

“I will,” Erin says. “I have to go.”

“A case?”

“Uh huh.”

“What is it?”
“Nothing important,” Erin lies.

“Hm.”

“Gotta go, Hank. Bye.” She hangs up.

Jay says, “So?”

Erin’s still staring at her screen. She sees it, now, the thing that was bothering her. There’s the man in the blue t-shirt, going back in the house, except his t-shirt is darker now. More like navy. And there’s the man in the brown coat, walking towards his car. She’s paused it mid-step, with his leg emerging from the long coat, stretched out across the road.

A leg clad in grey sweatpants.

Erin says, “Holy-” and then she says, “Jay, come see this.”

He’s up out of his chair and at her side in a second. “What?”

“These guys?” Erin says. “I think they’re brothers.”

“Brothers?”

“I think there’s two of them, and I think they swapped places. Swapped clothes – something.”


“That’s okay,” she says, and she’s pulling up the databases, running a new name through all of them. *Jacob Yates.*

And he’s there, it’s a hit, in Chicago – a custody case. A little girl, seven years old. A daughter. And then there’s a follow-up case, a car crash, with two fatalities. Mother and child.

“Oh my god.”

“Erin?”

“He had a kid,” she says. “That’s why he stopped killing. He had a daughter, and she died. Last month, she died.”

Jay’s starting to catch up. “He changed his pattern. Started going after women with kids.”

“They’re brothers,” Erin says. “Maddie is his niece.” She taps the silver car on her screen. “We’ve got to find Joshua Yates. He’s the only one who can sort this all out. Jay-”

“I’m already on it,” he’s saying. “I’ll get an APB out on the car. We’ll find him.”

Erin pulls Daniel closer and kisses the side of his face. Against his temple, she whispers, “That’s from your grandpa.”

It’s dark by the time they get any information on Joshua Yates’ car – gone out of the city. In the small morning hours of Sunday when they track his cell phone and Ruzek and Olinsky drive off to get him. He’s not far, thank god, still in Illinois.
Daniel’s been awake and asleep and awake again, had a second dose of Tylenol, explored the bullpen with Jay and also alone, crawling under desks, pushing chairs around, babbling to Atwater.

To the team’s credit, no one questions why he’s there. They just sort of roll with it, and Erin’s so grateful. It means there’s always someone watching him; supervising him as he explores, falls over, gets back onto his feet.

He’s napping on one of the couches in the breakroom when they bring Joshua Yates into interrogation.

Erin’s halfway out of her chair before she even looks at Jay, and he says, “Yeah, go, I’ve got him.”

“Thanks,” she says, nods at him, gets up and bolts down the hall.

Joshua is saying, “I don’t understand why I’m here,” when Erin bursts into the room.

“You’re Joshua?” she asks, and she looks at him closely. Everything about his face is familiar. She could have sworn she’s spoken to this man before. “Joshua Yates?”

“Yes?” he says. “I’ve already told these-”

“You’ve got a brother?” Erin interrupts.

The man frowns. “Jacob. We’re twins. I – has something happened?”

“Maddie. She’s your daughter?”

“Of course,” Joshua says. “Can you please tell me what’s going on?”

“Mr Yates,” Olinsky says gently, “when was the last time you saw your wife?”

“I… on Thursday,” he says. “Thursday morning, when she left for work.”

“Where did you go on Thursday?” Erin asks him.

“I’d been planning this trip for weeks, but at the last minute Maddie gets sick – she was supposed to be driving up with me, going to a summer camp near my cabin – and Emily said I should just cancel everything and stay with her but-”

“You didn’t,” Erin says. “Who did you call instead?”

“What?”

“Your brother?”

“Uh, Jake, yeah. I rang him and asked if he’d like to babysit for a few days. He’s been in this depression since the accident. I thought spending time with Maddie might help.”

“The accident,” Olinsky says. “His daughter died?”

“It was awful,” Joshua murmurs, and his face has gone pale. “Alyssa wasn’t that much younger than Maddie – they even looked similar, you know? And Jake doted on her, he did. He was devastated when she died. He blamed himself, of course, and Alex – his ex.”

“So you called your brother,” Erin says, refocusing the man. “He drove over in your car, the two
of you switched clothes and you drove off. Why?"

“We switched clothes?” Joshua frowns. “I don’t remember-”

“He arrived wearing a brown coat. You left wearing it.”

“Oh! No, that was for the car! The AC is broken, and Jake warned me about it. He told me to keep warm, he gave me his coat…” Joshua trails off. “Why are you asking me all of this? Please tell me what’s going on. Has something happened to my brother? My daughter?”

“Your wife,” Olinsky says.

Joshua says, “Emily?”

“We’ll tell you everything you want to know,” Olinsky says; calmly, quietly, “but you have to tell us what we need first.”

“Where would your brother go if he was in trouble?” Erin asks bluntly.

“Jacob? I don’t know. Home, I guess.”

“He’s not there. Try again.” She moves closer, leaning over the table, staring this guy down.

“Then I have no idea. What am I doing here? You drag me in here, ask me all these questions, and don’t tell me anything? What the fuck is this?” He’s angry now, the rage twisting his face. Erin stares at it and tries to imagine a man with the same face pinning women down. Slicing them up. Watching them die.

“Is there anywhere he might take Maddie?” Olinsky asks.

“He’s gone somewhere? With Maddie? I – don’t know… she wasn’t feeling well, I don’t think she’d want to leave the house.”

Erin says, “You mentioned a cabin.”

“Yes, up north. It’s where I go when I need a break.”

“You like camping?”

“Uh huh.”

“Your brother like camping?”

“Yes, I guess. Look, if you think Jake would ever hurt Maddie, you’re dead wrong. He loves her like his own. He’d never touch her.”

It’s taking too long. All of this is taking too long. Erin curls the fingers of her right hand into a fist; slams her left palm down on the table. “Damn it! Tell me where he’d go!”

Joshua jumps at the sound, his chair scraping across the floor. “I’ve got no idea!”

“Think of somewhere!”

“I’m thinking!” he cries. “I – I don’t know! There’s a campground he likes, it’s got places to pitch tents and little cabins. We went there last summer, he brought Alyssa. He stayed for a week after we went home – with Alyssa and Maddie.”
“Tell me where,” Erin says.
Wow I'm such a slacker and I haven't updated this since May. No apologies or excuses. ALTHOUGH, my keyboard did break. And stop typing the letters O and L. Which are useful.

Excuses are for suckers, is my point. Here's a chapter! I'd so much love to promise that the next one will be up quicker. Also, I am only like three eps into S5, because I'm behind on shows as well as writing! But how is everyone feeling so far about the blatant lack of Linstead? I gotta admit, I'm fairly bummed. I might rebel and start shipping Atwater and Burgess.

However even if I did do that, I'd say it's pretty likely this will be my last Chicago PD fic. There are a few random snippets left on my computer that I wrote years ago, and I'm considering reading through all those again and maybe posting them, but as far as full fics go, this is it.

Sorry it's taking me so damn long!

The car bumps over a pothole in the dirt road and Erin says, “Sorry,” through tightly gritted teeth.

Jay looks over at her. “You okay?”

“We’ve gotta be close, right?” she says.

They’re ahead of the rest of the cops. Jay can’t hear anyone behind them yet. He’s got his window rolled down, head half out, eyes scanning the trees.

“I don’t think it’s much further,” he says. He sniffs the air, pulls his head back into the car. “I smell smoke.”

“Campfire?” Erin wonders. She jerks the wheel and skids the car around a sharp corner, slams on the brakes as they come abruptly into a cleared area and nearly hit someone’s RV.

“This is it,” Jay says. He opens his door and jumps out before the engine is off. “Hey!”

A few curious people appear out of tents and RVs, but Jay doesn’t see any cabins. He doesn’t see Jacob Yates, either, but there’s a little blond girl looking out of a tent. Jay jogs over to her.

“Are you Maddie?” he asks.

She says, “No,” indignantly. “My name’s Sophie.”

“Sorry.” Jay backs up a little, turns to look for Erin.

“Have you seen this man?” she’s asking, badge in one hand and Jacob’s photo in the other. Everyone is shaking their heads.

A balding guy says, “That’s Jake, right?”
“Yes,” Erin says, seizing on his answer. “You know him?”

“Sure, he’s up here most summers.”

“Have you seen him lately?”

“No, he doesn’t come in July. The cabins are closed up until August, and he always stays up there with the girls. And his brother – what’s that guy’s name?”

“Josh,” Jay says.

“Yeah, that’s right. And the wife, Emma or something. Nice folks.”

“Which way are the cabins?” Erin asks.

“Further up the road, but you won’t be able to drive there. The gate stays locked until August, like I said.”

“Thanks,” Jay tells the guy, and Erin’s already moving back to the car, shoving the photo into her jeans. Jay follows her, gets into his seat and closes the door as they reverse out of the parking lot, retracting their steps until they get back to the main road.

They drive until they hit the gate, just like the man had said. A big red one, blocking the rest of the road. There’s a sign on it that Jay doesn’t bother to read.

“Team will have bolt cutters,” he says, as Erin climbs out of the car. When he steps out into the air he can almost hear the sirens behind them. “They’ll be close.”

“We can’t wait,” Erin says. She’s climbing over the gate already.

Jay sighs. “Erin, think about what you’re doing.”

“I’m trying to save a girl’s life.”

“Why would he kill her? She’s his niece. We didn’t know that before. He loves her.”

“He loved his daughter,” Erin says, “and she died.” She jumps down on the other side of the fence and her boots hit the packed earth with a thud. “He’s been acting out some kind of twisted revenge on these women with kids. How do we know he’s not going to do the same thing with Maddie?”

“Just wait for me!” Jay’s already struggling up the gate behind her, but she’s shaking her head and turning towards the woods.

“I can’t!” Her voice floats back as she starts running.

Damn it, Jay thinks, and he vaults the gate and takes off after her. “Lindsay!”

Erin can hear Jay crashing behind her. He’s following her, like he always does. Watching her back. It leaves her free to focus on what’s ahead of her; the kid, the serial killer.

They’ve driven through the night to get here. It’s nearly 9 AM, Sunday morning, and the last time Erin remembers sleeping is Friday night. She knows she’s running on fumes, knows it’s making her irritable. Snippy with Jay, with the rest of the team. Taking risks that she shouldn’t be taking.
She can still smell smoke. They’ve gotta be away from the campfires by now… and why would there be campfires? It’s July. It’s hot. The smell is getting stronger, if anything.

Erin tucks her chin into her chest and redoubles her pace, dodging through the trees, lifting her knees high to clear the sticks and grass. There’s an old fallen tree in front of her, a big fat trunk, and Erin vaults up and over it with a hand against the wood.

Jay’s voice behind her. “Lindsay!”

He’s gotta be mad, if he’s calling her Lindsay. It’s his go-to move when he’s upset with her, when he thinks she’s being stupid or he wants to put some professional distance between them.

Erin’s chest gets tight at the thought of distance between them, but she shoves the feeling down. She has to concentrate on the kid. Finding the kid, that’s the priority right now, and everything else should just be background noise.

Then she lurches out into a clearing and there’s a little ring of brown wood cabins and the furthest one from Erin is smoking. Smoke is leaking out through the windows, billowing from the chimney – that’s way too much smoke.

The fucking cabin is on fire.

Erin yells out, “Maddie!” She pauses for only a second, balancing on one foot before she launches back into full-tilt running, heading for the cabin. “Maddie!” Her voice cracks on the second scream, rasping past a throat that’s already sore from smoke. How had she not realised that the smell was too strong? She should have been faster.

Jay’s somewhere behind her, and Erin knows that but she can’t make herself stop to wait for him. He’s her partner. He’ll be there, sooner or later. He’s always there.

The door of the cabin bangs open and Erin’s legs stop so abruptly that she skids on the grass. Her hands go to her hip, unsnapping the holster and whipping out her service weapon. “Police!” she yells, gun trained at the door, wanting it to be Maddie.

It’s not. The man who steps out has brown hair and a grey shirt and a smoke-stained face. He sees Erin and stops.

“Don’t move,” she calls out, warning him. “Jacob Yates!”

The man turns and runs.

Erin squeezes the trigger, gets off one shot, two. Neither one hit him, and he’s dodging around the side of the cabin and out of her sight. Shit. But it’s Maddie who’s important, and Erin runs again, this time with her gun out, holding it by her leg, slowing her down.

There’s smoke coming through the open door of the cabin, thick grey clouds of it. Not black yet, and Erin thinks that’s a good sign. She wonders if Severide had taught her something about fire; if she’s got some kind of extra knowledge. It all feels pretty basic. Get low, keep moving. That’s all she can think to do.

She drops to her knees as she gets through the door. “Maddie!” The smoke makes her eyes water and the smell of it sets her heart racing, because it feels bad. It’s not a smell that her brain associates with good things. When she’d been a kid they’d set fires in winter, trying to keep warm in a tiny apartment with shitty heating. Teddy had burnt himself in one, and Erin remembers him screaming, the smell of singed flesh and herself sobbing, trying to run his hand under water, watching the skin
The wood floor of the cabin is warm against her hands. She can’t crawl holding the gun, so she stows it back in the holster. Maybe she’ll regret that later. It doesn’t matter.

“Maddie?”

She can’t hear anything. Just fire crackling and her own harsh breaths. She stops to cough, wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist when she’s done and crawls further forward. There’s no way to figure out the layout of the cabin, and it’s impossible to see far enough ahead to figure out if she’s in a hallway or a bigger room. Erin stretches out with her hands, feeling for walls, for furniture. For the body of a child.

“Maddie!”

She hears coughing. A human coughing. Erin’s hands hit a couch, and she works her way around it, eyes streaming from the smoke. She can see the wood of the floor and there’s a door ahead of her, halfway open.

“Maddie!”

“I’m here!”

The voice that answers Erin is faint, hoarse from coughing, but it’s a voice. It’s a little girl’s voice, calling out. Erin closes her eyes for a second, like she’s praying. Giving thanks. Whatever. She crawls forward again, faster this time, and there’s fire licking at the walls. Spreading across the furniture.

She shuffles through the door, hands and knees against the floor. It’s hot through her jeans, painfully hot against the bare skin of her arms and face. Erin wishes she’d thought to tie her hair up. She narrows her eyes against the smoke and says, “Call out to me, honey, come on.”

“Here,” Maddie says, voice rasping, “I’m here.”

God, the kid is so close. Erin can hear her breathing, lungs wheezing and rattling. She can sense the body ahead of her, and she stretches her arms out - a little further, a little more. She crawls again and her head hits a bed and she stretches underneath and suddenly Maddie is there.

Erin’s hands close around skin and she feels the soft give of Maddie’s arm and she tugs, sliding the girl across the floor and into her arms. “Okay, baby,” she says. “Okay.”

Maddie is sobbing. “I can’t breathe,” she chokes out.

“I know,” Erin says. “It’s going to be okay.”

It’s not okay. Not even close. Erin twists to see the door where she’d come in and there are flames raging just beyond it. The front of the cabin is completely hidden. She stretches her legs across the floor towards the door and kicks it shut, acting on some vague, half-formed instinct.

“Maddie,” she says, “is there another way out?”

“No,” the girl says. “Just the front door. Only one door. Uncle Jake says - he says it’s safe.” Maddie’s body shakes in Erin’s arms, a fresh round of sobs mingling with coughing, and gasping for air. Erin pulls the kid tighter against her. She tries to get her bearings. They’re crouched beside the bed, and when she looks up through the smoke she can see the shadow of it rising above her. It’s a
big bed. Tall.

A bunk bed. Not that it helps, knowing that. But Erin keeps looking, further up, her eyes watering and her nose streaming and there’s a light up there. Not the red-orange-flicker of the fire. A straight, white light.

“Is there a window?” she says.

“No. Just the skylight.”

_Skylight._ “Okay. That’s it.” Erin gets up from her knees, pushes her feet under her, hauls on Maddie’s shoulders. “Stand up, Maddie. You have to climb.”

“The ladder’s gone,” Maddie says. She shrinks back against Erin’s body.

Erin holds the girl’s shoulders tighter. “Climb the bed frame.”

“I’m not supposed-”

“Okay,” Erin interrupts. They don’t have time for this. She can’t stand here arguing. She bends her knees instead, turns her back to Maddie. “Just hold on to me. Can you do that? Ride on my back.”

There’s a hesitation that lasts too long, too long, and Erin hears her heart pounding in her ears. Sweat drips down her forehead and into her eyes. The crackle of the fire is impossibly, insanely loud. So close. Shit, they’re going to die.

Maddie’s arms wind around Erin’s neck.

“Hang on,” Erin says. “Really tight. Don’t let go.” She gets to her feet with an effort and reaches for the bed. There’s a railing running alongside the upper mattress, and Erin grabs it. She stands on the lower mattress, shifts to the side of the bed. Puts a foot on the headboard, slides her arm over the railing until she’s hanging there.

It’s thick up here. Smoky, hard to breathe, and Maddie’s forearms are pressing into Erin’s throat. She’s already light-headed.

Can’t pass out, she thinks. No time for that. She gets a firmer grip on the railing and swings one of her legs up and over. Oof, it’s an effort, Maddie’s extra weight dragging Erin down. She’s not used to this; she carries her own small frame and not much else.

They’re going to suffocate. Erin topples over onto the top mattress, doesn’t wait to catch the breath that she can’t seem to get back. She stands up, her feet sinking, struggling to keep her balance among blankets, springs bouncing beneath her. The bed creaks.

And she can almost reach the skylight. Almost. But she can’t. It’s too far - too far away from the bed, too high above her, and there’s no way to open it. No way to smash the glass. Erin doesn’t have anything.

Her legs give out. She can’t _breathe_, and she sinks to her knees, hands fluttering up to pull Maddie’s arms away from her neck. Gasping, but the smoke just stings, and she has to cough it out as soon as she pulls it in.

So this is how it’s going to end. And Erin had always thought it’d be a shoot-out. Something heroic. Unavoidable, in her line of work. A cop funeral with uniforms and salutes.
Or maybe once, in the middle of the night when she was half-asleep and hopeful, she’d pictured it ending another way. After years - after a life. And maybe Jay had been there and maybe… a glimpse of family. A dream that she’d never allowed herself to really imagine.

Not just the sheer fucking stupidity of running into a burning building with no equipment and no plan.

Maddie has dropped from Erin’s back and curled into a ball on the bed. Surely, Erin thinks, surely she hadn’t come in here without a plan. Climbed up here without a plan.

It’s always the same plan. That’s why you have back-up.

Jay is right outside, Erin thinks, and reminding herself helps. She can picture him watching the flames engulf the cabin. Helpless. She’s gotta give him some way to find them. Some way in.

“I’m scared,” Maddie cries.

“I know,” Erin says. “I’m scared too. But I need you to be brave a little longer, Maddie.” The bedroom door is closed, but there’ve gotta be flames licking at the outside of it by now. And Erin’s hand drops to her side and she pulls her gun free of the holster.

Maddie whimpers, “Please.”

“Put your hands over your ears,” Erin says. “Don’t move.” She puts one leg across Maddie, holding the girl in place. She braces her other knee against the railing.

Squinting through the smoke, burning in her eyes and nose and chest, Erin raises her arms and aims at the skylight. She curls her finger around the trigger and pulls.
The fist in Jay’s chest doesn’t unclench until he’s reached down through the shattered glass for the
girl, hauled her up and stretched out again for Erin. It isn’t until they’re all on the roof, finally, all
three of them, that he starts thinking it might be okay.

Erin is coughing, her face stained black with smoke, and the kid is crying.

Jay had thought he’d lose her. He’d seriously believed this was it, and he’d just be watching,
helpless.

“Come on,” he says, hustling Erin to her feet. “We’ve gotta get down.” He scoops the girl into his
arms, crouches to keep his balance as he skids across the sloping tiles of the roof. He hops down
onto the lower porch roof and then holds a hand out for Erin.

She takes it without complaining, accepts his help and coughs into her elbow as she climbs down.

Jay puts the kid down on the porch roof and slides perilously off the edge until his toes reach the
rocking chair. It’s still a little unsteady, even with the wood he’d put under the rockers. He hangs
onto the edge of the roof until he’s balanced and then steps down.

“It’s okay,” he calls up to them. “It’s not far. I can catch you.”

He hears the murmur of voices; Erin encouraging the kid, and then Maddie slides forward and
drops straight into Jay’s arms.

“Hey,” he says. “Are you okay?” He sets her feet on the ground, runs his eyes up and down her
body.

She nods. “Uh huh.” Her eyes are wide and scared.

Jay turns back up to reach to Erin. He’s surprised again when she drops; trusts him, instead of
trying to make her own way down. His hands close around her ribs, slowing her, and he stumbles
forward with the weight. They nearly fall.

Erin gets her feet on the ground, her arms around Jay’s back. She steadies him.

“Thanks,” she breathes, mouth against his neck, and then she pulls right back and goes to
Maddie.

Jay stands for a second. He rubs a hand backwards through his hair and lets out a heavy breath.
They’re both alive. They’re okay. He can hear voices now, footsteps crashing through the trees that
mean the rest of his team is here.

Almost too late. Jay can’t believe he just let her run into that cabin alone. Shit.

They call for an ambulance and Erin is told in no uncertain terms to wait in the car. The rest of
them buddy up and disappear among the trees; looking for Jake Yates one more time, just in case.
Erin crawls into the back beside Maddie and lets the girl curl up by her side.

“Uncle Jake told me we were going to meet Mommy here,” Maddie whispers. “But he lied.”

“He did,” Erin says. “I’m sorry.”

“Where is she?”

This isn’t fair. Erin puts her arm around the girl’s shoulders tightly, and she says, “Something really bad happened to your mom, Maddie.”

There’s a little hitched breath before the girl starts crying. Silent, helpless tears that slip from her eyes and run down her face, soaking into Erin’s shirt.

It’s this kind of love that’s always scared Erin. That all-consuming love that kids have for their moms. She’d never managed to shake it, not completely. No matter what Bunny did, that feeling had always been lurking somewhere inside Erin.

“Your dad is gonna be here soon,” she tells Maddie. “He’ll look after you.”

She hopes it’s true. How much of this stuff lurks in their DNA? Identical brothers - identical genes. How much safer is Maddie with Josh?

“I only want Mommy,” Maddie says, and she slides down to rest her head in Erin’s lap.

Absently, Erin strokes her fingers across the girl’s hair. Brushing it back behind her ear, tracing a path from temple to jaw, over and over.

“It’s going to be okay,” she soothes. “You’re going to be okay.”

Minutes slip by and Erin keeps her hand on Maddie’s head, feeling the girl’s body relax, slowly, until her breathing evens out and the tears stop flowing. Poor kid must be exhausted. Erin coughs as quietly as she can, wipes her sleeve across her mouth to clear the smoke-laced saliva that coats her throat and lips.

She’s leaning her head against the car window, half-asleep herself, when she sees a flicker of movement.

It’s not much. Just a glimpse between the trees of something moving. Something grey.

And it could be anything; it could be a deer, or a dog, or one of the other cops out here. But Erin straightens up just a little, tilts her head and opens her eyes and keeps looking.

She sees it again and this time it’s clearer. A human-shaped figure darting from tree to tree. A man.

“Maddie,” Erin whispers. She doesn’t look away from the window, but she reaches down to the girl’s shoulder, shakes her. “Maddie.”

“What?” Maddie says through a yawn.

“I have to go.”

“What?” The girl struggles to sit up.

“Stay here,” Erin says. She presses the car keys into Maddie’s hand. “Lock the doors,
understand? Don’t unlock them for anyone unless they have a badge. Okay?”

“Where are you going?”

“Not far,” Erin lies. “I just have to - I have to make a call on my radio. I’ll be right back.”

“Call from in here.”

“I can’t. No signal.” Erin pushes Maddie off her lap and points to the car keys. “Lock it as soon as I’m out. Don’t forget.”

“O-okay.”

“I’ll be right back,” Erin says. “Sit tight.”

She opens the door barely wide enough to slip out, closes it as quietly as she can. Crouching by the rear tyre, Erin waits until she hears the car lock before she starts moving.

It must be midday by now. The sun is high overhead, bright and hot on Erin’s skin, making shadow patterns with the leaves. There’s sweat drying on her back, damp along her bra line and in her hair. She reaches up and scrapes it back into a half-ponytail with both hands.

A stick cracks in the woods and Erin rises from her crouch and darts forward. Soft footfalls; she’s as quiet as she can be, the old leather of her boots scuffing in the leaf litter. It’s so still out here. The engine of the car hums in the background, but Erin can’t hear anything else. No birds. No human voices.

She rests one hand on her holster, unclips the strap keeping her gun in place but doesn’t remove it. Not yet. She’d fired six rounds at the skylight. A little bit of panic - stupid. Ten rounds left, and no extra clips, because Erin rushes into everything under-prepared.

Ten bullets. That’s enough. One of them will find Jake Yates.

Erin creeps further forward, stops to press her back against a tree. She listens, but there’s nothing. Her eyes flick side-to-side, scanning the patches of shadow in-between the bright sunbeams.

Voight would think she was so reckless. Erin can imagine what he’d say. She pushes the image away and tells herself it doesn’t matter. She’s doing what she has to do, just like Hank did.

A flash of movement ahead of her and Erin’s gun leaps into her hands, too fast for thought. There’s a pounding in her head. She slinks forward, places each foot carefully, feeling for loose stones or branches. Her eyes stay up, focused on the world around her, scanning side-to-side.

Brown hair behind a tree. A hand whisking into the cover of leaves. Erin speeds up a little and her breath comes in hoarse, ragged gasps. Her throat feels scorched from the smoke and the heat. She’s desperately thirsty.

And then suddenly he’s clear in front of her, stepping out into the open with his back towards Erin.

“Jacob Yates!” she yells, and her voice cracks. She doubles over, coughing, and he takes off like a hare, bounding away from her.

Erin smacks her chest with a fist, forces herself to suck in air and straighten up. “Police!” she yells, and she’s running after him. Gun held down by her leg, twigs snapping beneath her feet. No
point being quiet now. He knows she’s here.

She hurdles a bush and lands awkwardly, her foot skidding on a patch of gravel. Her ankle rolls and her stomach flips with the feeling of it, twisting too far. Reaching out, Erin grabs a tree branch with her left hand, breaking her fall. She feels the sting as a sharp spike of wood breaks her skin, and yanks her hand back to examine it.

That’s when Jake tackles her.

Erin goes forwards hard, hits the ground and has the wind knocked out of her. Her fingers flex automatically and the gun goes skidding out of her grip. She tries to reach for it, disoriented, still not entirely sure what’s hit her. She can hear breathing; knows it’s Jacob, but her face is pressed into the dirt and she can’t see him.

He grabs one of her wrists and Erin struggles to roll onto her back, freezes when she feels her shoulder wrench with the movement. Shit. He’s holding her arm tight, and he’s got a knee up between her shoulder blades. The heaviness of him pins her down. Her chest is crushed under the weight, and she can’t lift her face, either. Every breath is shallow. Dirt gets up her nose and inside her mouth.

There’s something frantic to it, more than just conscious thought. It’s instinctive; intrinsic, every part of Erin’s body and mind screaming out at her. The crushing weight on her back sends her into overdrive - she has to get away, get him off. His breath is hot against her ear, half-panting, half-growling.

She feels a hot line of pain in the small of her back, her skin throbbing and burning. Is that a knife? Does he have a fucking knife? And it’s getting hard to breathe and Erin thinks about how soft her skin is there, how there’s only a little flesh and muscle between her skin and her spinal cord. God, so fragile, all of it, and she can’t-

-her hand claws at the dirt and her gun has to be nearby and if she can just-

But she can’t.

Get up, Erin tells herself. Get up, fight back, reach further. Do something.

She wonders, suddenly, if this is what Ashley felt, in her last moments. If this is what all of them felt. Not just the paralysing fear, but the feeling that if she’d just been a little stronger… a little faster… a little smarter…

Erin is not going down like this. She’s not.

She throws her whole body into the effort - a final, last-ditch attempt to reach for the gun. There are her fingers, scrabbling against the dirt. Her wrist, twisting, pushing against the ground. Her elbow clicking as it straightens further than it should, and the awful, awful wrench in her shoulder. She feels something pop - what is that, a ligament? - and her finger brushes the edge of the gun. Barely.

And Erin reaches.

The gun seems to slide into her hand and after that it’s all very fast. She pulls her arm in, her shoulder throbbing. Jacob is still lying on her back, pinning her left arm down, and so she slides her right arm around her neck and points the gun over her left shoulder.

In the final seconds before she pulls the trigger, Erin has time to think that it’s going to hurt. She twists her head and puts her ear against the dirt, as close as she can get it.
She fires.

For a horrible, endless moment, she’s not sure if she hit him. She’s not sure of anything at all, and her left ear is ringing, ringing, and the sound is deafening and disorienting. Erin’s mouth gapes against the dirt and her eyes squeeze shut.

The weight against her back is a lot heavier all of a sudden. She tries, again, to roll to the side, and this time there’s no pulling on her arm to stop her. Erin rolls, and opens her eyes to see the blood soaking into the dirt. It’s a bright, vivid red, and then she rolls again and she finally shakes herself free of Jacob Yates.

Chapter End Notes

Okay! We're getting really close now. I'm thinking two more after this one. And this should be the last "action" chapter, which I always struggle with and feel uncomfortable writing, so hopefully less procrastinating. I CAN FINISH THIS IN 2017. WATCH ME.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Damnit. I said I would finish this in 2017 and I lied. My bad.

Second-last chapter. Only an epilogue from here. If you've stuck it out this far, with my incredibly shoddy updating schedule, you are AWESOME.

Erin isn’t sure later how she managed to get to her feet and stumble out of the trees with the world blurring and spinning around her. It doesn’t matter. The only important thing is that when she sways and drops to her knees, Jay is there.

His hands coast over her face, rubbing away the dirt and pushing her hair back. “Erin,” he says, “Erin, look at me. What happened?”

She doesn’t remember if she spoke. She doesn’t remember if she passed out, or if she just drifted away. The next time she’s aware, she’s in the back of their car. Face-down, with her head on Jay’s legs and his hands holding her down. There’s a white-hot lance of pain in her side.

She tries to move, and he says, “It’s okay. It’s okay, just stay with me. Please.”

Erin has time to think that it must be bad if he’s saying that before she’s gone again.

Jay’s got the torn remnants of Erin’s t-shirt balled up and pressed to the bleeding line on her back. He hasn’t touched the knife. It’s lodged deep, down to the hilt, and he doesn’t want to know what happens if he pulls it loose.

She’s already white with blood-loss and her skin is clammy when he touches her. Still, he keeps the blood-sodden t-shirt jammed into the wound and his other arm braced across her shoulders, holding her still.

“She’s not nearly there. They’ve been driving for fifteen minutes already and it’s taking too long. Erin is bleeding out all over Jay’s legs, all over his hands and his arms and the back of the car, and he’s just watching the blood spill out. There’s nothing he can do to stop it.

He presses down harder on the wound.

Erin comes back to herself in the ambulance, with an IV in her arm and her cheek mashed into the gurney. She blinks up at the faces hovering over her but she can’t make them out.

“Jay?” Her lips are numb and his name comes out slurred.
“Right here.” There’s a pressure on her hand and Erin tries, she tries to squeeze back.

Her fingers won’t move and she slips into darkness.

It just about breaks Jay’s heart to leave her in the hospital. He drives back to the 21st with his knuckles white on the steering wheel and his legs jittering anxiously.

Outside, Jay parks carelessly, and he takes the steps three at a time, shoving his shoulder against the doors.

“Platt,” he says, before he even sees her. “Is Daniel-”


Jay stops. “What?”

“Your clothes!”

He glances down his front, and yeah, there’s blood caked into his t-shirt and dry and flaky against his skin. “It’s Lindsay’s.”

“Yeah,” Platt says, and the tight line of her mouth softens just a bit. Her eyes are gentle when she looks at Jay. “I heard. But she’s gonna be okay, right?”

“Right.” He hopes. God, he hopes.

“So don’t get that blood all over the baby,” Platt tells him. She points at the stairs. “Go. Locker room. Now.”

“I-” Jay starts, and then he stops himself. He can’t be bothered to protest. She’s right, anyway. Jay’s come here to pick up Daniel out of some misguided sense of duty, but he can’t imagine that Erin would be impressed with him soaking the toddler in her lifeblood. Or Voight. Voight wouldn’t be impressed either.

The exhaustion really starts to sink in as Jay climbs the stairs. He wonders what it will be like, having Voight back. Does the man just slip back into his place, the same as before? And they’ll all act like it never happened - like he never went off the rails and forced Erin to cover for him, like this isn’t something that could happen again?

It will happen again, Jay thinks when he steps into the shower. It will keep happening, because that’s the kind of guy Voight is. And Erin will keep being dragged into the middle of it. Over and over, and it’s a cycle Jay can’t even imagine how to break.

Voight is family for her. Erin is just about the only family Voight’s got left. Trying to pry them apart will only hurt everyone more.

Except - and Jay’s not ashamed to admit it to himself - he cares about Erin more than Voight. More than any of them. If it comes down to it, Jay’s going to pick Erin, every single damn time. Over Voight. Over his job. Over himself.

But he hadn’t run into the cabin today, and she had. And Jay doesn’t know why he’d hesitated.
Jay’s hair is drying into spikes when he gets back to the hospital. He’s wearing clean jeans and a fresh t-shirt and he’s got Daniel in one arm, holding the kid up against his chest. The boy is sleepy, rubbing at his eyes, but he’s talkative. It’s been a stream of babble since they got out of the car and started walking from the parking lot.

Voight’s supposed to call. Jay’s got his phone in the back pocket of his jeans, and he’s waiting for it to buzz, but it’s still and quiet. Voight hadn’t even replied to the text Jay had sent.

Kim is sitting in one of the shitty, straight-backed chairs in the waiting room. She reaches out a hand when she sees Jay, catches his wrist and tugs him down to sit beside her.

“No news yet,” she says, before Jay can ask. “She’s still in surgery.”

Jay puffs out a sigh and settles back into the chair. “Thanks.”

“She’ll be okay,” Kim says firmly. She leans across Jay and smiles at Daniel. “Hey, Daniel.”

The boy stretches a hand out for Kim and grabs at her hair, but she dodges, still smiling. Jay shifts the kid around to stand on his lap, and Daniel bounces up and down on Jay’s knees, rising on his toes to look around.

“Did they say how much longer?” Jay asks. He takes one hand away from Daniel to rifle it backwards through his damp hair.

Kim chews her lip. “No, sorry.”

“It’s been almost two hours,” Jay says, glancing at the clock over the reception desk. “Surely-”

Daniel tips forward and falls face-first towards the hard linoleum. Jay snatches for the back of the boy’s shirt and misses. It’s Kim who springs into action and gets an arm under Daniel, catching him right before his head hits the floor.

“Shit,” Jay breathes.

“Oh my god,” Kim murmurs. She puts her other hand on Daniel’s back, tips him to set his feet on the floor and blows the hair out of her face.


Daniel doesn’t want to stay sitting. He waves his arms wildly, kicks his legs against Jay’s shins and voices his displeasure very, very loudly.

“You can’t get down,” Jay says, clamping his hands around Daniel’s ribs and trying to hold on as the kid bucks against him.

And it makes him feel great that Ruzek and Olinsky arrive just in time to witness Jay’s complete
inability to restrain a fifteen-month-old. Typical.

Ruzek plops down on Kim’s other side. “Any news?”

“Not yet,” she says. “Jay, I can walk around with him, if you’d like? Maybe a change of scenery will help?”

“Um,” Jay says. He jerks backwards to avoid Daniel’s hard little head. “Thanks, Kim, but I should probably do it. I don’t want to just hand him over when he gets difficult. It’ll take my mind off things, anyway.”

“Oh, yeah,” she says. “Sure.”

Jay stands up with Daniel held firmly against him.

It isn’t until he’s walked down the first corridor and turned a corner that he thinks maybe Kim wanted an out just as badly as Jay did. It can’t be fun for her, with Ruzek always right there. Shit. Maybe he should have let her-

The back of Daniel’s head connects solidly with Jay’s mouth and he winces and almost drops the kid.

“Ouch!” he says. “Fuck!” That earns him a disapproving glare from a nurse walking past. Jay sighs. “Now look what you’ve done,” he says to Daniel. “You’re making me look bad, buddy. And you better not have killed any of my teeth.” Jay runs his tongue along them. They feel okay. His lip is swelling already, though.

There’s a vending machine at the end of this corridor, and Jay makes towards it. It’s a good decision. Daniel likes standing in front of the machine, mashing his nose up against the glass. He likes it even more when Jay sticks a couple of dollars in for a Coke. He turns around to grin at Jay with his six tiny teeth, bangs his palms against the machine.

“You must be hungry, little dude,” Jay decides. He sticks in a few more bucks and pulls out a packet of sea salt chips. Not the most healthy, and not easy to eat without molars, but surely he can crumble them up for Daniel a little?

Kim is standing up when they get back to the waiting room. “I was coming to find you,” she says.

Jay feels the warmth leech out of his skin. “Erin?”

“She’s okay. She’s out of surgery - she’s hanging in there.”

“When can we-”

“As soon as she’s out of ICU,” Kim says. “She had a blood transfusion, so she’ll be in for a few hours. They’ll tell us when they move her to a ward.” She hesitates. “You can probably go home, if you want?”

“No,” Jay says. “I’ll wait.”

Ruzek says, “Do you want me to take the kid anywhere? Does he have like a babysitter?”

“I’ll keep him,” Jay says. “It’ll be fine.”

Kim sits back down, tucking one of her legs beneath her. “We’ll all wait,” she says decisively.
“You guys don’t have to.”

Olinsky shrugs. “Yeah, we do.”

Jay’s not gonna argue with that. He sits back down, settles Daniel into his lap and rips open the packet of chips.

There’s a bright light somewhere above her, and Erin squints as she opens her eyes. Someone says her name. A fuzzy face hovers over her. She tries to speak, but her lips are thick and gummy and her throat is dry. She closes her eyes again.

Someone’s lips brush Erin’s forehead. There’s a low, gravelly voice filling the room, spinning through her ears. She wishes she could remember who was speaking. She wishes she could understand what he’s saying.

A long, long time passes. When Erin opens her eyes, the light is gone. There’s a shadow slumped in the chair beside her bed. She reaches out for him and twists to the side. Pain shoots through her back and she gasps and the person sitting by her jerks upright.

“Erin?”

She’s gone again.

Jay’s got to be the one to tell her. He knows it has to be him. He’s ready; he’s been waiting in her hospital room for a day-and-a-half, dozing in the chair, tagging in someone else every time he has to leave. He won’t let Erin wake up alone.

But it’s Jay who’s there when she finally opens her eyes all the way and looks at him.

She sees him. She’s awake. “Erin,” he murmurs, reaching for her hand and folding his fingers around the soft skin. He’s careful to avoid the IV in the back of her hand, careful to make sure the blankets on the bed don’t snag against the tubes snaking away from her.

“What’s happened?” she asks him. Her eyes roll over his face, around the room and then back. “Hospital?”

Her voice rasps painfully. Jay says, “Don’t talk too much,” and he reaches for the glass of water by her bed. Puts the straw to her lips and raises the back of the bed to prop her up as she sips, slowly.

Erin swallows and then sits back. She sighs, and closes her eyes, and for a second Jay thinks she’s gone again. But they open again just as quickly, fixing on him.


“Yates?” There’s real fear in her face.


“He stabbed you. Grazed a kidney. You were in surgery for a while, and you lost a lot of blood,” Jay says. “You’re going to be fine.”
“The little girl?” Erin asks.

“Maddie,” Jay says. “She’s going to be fine, too. She’s already been discharged.”

There’s a pause. Erin squeezes his hand. Jay squeezes back, the knowledge in his chest burning hot and fierce and hard. He wants to tell her - oh, he wants to tell her - but he’s scared, too. Worried about how she’ll react. Terrified for what comes next. So he stays silent - just for a little while longer.

Several minutes pass before Erin says, “Daniel?”

“He’s with Olive. Voight was here in the night, but he’s gone home now. He needed some sleep.” Jay blows out a breath, hunches his body over, closer to the bed. “We’ve all been worried about you.”

“Sorry,” Erin murmurs, her eyes half-closed. Her lips loose.

“It’s okay,” Jay says. “You can rest more. I’m not going anywhere. I can wait.” Everything can wait. The news boiling inside him can wait. They’ve got nothing but time.

Something’s different.

With Jay, but not just with Jay. He’s where Erin notices it first. When she wakes up; and by the time she’s spent another day in hospital, and is feeling well enough to eat food, she’s sure.

The food makes her nauseous, but she’s hungry. Jay feeds her sandwiches one tiny bite at a time, and Erin chews steadily, gives each swallow a chance to sit in her empty stomach before she takes another. This isn’t new to her - recovering in hospital. She’s been here enough times to understand the process. She’s followed others here, too. Her co-workers. Her friends.

Maddie, the little girl she’d saved, has been in Erin’s head a lot lately. It makes her think things about the world. About what sort of a place it is - what sort of a place it always will be, no matter how hard she tries to fix it.

What’s it going to be like when Daniel’s thirty? Erin can’t imagine things will be very different.

That doesn’t mean she has to stop trying.


The rest of the team, when they visit, are unchanged. But the hospital staff are walking on eggshells around her. It’s a relief to Erin when the stitches in her back are checked for the last time, when the painkillers are bottled up and given to her with strict instructions, and when she’s allowed to put on some real clothes and leave.

Jay is different when he drives her home. He’s different when he helps her out of the car, and different when he helps her upstairs into her apartment. When he settles her down on the couch. When he takes off her shoes and kisses her and covers her with a blanket.

It’s too much, finally, and Erin turns towards him, her body stiff so as to not pull at her wound, and blurts, “What?”

“Huh? What?”
“That’s what I’m asking you,” Erin says. “When are you going to tell me what’s going on? I can tell, Jay.”

He looks down at her, serious-faced. Slate-blue eyes. “It’s complicated,” he says, sitting beside her on the couch. “The hospital found something out.”

Erin’s mind whirls through worst-case scenarios. Cancer, autoimmune disorders, anything that might stop her from being a cop. She steadies herself against the arm of the couch and says, “Tell me.”

So he tells her. And her mind goes blank, and her future falls apart.

The baby is due in March. That’s what Jay tells her.

Nothing’s ever going to be the same.
Wow, here we are! Last chapter (finally) of my last Chicago PD fic. It's been fun, my updating schedule has been appalling, and I've had a ton of lovely comments and kudos. Thank you, Linstead fans, for reading and talking with me! It's been really awesome to share my take on these guys with you from July 2014 until February 2018 (wow). It's also been amazing to see my fics consistently coming up close to the top of Erin/Jay fics when filtered by hits, kudos, comments and bookmarks. That's a really cool feeling. As I've said a couple of times in notes since S4 ended, Chicago PD isn't as much fun for me without Lindsay around. I've definitely not enjoyed S5 so far, and I don't really think I'll be watching it seriously in the future. Maybe from time to time, but I doubt I'll keep up. That makes this my final fic and also my farewell to the show and the fandom as a whole.

So thanks again, everyone! Thanks for sticking it out, especially with this fic, which has taken literal years to finish. Here's a nice, sappy ending, because you all deserve it and so do Erin and Jay.

“Mom! Mommy!”

Jay turns around, squinting down the hallway towards the yelling. “What?”

Kenzi had been running towards him, but she skids to a stop, planting her hands on her hips. “You’re not Mom,” she says, suspicious and accusing.

“Good eye,” Jay says.

“I need Mommy.”

“Not sure where she is, sweetpea.” He reaches out to card his fingers through Kenzi’s long, dark hair, ducking down to drop a kiss on top of her head. She’s so big. He can’t handle it.

She huffs crossly and squirms away. “It’s important. And also urgent. I need her right now.”

Something about the way she’s talking looks strange. Jay bends further, putting their faces on a level. “Have you lost a tooth, Kenz?”

“Uh, yeah,” she says, and she opens her mouth wide and there are no bottom front teeth left, now, at all. “I did a ginormous pull and it came out.”

“Is that why you need Mom?”

“No.”

“Do you want to tell me why you need Mom?”

“No. It’s a Mom problem.”

Jay frowns. He isn’t sure he can remember anything being a specific parent problem before.
Although, there was a period when Kenzi was three and wiping her butt was always a Dad job. Man, was he glad when that phase passed.

“Is it something to do with the new baby?” he asks carefully. Kenz hasn’t always been happy about the idea of the new baby.

“No.” She’s glaring at him now, fists propped on her hips again. “Dad-dy. Tell me where to find her.”

“In the bedroom, I think,” Jay says. “But she’s getting changed!”

Kenzi’s already gone.

Erin hates being pregnant. She’s in a better emotional state this time around, that’s for sure, but she still hates it. Her body doesn’t handle it well, and she feels bloated and uncomfortable and way, way too hot.

She yanks off the third shirt she’s tried on in the past two minutes and tosses it to the ground, groaning in frustration. Her back aches and she really, really just wants to lie down. Preferably in an ice cube somewhere.

“What’s wrong?” Kenzi pipes up from the doorway.

Erin glances at her. “Did you knock?”

“Uh, no.”

“I’m trying to get dressed, Kenz.”

“Okay,” Kenzi says, and she crawls up onto the bed and sits there, her hands tucked under her legs. “I have an urgent problem, but it can wait.”

“That’s not what urgent means,” Erin says. She steps back towards her dresser and rummages through the open drawer. “What’s the problem?”

“Daniel’s cake has six candles,” Kenzi explains. “That’s wrong.”

“Ohhhkay. Is that it?” Not exactly urgent, Erin thinks wryly.

“No, I just thought you’d want to know it was wrong, because there’s supposed to be seven, Mommy.”

“You’re so very right, sweet girl, and I will fix it as soon as I can.” Erin pulls out a pale green one and holds it up. No good. She doesn’t think it’ll fit over her belly. She rubs a hand over the bump and cringes at the muscle spasm that follows. Geez. She needs a rest. “Was there another problem?”

“Yeah,” Kenzi says. “It’s a big one. My tooth fell out.”

Erin frowns. “You’ve lost a tooth before, K-bug.”

“Don’t call me bug, Momma.”

“Sorry, pumpkin.”
“My tooth is lost,” Kenzi says.

Still not a big deal. Erin pulls the blue peasant blouse over her head, shaking the loose sleeves out past her shoulders. Perfect. “I’m sure the Tooth Fairy will still come, even if you lost your tooth.”

“Yeah,” Kenzi says, “but it’s going to ruin the cake!”

Erin turns to stare at her daughter. Tangled brown hair, pale eyes, and - yup - an extra hole in the little girl’s smile. Nothing that might explain what she’s talking about.

“Sweetheart, why is your tooth going to ruin the cake?”

Kenzi rolls her eyes - actually rolls them skyward, like she’s fifteen instead of five. “Duh, Mommy,” she says. “Someone’s going to have to eat my tooth.”

Erin purses her lips. She thinks she’s starting to understand. “Kenzi, when you say you lost your tooth, where did you lose it?”

Kenzi lifts her eyebrows, and leans forward, like it’s some big conspiracy. “I lost my tooth in the cake,” she hisses.

Oh. Uh oh.

It’s nearly six. They’ve got about ten minutes before everyone arrives, Jay thinks. Of course, everyone is really only Hank and Olive, Daniel, and Olive’s new(ish) boyfriend Ben, who’s got two young kids of his own and is taking the stepfather role in his stride.

Basically it’s just family coming, which isn’t anything to worry about. But Jay’s still watching Erin digging with her fingers in the cake and, yeah, he’s a little worried.

“How am I supposed to find it with a spoon?” she asks, lifting her head to glare at him. “I need to be able to feel what I’m doing.”

“Yeah, Daddy,” Kenzi says, standing by Erin’s side and bouncing on her toes. “Duh.”

Of course, Jay thinks. Duh, Daddy. He runs a hand backwards through his hair and watches Erin. Her lips are twisted sideways and pressed together. It could be frustration at having to find a baby tooth inside a chocolate cake. It looks like more.

They’d had to wait for Daniel to finish school, and then T-ball. Kenzi’s been bouncing off the walls all day - she won’t start Kindergarten until September. In Jay’s mind, it can’t come fast enough. Daniel’s official seventh birthday party is tomorrow, but Kenz has a skating competition. She’s overexcited about that, too, and the result has been a crazed, hyperactive little girl from 7am this morning.

No wonder she’d ripped out her tooth and dropped it in a cake, Jay thinks wryly.

Erin jerks her arm back from the cake like she’d been burned.

“What?” Jay asks. “Did you find it?”

“Yeah, did you find it, Mommy?”
“No,” Erin says. “Sorry.”

Is she breathing hard? Jay stares at her. There’s a faint sheen of sweat on her forehead, and, yeah, it’s warm, but not that warm. And the freckle on her cheek is standing out starkly against skin which is paler than usual.

“Erin? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she says, but she’s shaking her head from side-to-side and that means no.

Maybe she doesn’t want to say it with Kenzi in the room. “Kiddo,” Jay says, “can you do me a favour?”

“Uh-huh! What?”

“Can you go—” he pauses, wracking his brains for an excuse. “Um, go and check on your dress for tomorrow? Make sure it’s hanging up and ready?”

“Yeah!” she cheers, throwing her arms over her head, flashing him the deep dimple in her right cheek as she runs past.

Jay smiles. Good one, Daddy. She’s been obsessed with the figure skating dress since they bought it two weeks ago.

He moves closer to Erin and rubs a hand over her lower back. “Hey. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure,” she says through gritted teeth.

Jay steps up behind her, dropping his head to brush a kiss along the line where her neck meets her shoulder. “You don’t sound sure,” he says.

And because he’s standing so close to her, cheek-to-cheek, her back to his front, he feels it when she tenses. The way she hunches forward and folds her arms to her chest and the sharp, pained exhale that she lets out.

“Babe,” Jay says. He reaches out to rub over her belly and he feels Little Pea kicking, hard and fast. And then he knows. “This is it, huh?”

She tips her head back against his shoulder and blows out another shaky breath. “I don’t think I’m going to make it to the skating,” she says.

The ice is cold. Kenzi’s breath comes out in dragon puffs and her nose is cold. Her cheeks are cold. Her fingers are so, so cold. Her toes, when she wiggles them inside her skates, are cold.

She loves the cold. And the music, and the ice, and the sound her skates make. And how fast she goes, with the wind blowing in her ponytail. And her dress.

The dress is dark blue and it’s Kenzi’s prettiest ever. She loves it so, so much. There are spirals made out of sparkles all over the top half, and they shine so much when it moves. There are beads like pearls around the neck and the wrists and the bottom of the skirt. The skirt flies out when Kenzi
does twirls. She loves it.

She loves her dress. She loves skating. She loves winning the most of all.

Daddy always says it’s not about winning, because it’s about having fun. Kenzi has fun when she wins. Especially when they put the medal on her neck and she clomps on the edges of her skates around the rink to Daddy.

He’s got an empty spot behind him where Mommy should be sitting, and that makes Kenzi sad.

“Sweetpea!” Daddy says, pulling Kenzi up and swinging her around into his lap. She cuddles up against him. He’s so warm.

“I won,” Kenzi says.

“I saw! I’m so proud of you, Kenz.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

There’s water in the bag and Kenzi drinks for a long time, and then she finds her mittens and slips them onto her hands. Her hands are always so cold. When they leave the rink, though, it will be summer outside, with hot sun and hot wind.

“Are we going there now?” Kenzi asks Daddy. “To the hospital?”

“That’s the plan,” he says.


Daddy laughs. “Do you think so?”

“Yeah. Will she skate with me, Daddy?”

“Not while she’s so little, pumpkin.” He helps Kenzi unlace her skates, because they’re done up so tight that her fingers can’t get the knots.

“When she’s bigger?”

“Maybe. If she wants to skate.”

“Why wouldn’t she want to skate?” Kenzi asks. “Skating is the best ever.” She looks down at her chest and grins when she sees the medal there. “And winning.”

“I know, Kenz, but maybe your sister will want to do something else more than skating. She’s going to do whatever she wants to do, okay? Just like you.”

“What else will she want?”

“We don’t know yet,” Daddy says. “Maybe she wants to play soccer. I don’t know. We’ll find out.”

“When we meet her, we’ll find out?”

Another Daddy laugh. “In a few years, I think,” he says. “Not right away.” He puts Kenzi’s skates in the bag and laces up her chucks instead. “Are you ready to go?”
“I am. I’m ready to see Mommy. And baby sister.”

Erin’s sitting up in bed when they come in. She’d had a warning text from Jay, and she’s cleaned herself up a little - brushed her hair, and washed her face. A nap had made the dark circles under her eyes fade.

The baby is clean, too, clean and pink and a little wrinkled. She’s got some hair already, a little dark cowlick, and huge dark eyes. They’re not exactly brown, not yet, but Erin thinks they will be. More like her than Jay.

Kenzi says, “Mommy!” and Erin tears her eyes away from the baby and finds her big girl. Wow - her big girl, her oldest daughter. She can’t believe that. It’s just been Kenzi for so long, and now it’s Kenzi and…

…well. They’re still stuck on a name.


Kenzi lifts the medal around her neck proudly, holding it out towards Erin. “I won!”

“That’s fantastic!” Erin meets Jay’s eyes above Kenzi’s head, and he smiles at her, that same pleased and proud smile that he always gets. The I made this, smile. The look at my family, smile.

“How’s Little Pea?” he asks.

“Still beautiful,” Erin says. She looks down at Kenzi. “Want to climb up here?”

Kenzi nods, and Jay swoops down to lift her, settles her on the bed beside Erin’s knees. Kenzi crawls closer.

“That’s my baby?” she checks.

“This is her.”

“She’s really little.”

“She’s brand new, Kenz,” Jay says. “Be gentle.”

Kenzi is gentle. She’s gentle when she reaches out a finger to rub the baby’s arm, and she’s gentle when she touches the little cheeks. The sequins on Kenzi’s dress glitter under the fluorescent lights, and Erin watches, holding her breath, as Kenzi leans forward. As she places a kiss on the baby’s head.

“Ohh, good job,” Erin breathes, her heart so full that she can barely get the words out. “You’re so gentle with her, Kenzi.”

“I’m a good big sister,” Kenzi says, sitting up and beaming. “I’ll teach her how to skate.”

“If she wants to,” Jay says.

“Yeah, if she wants to. But I won’t play soccer with her, Daddy.”

Erin smiles, although she’s not sure where that’s come from, and Jay grins, too. He steps closer and rubs her shoulder.
“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Erin says. “A little tired.” She watches Kenzi unwrapping the baby’s blankets, laughing at the little onesie underneath, marvelling over the tiny legs and feet.

“You did good, Mommy,” Jay says.

“We did,” Erin agrees. She looks up at him and laughs. “Are you excited to have me back at work?”

“Not for a few months,” Jay says.

“A few weeks.”

“I thought we said six months?”

“We said four months,” Erin reminds him, “and that’s only sixteen weeks. Pretty much.”

Jay rolls his eyes. “Only sixteen weeks.”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” she says. “You need your partner.”

“Right,” Jay says, and he puts his finger into the baby’s tiny little hand. “Because you’ve got my back.”


Jay turns and kisses her, and it’s good. It’s great. It’s amazing. He’s amazing. Erin’s kids are amazing.

They’re amazing together.

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