
THE TRINIDAD MAN

A Prequel to the Erin Reed Thriller Series

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THE MEETING

SEPTEMBER 17, 2009

“Another?” Marty, the bartender, asked.

Erin Reed sat at the bar of the Weinstuben in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad.

Behind her, just outside was an expansive white beach, followed by blue-green waters that looked, actually, just like the commercials advertising Caribbean vacations said they would. It was the kind of view that had enough palm trees to feel exotic but not crowd the view.

But Erin wasn't looking at any of that.

For the last three hours, she'd been sitting at the bar at an angle to the door, watching.

Marty occasionally walked over.

She knew his name was Marty because she'd been sitting here for the last three hours. Middle of the afternoon, the place was dead. Just her, Marty, and the occasional lobster-colored American who wandered in.

“No,” she said. “Just going to wait a little longer.”

He shrugged and went off to do nothing in particular.

Erin was here on assignment. She'd interned at the *Washington Post* while in grad school. Schools like Georgetown had connections like that. And it went well. So well that when she graduated *The Post* asked her to stay on. Well, 'on' was a loose term here. She was a stringer, to start. And only recently had she become a cub reporter. Her editor, Conall McGillis, an Irishman with a sailor-worthy mouth, had worked for the *Post* since her mother was there. And he took a liking to her. That was a big help. But it wasn't enough to get on as a full-time staff writer. News was a competitive business. And there were others more qualified, with more experience than her.

For the past four months, Erin had been working on an investigative piece, the kind that would get her promoted. The kind that would get her respected. The piece was about NGO corruption. Relief organizations do a lot of good in the world. But because of the diverse nature of the business—anything from clothing and food to disaster supplies and longer-term sustainable supplies—NGOs had become a target for smuggling.

Erin's mother, Gillian, was doing a story on this very thing when she died, when she was killed, sixteen years earlier. The incident was officially ruled an accident. In those days, Mogadishu, and all of Somalia really, was the Wild West of Africa. The rebels had the upper hand on the government. And eventually, as history shows, the rebels prevailed and the government fell. That's when the U.S. pulled out for good.

It was during the Somali coup that Gillian was killed. As far as journalists go, she was one of the best. And it wasn't Erin, her daughter, saying that. Everyone who worked with Gillian said that about her.

The official report said she'd been caught in a crossfire. Like an amateur. But Gillian wasn't an amateur. She'd

covered the guerrillas in Panama, the civil war in Sudan, and before that, the crumbling of Beirut. No, she didn't 'get caught in a crossfire.' What really happened, and what those closest to Gillian knew, was that she'd uncovered something. Something powerful. Something dangerous people didn't want uncovered.

McGillis, Erin's now editor at *The Post*, was one of that group of confidants. He didn't know too many specifics, because it all happened so fast. But he'd long shared his files with Erin. She's become almost obsessed with working and re-working the slivers of leads. And finally, she was in the process of making a significant breakthrough.

Which is what brought Erin to Trinidad.

And, specifically, to a German bar on a beach in the capital city.

She was meeting a man whose name or face she didn't know. In fact, she'd never even talked to him directly. The "Trinidad Man," as she and McGillis had taken to calling him. Through a series of intermediaries, Erin connected with him. He'd worked with Gillian in Somalia in 1993, and he'd been able to prove it. But he was scared. So scared, he kept his identity a secret and wouldn't meet inside the United States. It had taken her two months just to arrange this meeting.

And now, he was a no-show.

"So, who were you meeting?" Marty asked.

Marty leaned with his hands on the bar, rag slung over his shoulder, and a flaming top of tangly red hair. He looked like he was trying to be James Dean, from that famous painting of him in a diner. Except he wasn't. He wasn't even close. Erin thought briefly about how much to tell him, then decided against it.

"Just...a guy," she said.

"Don't feel bad," he said. "There's a lot of *that* here."

“A lot of what?”

“Banana romances. A vacationer saves up and finally does it, a solo trip to the islands. Then she meets him. An expat. Fate certainly has shined on them for such a time as this. They hook up, a special night. It’s good. Real good,” he smiles, knowingly.

Erin wanted to stop him. But it’s not like she had much else to do. And she couldn’t talk about the truth. So, she let him continue.

“Though that’s not normally ‘the kind of girl she is,’” Marty continued, sounding like he’s rehearsed this before. “And then,” he said drastically, “as the sun is breaking above the water, the romantic stranger has to ‘pop out and run a quick errand.’”

He paused looking at Erin, for dramatic effect, before continuing.

“And, of course, kisses and promises to be back in a few minutes. Except, a few minutes turn into a few hours, which soon turn into forever.”

She had to admit, from where he was sitting, she did look like that girl. Lonely and stood-up. Which, ironically, was also what she happened to be right now. But for different reasons. Reasons she couldn’t get into with this guy. Marty.

“Wow, that’s good,” she said. “How many times have you given that one?” she said.

He smiled, polishing an already-clean glass, “once or twice.”

“Tell me,” she said, “how long has it been since you left?”

“Left where?” he didn’t meet her eyes.

“Left wherever it was you came from,” she said. “You don’t look like you’re from here. Fair skin, light hair.”

He looked at her, as if deciding whether to take this bait.

“I’m going to guess...,” she continued. “Alabama.”

“Ha,” he laughed. “Not even close. But you, on the other

hand..." He paused, put his hand to his mouth, and then pointed at her, "I'm going to say...Kansas."

She thought about this ridiculous conversation. About her even being here at all. On a real assignment, and not only that, but being so close to finally getting somewhere on her mother's case.

"Kansas..." she said. "What gave me away?"

He lifted his hands. "You talk to enough people, and you can just sort of tell after a while." He said this, clearly trying not to look too impressed with himself.

In Erin's experience, whenever someone felt impressed with themselves, there was usually an advantage to be had. And as the afternoon pressed on, her big lead was feeling smaller and smaller.

"Okay, Marty not-from-Alabama," she said, standing up. "I'm going to leave now. Here's my card. If anyone does come looking for me, tell them I'm at the Woodbrook on Methuen Street. Will you do that for me?"

He took her card without looking at it and kept watching her as she turned to leave.

She put her hand on the door to open it and heard him say behind her, "You're from the Washington Post?"

"Yeah," she said, "the Kansas branch," and walked out of the door.

PORT OF SPAIN

“It’s me,” Erin said into the hotel phone, as she sat on the bed.

“How did it go,” McGillis, her editor on the other end, asked.

“It didn’t. He was a no show.”

“How long did you wait?”

“Long enough. A few hours at least.”

The sun had just set, and the light now coming through her window was the color of streetlights and neons. The color of a city waking up for the night. In the distant skyline, she could see the long arms of the cranes at the port, sticking up, almost invisible now as the last of the sun’s light faded.

“Stick around for a few days,” McGillis said. “You never know, time moves slower down there. Might have just gotten held up.”

“Or he might have gotten spooked.”

“Why do you say that, did you see something?”

“No, just thinking...you know how paranoid he is.”

“Maybe. Give it a few more days. See what comes up.”

She hung up.

She was here to meet a man, she thought, whose name she didn't even know. She couldn't go looking for him, because she had no idea what he looked like. And she couldn't contact him, because he never gave her any contact information. The intermediary always called her, and, by her source's request, it was from a blocked number. The impossibility of it all was beginning to catch up with her.

She looked at the mirror and saw her reflection.

"You're a journalist," she said, out loud. "Tracking people down, finding information, that's your job."

Despite the way she imagined herself sounding, these little pep talks helped. They always had. Something about being accountable, even if it was to her own reflection. She pulled on a long-sleeved shirt and looked in the mirror again.

"Now," she said, finishing her talk and running her hands through her hair, "it's time to go act like a journalist."

She grabbed her keycard from the table near the door and left her hotel room, letting the door close behind her. The cool air hit her as she walked out into the newly arrived night. She remembered back to her communications with her source. When they were deciding on a place to meet, he was adamant about it being a well-lit, touristy area.

She made her way to the main street in Port of Spain, where she'd been earlier. The Weinstuben was there, their original meeting spot. She wondered if her contact had shown up but had been spooked and left. As she was walking, she decided she'd make herself visible, make the rounds. He had her picture, so if he were still around, she'd make it as easy as possible for him to find her.

She passed a few low key places until she came to a sports bar, well lit, bright signs. Coeds outside. She walked in. Looking around, she made her way to the bar. The walls around her were lined with flatscreen TVs showing soccer games. At each, were a few enthusiastic fans, huddled and

engaged. A few large tables were in the center, and a couple of pool tables were at the far end.

She sat on a stool off-center from the door. The woman behind the bar had medium-dark skin. Erin couldn't tell if she was local or not. She was pretty, and, Erin thought, she probably did well on tips.

"What can I get you?" she asked.

"Just a Coke," Erin said.

The bartender put it in front of her and walked to someone else.

Erin sipped her drink, glancing to the side to get a better look at the room. A few moments later, she noticed a man with a blue and white baseball hat, pulled low, walk in.

He looked like any of the other college kids she saw, except he was alone. Which, in this case, made him stand out. He walked in and found a booth on the far side of the room. A moment later, she saw the woman behind the counter bring him a drink. Erin still couldn't see his face, but if his hat weren't so low, she'd think he was looking directly at her. *Did he know who she was?* she thought. *Maybe he was the source?*

That was a stretch, she told herself. He probably wasn't even looking at her. She turned back to her drink, not wanting to attract any unwanted attention. She finished her drink.

She sat fighting the urge to glance back toward the man with the low hat. Something about him was nagging her. The way he was alone in a place like this. People who were alone didn't sit at booths. Not in a place like this. They sat at the bar.

She shifted her weight on her stool, glancing in his direction as she did. The blue and white hat was still there.

Just sitting, drinking, not moving.

Maybe, she thought, she was beginning to pick up on her

source's paranoia. This guy could be anybody. Any number of stories could explain him sitting here alone and quiet. And with his hat pulled low, she didn't really know where his eyes were looking. Though...from where he was sitting, he had a direct line of sight to her.

Not wanting to chance another look, she decided she'd go to the bathroom and get a closer look as she passed by. She slid off of her stool and turned to head to the bathroom. As she turned, she glanced at the booth.

But he was gone. The booth was empty.

She quickly scanned the room while she walked. The blue and white cap was nowhere to be seen. Maybe it was nothing after all. She went to the bathroom and then left the sports bar.

Outside again, the temperature had dropped. She was glad she'd put on a long sleeved shirt, but she could still feel the chill of the night. She kept walking, looking for more places her source might find comfortable. As she moved down the street, she began to notice the crowd thinning. The brighter, busier places were giving way to dark shop windows and a few stragglers.

She turned to head back.

But as she did, she caught the briefest glimpse of a blue and white baseball cap. She did a double-take, seeing it slip into a darkly lit door across the street, between her and where she'd come from. Or...she thought she saw him. It was darker now than she realized before.

And quieter, too.

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and she felt the kind of cold that comes from the inside. She looked around and, save for a few people a couple hundred feet away, she was completely alone on the street.

She picked up her pace, almost skipping as she walked.

Thoughts she didn't like began to grow in her mind like

wild vines, choking everything else. *Was he following her?* she wondered. And, *Did I really just see the same guy?*

As she passed by the doorway she'd seen him disappear into, she looked into it. A hole. Too dark to see. She couldn't even tell if the place was open. Or condemned.

Erin tried to self-talk herself to a calmer state. *This is just fear running wild*, she told herself.

The self-talk wasn't working.

She felt a panic brewing, just below the surface.

She realized she was walking fast, almost a run now. She'd crossed a street, maybe two, she couldn't remember. She wasn't back to the tourist crowds. But she was sure they weren't far.

On an impulse, acting braver than she felt, she abruptly stopped. And turning, she pressed her back against the brick wall that lined the side of the street. Palms flat against it, she used her last bit of courage to look in the direction she'd just come.

As soon as she did it, she regretted it. Immediately, a flood of thoughts and warnings filled her mind, in the split second wishing she could undo what she did, wondering why she didn't use that burst of willpower just to run.

As she looked into the darkness, her sight seemed to be tunneling into nothing. Not because of the darkness, but because of her racing pulse. Like the feeling you get when you stand up too fast. She concentrated on listening while her eyes adjusted. Her heart thumped loud and high, into the back of her throat.

Her throat.

It was so dry.

She wanted to close her eyes. To not let them adjust. To just...disappear. But she didn't. She kept them open.

Forcing them to see.

And see she did...

A man again.

The fear in her was almost palpable.

Was it the blue and white hat man?

No.

It wasn't a man.

It was something else. But it wasn't moving.

She stayed, frozen, waiting for it to move first. If she didn't move, she'd be safe. As long as she didn't move — as irrational as the thought was — she'd be okay. Every muscle in her body had been put on hold, except for her heart, which she was afraid would give her away. Her thigh muscles almost buckled. Her strength was draining.

And that, she realized, was presenting a new problem. Since she'd stopped running, she found her body had stopped responding. She was stuck. Paralyzed. Even her face, it seemed, couldn't move away from the dark shadow. She was staring at it. The pulse throbbing in her neck, forcing her breath into shallow, short gasps.

Then a sound.

Coming to her.

A car crash.

No, it was behind her.

A screeching sound.

Something other than herself turned her head. Back toward the city, the people. Safety.

But it wasn't a car. There were no cars. Her eyes darted across the scene. It was the same street. Almost everything was the same.

Except, off to the side, she saw a boy chasing a pig. The pig had just knocked over a cart of some kind.

A boy and a pig.

Erin felt her back slump into the wall behind her. Relief. Rationally, she knew there was nothing they could do to save

her. But just knowing she wasn't alone seemed to give her the energy she needed to move again.

As the boy continued to give his pig threats that clearly weren't working, Erin looked once more down the dark street, at the spot. It was dark. Shadowy.

She started walking. She pulled her sleeves down over her fists as she walked. The people and lights and noises were louder now. She passed the sports bar and the Weinstuben from earlier in the day. She kept moving. As she walked to her hotel, she looked behind her at each corner. Each time she saw no one, she began to find a little more confidence.

In her hotel room, she shut the door behind her and bolted it. She sat on the bed without turning on the lights and watched the door. Her eyes fixed on the thin, bright line on the floor. And for as long as she could keep them open, she watched it. Watched for it to move.

The exhaustion began to take her. But she needed to stay up, to watch. Just in case... If someone were following her... In her mind's eye, she could see someone shadowy approaching. Or was it someone outside her door? She jerked awake, realizing she'd fallen asleep. *What time was it?* Before she looked, she was there again. Her feet, back on the ground. Back where she was. Then a loud rumble. She turned, and... pigs. More than she could count, running everywhere. The pigs had saved her. She woke up to realize she'd dozed off again. Her hotel door still there, the thin, bright light still there. And then, before she had another thought, she was asleep.

AMERICAN JAZZ

It had been a dream.

It must have been, Erin thought to herself.

She sat on the balcony of her hotel room, looking out over the city. The sun was already in the sky as she sipped a small glass of freshly squeezed juice. Below her, a morning delivery truck with its diesel fumes was puttering down the cobbled street.

As she thought about last night, some things came back with startling clarity. The man. The blue and white hat. Sitting now in the comfortable morning sun, she began to feel foolish. She'd overreacted. Like a young girl who'd never been away from home, she'd lost her head and panicked. Her face flushed as she thought about it.

She stood up, putting those thoughts out of her mind. One day left before she went back home. She'd left her contact information at their meeting spot. If her source wanted to, he could find her. Erin went back into the room and took a shower. The warm water felt good. Like a reset. She got dressed and decided: today, on her last day, she'd explore the city. Visit the old district. Do some sightseeing.

The day passed uneventfully. By evening Erin felt herself blending in with the other tourist. Scenes from last night would occasionally creep back into her mind. But she quickly pushed them away. There's no point dwelling on that. It's over.

After a local Trinidad dinner of Doubles, a starchy curry food with no recognizable ingredients, Erin settled into a cozy bar that overlooked the ocean. She was reading a book she'd picked up in one of the shops. It was about a boy with no name, searching for meaning.

"High school English class," a voice near her said.

She looked up to see a tanned man, wearing a coral polo and deck shoes, looking at her.

"Ninth grade, if I recall," he said.

"Er, what?" Erin said.

"Your book," he said. "*The Alchemist*. That was the last time I had to read it. And I didn't like it. But," he kept talking, "to be fair, I didn't like much when I was fourteen, if you know what I mean," he grinned.

Erin watched him talk. Was this guy hitting on her? If he was, she didn't feel like he was doing a very good job.

He turned to the counter and ordered a drink, sitting with a stool in between them.

"I'm not hitting on you, if that's what you're thinking," he said. "It's just good to meet another American down here. I mean, another American who's interested in more than partying and getting wasted."

"How do you know I'm not interested in partying and getting wasted?"

"Are you kidding?" he said, looking at her. "I mean," he held up his hand, "no offense, but...you're sitting in a bar reading a book."

"Fair point," she said, looking down at the book in her hand.

“Anyway, I come down here a few times a year. Sometimes on business.”

“What do you do?”

“I work for my family mostly. We sell high-end boats to rich people. And sometimes they want those boats delivered, which is what I’m doing here now. I sail down, deliver the goods, and then fly back home.”

“Sounds pretty nice.”

“Pays the bills,” he shrugged.

This felt like a good stopping point. A good time to say goodnight and move on.

But she didn’t. It wasn’t as if she was attracted to this guy. Nothing like that. He was nice. But not her type. And, so far, her trip had officially been a bust. It wouldn’t hurt to have a normal conversation for a few more minutes.

“So, where’s home?” Erin asked him.

“Massachusetts,” he looked back at her. “Land of yuppies.”

He took a sip from his bottle. “You?”

“D.C.”

“Mm, let me guess...” he said. “You’re a politician?”

She laughed, catching herself off guard.

“And—” he continued, “you’re here campaigning for the foreign vote.”

It felt good to smile. She felt like she hadn’t done that in a long time.

“Yes,” she said, “that is exactly what I’m doing here in Trinidad. Campaigning for the foreign vote.”

“I have a gift,” he said, donning a mock-somber tone.

He turned back to his drink, and closed his eyes, and looked like he might be trying to sleep sitting up. Maybe he really wasn’t interested, she thought. Not that she wanted him to be, of course. But, she noticed, the thought did sting a little bit.

They sat in silence for a moment longer before he said, with a deep breathe, “this,” he said with emphasis, “is a good song.”

Until then, she hadn't really noticed the music. It sounded like an old song. Maybe from the seventies. Or sixties. Or something.

“You a Sam Cooke fan?” he said, turning back to her.

“Sam Cooke...” The song. “Oh, yeah, he's...he's alright.”

“Alright?” he said. He raised a finger for the bartender to bring him another. “Want one?”

“No, thanks.”

“I never saw him in concert,” he said. “Before my time. But, man...” his voice trailed off.

“I'm Michael,” he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small white business card. He handed it to her. “In case you're in the market for a boat,” he said with a smile.

“I'm Erin.”

It seemed strange, she'd been talking to him for this long and she didn't even know his name. She was comfortable. It felt natural talking to him. To Michael.

“You know,” he said. “I'm down in D.C. every now and then. We should, um, get together for a coffee or something.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. She smiled and put the card in her pocket.

She was enjoying her time. That was true. But she knew this was a one-off. What are the chances something like that would work out?

“Okay,” Michael said, putting both of his palms down on the bar. “That's enough for me.”

He put a few bills down on the bar and stood up. “I am officially at my limit. If I stay here, I'll just keep drinking, and then I'll get myself in trouble.” He held out his hand to shake. “It was lovely to meet you, Erin from D.C.”

She shook his hand. "Thanks for the conversation, Michael."

"And I'm serious," he said. "Call me when you get home."

"Okay," she said, realizing as he was leaving how much she'd enjoyed talking to him. And now that he was actually leaving, she almost felt like she might miss him.

He walked away with a wave. But as he put his hand on the door to leave, he stopped, like he'd just remembered something.

Turning back to her, he said, almost apologetically, "This is weird. I was going to stop by and visit an old friend before I turned in for the night. He plays in a Billie Holiday cover band. It is uncanny how much the lead singer sounds like Holiday. Anyway," he kept talking, "he's an old friend, met him a few years ago on my trip down here, and I always try to stop in and see him when I'm here."

Was this him asking her if she wanted to go with him? she thought.

"It's just a few minutes walk from here. Over there," he turned and pointed, about a thousand feet down the cove, "those lights, there, with the pier that juts out. That's the place."

"Okay..." she said.

"Did you, I mean," he paused and glanced down before continuing. "Did you want to come with me and listen?"

"Oh," she said, "I've got an early flight tomorrow, and..."

"Yeah, no, I totally understand," he said.

"It's not, that," she said. "I just..." She stopped talking and looked at her watch. Hesitating. This was a textbook-bad move. She knew it. What did she really know about him? He could be anyone. But...she had a nose for these things. She was a journalist. A professional. Not a kid. She could take care of herself. And...she was having a hard time coming up

with more reasons not to. Something about him. Charisma. A smile that... And he was in to her, that counted for something. Her mind started filling out scenarios where she and he were back in D.C. meeting her friends, and life was...

"I tell you what," he said, "give it one song. If I'm wrong. If they're not the best Billie Holiday cover band you've ever heard, then you win, and you can go back to your hotel with no more protests from me."

"And," he added, "it's better than that book you're reading. Trust me."

She looked out across the cove. She'd seen that place before she came here. It was a club of some sort. She looked back at him and smiled. "Fine. One song."

"One song," he said. "Let's go, it's a quick walk."

She left some money on the counter and walked out with Michael.

They began walking down toward the lights, when he stopped.

"Ah, ya know what," he said. "The rental," he pointed to a car behind her. "I had a rental last time, and I left it not far from here. I stayed out a little too late, and when I came back it was gone. Seriously. Stolen. That was a mess. Dragged on forever. Especially," he looked sheepishly, "since I didn't get the insurance."

"I," he looked at his car, "I probably need to park it closer. Somewhere I can keep an eye on it."

"But look," he held up a hand, "if you don't feel comfortable riding down there with me, no pressure. It's an easy walk, and I'll be right there in the car." He turned and pointed, giving her directions. "Just follow this path here," he said, "It's the shortest way, but then when you get over there," he pointed, "just loop around that restaurant with the—"

"It's okay," she interrupted him.

He looked at her. "You sure?"

"It's not a big deal. Just a quick ride, right?"

"Okay, yeah," he said, "about two minutes."

"Let's go," she said.

"Let's go," he repeated, pushing a button on his key fob, making the car lights flash. They got in and drove out of the parking lot.

As they made their way around the corner, they saw a roadblock. "This is—" he started to say, "—huh, okay, no problem." He slowed and turned the car to a street away from the beach. "It looks like they blocked off the road here. No biggie," he kept driving, "we'll just take a quick detour. I know the area well," he looked at her with a little smile. "Maybe three minutes."

The road was bumpier now. Quite a bit bumpier, like they were not on the road at all anymore. The streetlights were hit or miss, so it was hard to see for sure.

"See," he pointed out her window. "That's where we want to go, just down there." Erin could see the pier and the lights through some trees between them. As best she could tell, they were driving parallel to the road they were originally going to take. He took another turn, following the road. They passed by an apartment building. The water and lights by the beach were no longer visible.

"It's just right past here," he said. And then, he slowed the car to a stop.

"Why are you stopping?"

"Um," he looked in his rear view mirror, put it in reverse, and started to back up. He braked again, stopping.

"It looks like..." he trailed off.

And then she saw them.

Two cars were forming a roadblock ahead of them, their headlights pointing in opposite directions. And now, she saw why he stopped reversing, too. In the passenger mirror, she

could see headlights reflecting from behind. She looked over her shoulder, there was another car directly behind them. All she could see were its headlights filling the back window.

Michael looked at her. He looked at the cars in front of them, and then squinting, looked into his rearview. He looked back to her again.

"I'll handle this," he said, and opened his door and got out.

She watched him walk to the two parked cars on the road ahead, looking back over his shoulder at the car behind them.

As he approached, two men got out. Erin couldn't get a feel for how it was going. It was too dark to make out body language. One of the men held out a hand to Michael, and then pointed off in another direction, and then—her attention was shifted back to her own door, next to her.

It opened.

Someone opened it.

"Out," a man's voice said.

She looked back at Michael. He was still talking to the other two men, not noting what was happening here.

The man reached into the car, grabbed her under her arm and lifted her bodily out of the car. She tried to call for Michael, but nothing came out.

"Move," the man said.

His grip on her arm was strong. She felt panic rising, taking control.

As he moved her, she lifted her leg and kicked off from the car, trying something, anything. But as she did, the man just pulled her toward him. Her foot landed on the door, knocking it closed.

Michael turned his head in her direction. "Hey," he called out, raising his hand toward the man holding Erin. Then, he turned back to the other men.

She could hear their voices louder now, but she still couldn't make out what was being said. Maybe it was because her heart was thumping so loudly.

The man still held her. And then she realized, she was moving. The man was dragging her. Away from the car. Away from Michael. *Why didn't Michael come over here and stop him?*

The man holding Erin was taller than her by almost a foot. Because of the way he held her, she never got a look at his face.

With one hand, the man opened the back door of his own car. And with his other hand—the one still holding her—he pushed her into the back seat, making her fall over. He slammed the door shut.

It was dark inside the car. She tried to open the door, but it was locked. She tried to look out of the windows to see Michael. But she couldn't. The windows must be tinted, she thought.

It was quiet, too. She couldn't hear voices anymore.

She couldn't hear anything.

Then she noticed another man, in the backseat with her. She kicked away, putting distance between them, but before she could, she felt a blinding dull pain from the back of her head, and, then everything faded to darkness.

THE ROOM

Erin woke up, coughing violently.

For a moment, she felt as if she may throw up. She tried to open her eyes, but she couldn't. Something heavy was laying on them. No, she realized, it was a blindfold. She reached to take it off, but as she did, she felt the rest of her situation. She was tied. In a chair.

Her heart began pumping. She felt another wave of nausea. *Where was she?*

Her thoughts were interrupted when a voice, inches from her face, spoke.

"Miss Reed," he said. Dark and silky.

He sounded like he was eye level, sitting beside her, watching her.

"Who—" her voice choked when she tried to talk. She swallowed hard. "Who are you?" she said.

He didn't immediately answer. Or maybe the adrenaline had kicked in, and time was moving faster. She wasn't sure.

"Who I am," he said, "does not matter."

"What do you want?" Her voice came out in a whisper.

She heard him stand up. His feet clicked on the hard floor as he walked. He was walking around her, in a circle. *Click, click,* went his feet. He sounded like he was wearing dress shoes. She could feel the ropes holding her tight as her breath came faster.

“I think you know,” he spoke, slow and measured, “what it is we want.”

We? she thought to herself.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know who you are.”

Her mind was racing now. Erin had always played life straight. She wasn’t the kind of person who made enemies. And if she did, somehow, they certainly weren’t the kind who would kidnap her and tie her up. As she tried to think of an explanation that would fit this bizarre nightmare, she began to feel heavy, painful thumps inside the back of her head. The pain, matching her heartbeat.

The backseat of the car. She was beginning to remember. They must have hit her to knock her out. She tried to remember. *What was she doing in the backseat of that car?* And then, as if her memory started playing in reverse, she began to remember it all. The tall man who threw her into the backseat. The dark street. The headlights. The two cars blocking them. *Them.* She was with someone, the American she’d met at the bar. The one with the boats. Michael. They were going to a jazz club to listen to music. That’s when the men ambushed them. She remembered being afraid of many things but getting kidnapped wasn’t one of them.

“Before you answer my next question,” the man started speaking again, “I want you to think carefully.”

Next question? Who does he think she is? What would she know that he’d want to kidnap her for?

“Nod if you understand me,” he said.

Erin stayed still. Everything in her burned to comply. That’s what they always say in hostage situations—not that

she had any experience here, whatsoever—go along with whatever they told you. Be good. Be good, and you'll live.

But there was something else. She was feeling a new emotion, sitting here, tied, and completely at this unknown man's mercy. A feeling she didn't recognize. A feeling that wanted to fight.

"Miss Reed," he said, slow and measured. For the first time, she noticed the smell, as if her senses were coming back to her one at a time, the sharp, cool cologne that seemed to fill the space around her.

"No," she said, hearing how brave her voice sounded.

"No?"

She registered the surprise in his voice. Or maybe it was amusement.

"No," she said again. "First... First, tell me where Michael is."

"Michael?" he said.

In the brief time she took to decide to be bold, she hadn't considered this. She hadn't thought he might not know. He was connected to the men who took her. He had to be. Or else, how'd she get here?

"The man I was with, in the car," she said.

"Oh, yes," he said, "Michael."

He paused. "You shouldn't worry about Michael."

The way he said it. Was he playing with her? Or was he talking about something else. Something bad. She thought again about herself, sitting here. Tied here. *Shouldn't worry about Michael.* As strange as it felt, a small part of her agreed with him. Whatever did, or was going to, happen to Michael—there was nothing she could do about it, not tied up here. As nice as he seemed, she didn't really even know him. What she did know was that right now, she was in trouble.

The more she thought about herself, the more she found herself fighting the panic.

“Now,” he said. “I’m going to ask you a series of questions. And if you want to leave here alive, you will tell me the truth. If you don’t answer me, or if I don’t think you’re telling me the truth—” he trailed off. Something heavy, cold, metal touched her face.

Erin jumped, moving away. Then she heard a clicking sound. It sounded like on TV. A gun. But it felt nothing like TV. Her lungs began to sink inside her. Her breathing was harder.

“—then,” he continued in a sing-song voice, “we shoot you. We dump you in a ditch, and nobody ever hears from you again.”

“So,” he said, a bit too cheerily, “we have a deal?”

His cologne filled the space in between them.

Erin nodded her head, “Yes.”

“Good,” he patted her on the head.

She winced.

“Now, first question, what did he tell you?”

He? her mind calculated, rapidly. *Who?* she thought.

“Who—” Erin said. She meant to get more of a complete thought out. But her bravery had passed.

“Miss Reed,” he said, singing her name like a grade-school teacher.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“We know about Marcus,” he said.

Marcus? Erin was thinking feverishly.

“We know about the meeting,” the man continued.

The source. Must have been, she began working it out.

“And we already know what he knows. What we are here to find out, right now, Miss Reed, is what you know... And, let me add, Miss Reed, Marcus did not originally want to talk to us either. But we’re...persuasive.” He said the last words with a quiet hiss.

“My source,” Erin said. “That’s why...” she started.

"That's right..."

"That's why I never talked to him."

"No, no, that's not true. Do not lie."

"I'm telling you the truth," she said. "I flew in yesterday. Noon."

The man didn't respond.

"You can check it," she added. "I went to my hotel. The..." she paused to remember the name. "The Woodbrook," she said. "I went there. Then I went straight to the meeting spot."

"And. Go on."

"And that was it. We were supposed to meet after lunch. I was there, but he never showed. I stayed around for a few hours, then I left."

The man was quiet again.

"I'm telling you the truth," she said. "You can..." She winced at what she was about to say next, fearing for his sake they might take her up on it. "You can talk to the bartender. I gave him my card. His name was...his name was Marty," she said.

She heard the sound of the other chair's feet scraping the floor. He was moving it.

"Miss. Reed," he said, close into her ear now, like it was two separate thoughts.

Waiting for what he would say, she forced herself to breath normal. Controlled. Measured. It wasn't working. Still ragged. Still scared.

"I am going to check what you say," he said. "But if I find that any of it does not line up, even a little bit, then I'm going to come back here. But I'm not going to shoot you. I'm going to cut you," he hissed close in her ear now.

As he said it, she felt a new kind of steel on her cheek. It was cold. No, it burned, like fire. She felt something drop down the side of her face.

"I'm going to cut you and cut you until you tell me the truth. Do you understand?"

She nodded her head, her throat too tight to speak.

"Good," he said again in his sing-song way.

She heard the chair moving again. His high-pitched footsteps walked away from her. He hammered heavily on something. Then she heard a sliding noise and squeak of the heavy door opening. Another brief squeak followed by the heavy sliding noise on the outside of the door. Then the room was completely silent.

As she sat there, alone, she felt tears coming now down the front of her face. For a reason she didn't understand, she didn't care she was crying. She just didn't want him to see her doing it.

Fatigue was overcoming her. She let her head hang forward, a pitiful excuse for rest, but one she was quickly accepting.

Erin shook awake. Still sitting in the chair. Still blindfolded.

Still tied.

For a moment, she thought the man was back, that it was he who'd awoken her. But the room was still quiet.

She stretched against her ropes. Knowing that even if she got out of them, the door was bolted from the outside. She had no play.

She heard noises outside.

The man. Coming back.

These are the moments when people say they pray. But Erin wasn't praying. She was just concentrating. Waiting. All thoughts on hold.

Through the thick door, she heard a voice yelling. She

couldn't tell if it was the same man who'd been talking to her, or if it was another. Then a fast, loud crack sound.

No more yelling.

Another crack sound. Like something large breaking. Through the heavy door, the sound was muffled. Erin had never heard a gunshot in real life, but something about the sound made her think that might be what it was. But who was shooting? And did they know she was in here? Were they coming to save her? Or to...she tried not to think of the alternative.

She heard the scraping sound on the other side of the door. Then the door squeaked as it opened.

Erin waited, hoping it was not the man. Hoping that whoever it was was not coming here for her.

Footsteps. Different, quiet steps, walking to her.

She had to concentrate because she almost couldn't hear them.

The footsteps stopped just behind her.

She didn't say anything.

She didn't move.

Or breathe.

Behind her, she felt the owner of the footsteps pull on her chair. For a moment, she thought he might pull her over backward.

Then he stopped. And, as silently as he came, he walked out of the room, leaving her still sitting, still blindfolded, still tied.

She sat, not moving. Barely breathing.

THE NUMBER

Erin leaned forward.

When the quiet man left, he didn't close the door. For a short time, she sat listening. Was this some kind of trick? She didn't want to think about that. She didn't even want to think about why someone would half-rescue her—if that's what this was. It all sounded so, thin.

But then she felt it...or, rather, *didn't*.

Leaning forward, the rope holding her to the chair gave. She leaned farther, twisting to the side. Had he cut her loose?

She froze, listening. Outside of the room was as quiet as the inside. She kept going. She tried standing this time, and as she did, the ropes gave way.

But as soon as she was on her feet, she immediately fell over. Her legs were asleep, and her hands were still tied behind her. She hit the ground hard.

She lay there, still blindfolded, while her legs painfully began tingling awake. *How long had she been in this room?* she wondered. *Hours? A day or more?* She again tried to put weight on her legs. Not ready yet. She began pulling her arms around her mostly non-responsive legs. They hurt too,

being forced behind her for so long. But at least they were working. Finally, she had them under, and then around her legs. She reached up with her tied hands and pulled the blindfold off her eyes.

The light forced her to shut her eyes again.

She squinted her eyes open, blinking. Looking around the room, she saw it was some kind of a walk-in freezer. Like the kind restaurants had. But it was empty. It looked like it hadn't been used in some time. Above her a single bare bulb was hanging.

She looked over her shoulder, rolling onto her back and then onto her other side. The still-open door. There was no movement.

She kept her eyes on the doorway as she pulled her hands up to her mouth. Duct tape.

Erin chewed the tape on her hands, still not taking her eyes off the door. The tape around her hands tore. She pulled it with her mouth until her hands were free.

She tried her legs again. They were good enough this time. She stood up and walked tentatively to the crack in the door. She still didn't know if anyone was on the other side of it. But she also didn't fully trust her legs.

Standing now, her back against the wall, she turned her head and faced the slightly-open door. If someone was on the other side, she wanted to give her legs as much of a chance as she could. She reached out, slowly opening it. Nothing. She looked around the doorway, it was a dark hall. Empty.

She walked through the hall. It was a storage closet of some kind. The walls were lined with supplies. Some of it was canned food. Some of the shelving, she noticed, was made from plastic milk crates. As she walked, she realized, she was in the back of a restaurant.

Ahead on the left was a door open. It had a flickering light inside it. She crept silently to the edge of the door

frame, listening without breathing. Silence. Next to her was a flat bar. She wasn't sure what it was for, but she picked it up, holding it like a baseball bat. With a fluid motion, she stepped into the doorway.

The flickering was a TV on silent. But then, she jumped back, afraid she'd just walked in on a man taking a nap, immediately questioning herself and the noises she'd made. She would have certainly woken him up.

But then, she noticed, he wasn't moving, at all. And he was laying at a strange angle.

And then, she saw it, the blood.

Someone had shot him.

She turned, doubled-over, wrenching. But she couldn't throw-up. Her body only went through the painful motions. She leaned on the bar she was still holding and forced herself to turn and look at the man again. As if she needed to know for sure he was really dead.

He was.

The blood was dark. And pooling. His clothes were dark, too, she noticed. Except for his shoes. They were all-white tennis shoes. They caught her attention because of the red, wet streaks now staining them. She looked closer, to see his face, but it was angled away.

Against her better judgment, she moved closer, not able to stop herself, needing to see his face. She froze. The flaming red, tangly hair.

The recognition dawned on her in parts.

Was is...

Marty. The bartender, from earlier.

She jumped back.

He was...dead. Completely dead.

Her head was swimming now.

Thoughts coming in rapid succession. Did *she* get him wrapped up in this? No... How could she have? And then...

a very different kind of thought...what was Marty doing here? She stared at him as she thought about this. A new idea, one she couldn't quite justify...there didn't seem to be any kind of struggle. As she looked at the scene, almost stepping out of her body, out of her fear, she examined the room. It looked like he was just watching TV. No sign of a struggle, as far as she could tell.

But then, she kept working through it, that would mean he...would mean he knew she was there. Could it really be possible that *he* was in on all of this? As bizarre as that felt, nothing was off the table right now.

That would mean, then — she continued churning through the logic — that whoever let her out must have killed Marty. That was the yelling she heard. It must have been...

*Which means...*she thought, as she felt a cold run through her body, the first man, the one holding her, might still be out there.

She felt the heavy thud of her heart.

She turned and left the room, making her way down the hall, silently, listening and looking as hard as she could. At the end, the hall turned, and she saw two waiter's doors. She looked carefully through porthole windows. She couldn't see any movement. In fact, the room, which looked like a dining room of some sort, was dark. She pushed her way through, still holding the flat bar up, ready to attack.

Then, a strange feeling hit her as she walked into the dining room.

It was a bar.

The same bar she'd first come to meet her source. The Weinstuben.

Her head begun spinning as she thought about this.

She was here.

She was being held *here* the whole time.

That could mean a lot of things, but Erin wasn't ready to process that. She was still in survival mode. She made her way to the front. Outside, she could see through the large windows, it was bright. Over her shoulder, she looked at a clock on the wall. It showed ten past seven. She looked out the windows again. She could see traffic driving by. People walking. A little girl with dark hair, holding her mother's hand as they crossed the street.

Was it morning? Had she only been in that room for a few hours? It felt like it could have been a few days.

She opened the front door and walked outside. The sunlight was mercilessly bright. Her head began to pound. She saw a taxi, and she put her hand up to flag him down. A few people looked at her as they walked by.

The taxi slowed in front of her. She realized she was still carrying the metal bar. She tossed it to the side and walked to the taxi, opening the back door and getting in.

He gave her a look like he'd seen her type before. Americans who party too much.

"Do you remember where your hotel is?" he asked, almost bored.

"Take me to the U.S. Embassy," she said without looking at him.

He adjusted his mirror, looking at her again, not driving.

"Do you know where it is?" she said, looking up at him.

"Er, yeah," he said. "Are you okay, miss?"

The driver had one of those extra large rear-view mirrors. She glanced at it, seeing her reflection. She looked like hell. Which...fit well, considering.

"Yeah," she said.

"Okay," he said, not sounding convinced.

And then, realizing, she said "but...I don't have any money."

He was still looking at her, not driving yet. “That’s okay, it’s not far. And this one’s on me.”

Normally, she would have smiled. But she didn’t. She didn’t even meet his gaze again. Just, “Thanks,” as she looked out the window.

As he drove, she thought it felt like it had been a month since she had been sitting in that bar with some guy she’d just met, an American abroad like her. Michael. Without meaning to, she began trying to remember what the man said about Michael when she asked. *How did he say it?* she tried to remember. She didn’t want to think that maybe he wasn’t alive. That the man saw him as collateral damage and killed him.

But if he was alive, and she really hoped he was, she also didn’t want to get together with him when she got home. Last night—it still felt like such a long time ago—was unusual. *What was she even thinking, getting into his car with him?*

Then she remembered, she had his number. She’d call, just to check to see that he was alright.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the folded white business card he’d given her. When she got to a phone, she’d call the number. Maybe it was his cell, and she’d be able to reach him. Maybe it would ring to someone who’d know if he was safe. At the very least, she’d pass it on to the Embassy. She was sure she’d have to explain the whole story.

“Actually,” she said to the driver, “can you stop by my hotel on the way to the Embassy. It’s the...” she trailed off, a new thought, no memory coming back to her.

“Yes?” he said.

She’d told the man interrogating her the name of her hotel. Whoever set her free didn’t kill that guy. That man was still alive. Or he could be. And if he was, he knew where her hotel was. She’d told him that herself.

“No,” she said to the driver. “Never mind, keep going to the Embassy. As fast as you can.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

As he drove, she looked down at Michael’s business card in her hand. She unfolded it. But it didn’t have a phone number on it. In fact, it wasn’t a business card at all.

It only had the words, handwritten in block letters, LEAVE THIS STORY ALONE. OR THEY’LL KILL YOU.

NEXT

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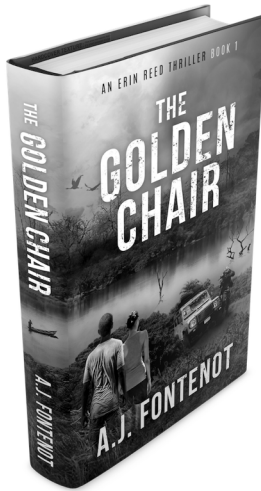
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