




The Midnight Coffee Series Part Two

*Coffee and
Conclusions*



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Chapter 1

At the Airport

ISABELLA HADN'T BEEN THIS BUSY since the height of her career. The past six weeks had flown by in a flurry of conversations with her parents, arranging a place to live in Philadelphia, and the tricky task of planning Richard's part in Alberto's life when they were no longer living under the same roof.

A new companionship had blossomed between them. Accepting they weren't meant to be a couple—and the honesty between them that came with that acceptance—made their relationship much more comfortable.

Richard had helped Isabella find the least disruptive and most financially sensible way to transport her few prized belongings and Alberto's baby things up to Philadelphia. Then he'd put their house up for sale and moved in with Shay and Joshua again.

While most of their things were making their way slowly up the country, Isabella, Alberto, and her biggest suitcase were on their way to the airport. They would stay with Isabella's parents for two nights—until the moving company Isabella's mother had hired delivered their belongings to their rented apartment.

Grudgingly, Isabella had to admit that, for all her mother's faults, Judith had been a godsend when it came to planning the move. Granted, she was undoubtedly driven by selfish reasons—wanting her daughter and grandson back with her was one of them. Saying “I told you so” regarding Isabella's failed relationship with “the hippie-Florida-hobo” was another.

Nevertheless, she'd made the process a lot faster by shouting at people and throwing money at every problem that arose.

Sipping an airport macchiato, Isabella looked at the sleeping Alberto in the harness strapped to her chest. He seemed utterly content and clueless that they were embarking on a trip that would change everything. Isabella smiled at his little sleeping face, and she ignored the pang of guilt that hit. Again.

She should be using the time to write. Her book had been left to collect dust through the last few weeks of planning. Between caring for Alberto, the plans for future living and travel arrangements, discussions with Richard, and, of course, chatting to Erin, her writing had been put on the back burner.

The little wireless keyboard she'd bought was to make writing on the iPad less mind numbing. She opened the tablet's writing app to her latest chapter and read with knitted brows, not sure where she had been going with the last paragraph. She sighed and closed the app. Writing could wait until things settled down.

A smile spread across her face. Behind her apps was a picture of Alberto banging a toy on the ground and grinning widely. Erin had explained how to use a picture for the lock screen and wallpaper. Erin. Wonderful, sweet, helpful Erin. Thinking about her favorite New Yorker had quickly become second nature. She didn't feel guilty in the slightest, as she daydreamed about Erin teaching techie things in person.

During their chats, Erin would make silly jokes or send pictures of cute dogs she wanted to get, but they also had serious conversations about relationships and their everyday lives. Isabella knew most of Erin's regular clients by name, and infuriatingly, she also knew the girl Erin lost her virginity to at eighteen was called AJ. That was new. Isabella had never experienced jealousy like that before.

More frequent video chats were a luxury that had allowed Isabella to see a lot more of Erin. Yet it still wasn't nearly enough. Isabella desperately wanted to be closer to her. She wondered what Erin smelled like, how it would feel to be in the presence of her amazing smile and perfect body.

Isabella bit her lip. She shouldn't think about Erin's body; she'd already lost too much of the rare commodity that was sleep, and she felt acutely guilty. Objectifying women was something she hated in men. Now she was

doing it, although she comforted herself with the fact that she respected and cared for Erin more than she drooled over her. But those damned muscles were her downfall.

When Erin had demonstrated shadowboxing, wrapping her hands, taking her stance away from her laptop, and boxing the hell out of the air in front of her, Isabella's skin had goose-pimpled at the sight of the ripples in the slender muscles of Erin's arms and chest.

Isabella had a weakness for muscles. Not extreme bodybuilders, just cut muscles and a body that looked like it could pounce into action at any second. She'd always loved the visual poetry of muscles moving under a man's skin.

But she hadn't realized that she could be attracted to this sort of build on a woman. Perhaps even more so. A thin waist and chiseled abs, the contrast of soft breasts and sharply defined pecs above them, it was... alluring, to say the least.

In Erin, she'd found the beauty and elegance of a woman, combined with the strength and power she normally associated with a man. All the things she admired could exist in one person, and that person had come crashing into her life with long eyelashes and sexy, toned arms. Like one of the Amazons in *Wonder Woman*.

She continued to ignore the airport bustle and let her mind obsess about Erin. Isabella remembered a conversation they'd had during a video chat, on a rainy afternoon last week.

"You know what I find strange about being attracted to you?" she asked.

Erin put her coffee down and looked worried for a moment. "Um... no?"

"That I look at you and see all your amazing qualities and can't decide if I want to be like you or be with you."

With a chuckle, Erin brought her mug up toward the laptop camera to toast Isabella. "Yep, welcome to the woman-loving-woman community. That's, like, the first thing that a lot of women feel when they come across a woman they find attractive. And for the record, I refuse to let you be anything like me. That would ruin everything awesome that you are. So just be with me. Uh, I mean, you know, someday. If I'm lucky."

The panicked tone in Erin's voice filled Isabella with affection.

She'd been so respectful since the breakup. After the revelation that they were both attracted to each other and that Isabella was breaking up with Richard, Erin had backed off and tried desperately not to flirt. She'd stayed friendly, and while they spoke openly about their attraction, neither of them had taken it any further.

Her respectful behavior was endearing, and it made Isabella feel safe and much appreciated. However, she also felt appreciated when Erin would falter and stare at her body. Or come out with a comment that was too close to a double entendre to be purely platonic.

She'd be apologetic, and Isabella—for a moment or two—would find herself wishing Erin would stop being so respectful and just flirt her brains out. There had been a lot more flirting recently. Right after the breakup, Isabella had given herself kudos for being good at keeping things platonic. Sadly, it hadn't lasted.

At the end of the day, they were both adults and knew what was at stake. First, Isabella had to get her life in order and make a new, safe home for her and Alberto. Then she could think about making Erin blush.

She couldn't wait to talk to Erin, even if it was just to say hi and tell her that they were boarding in twenty minutes. There was no point using Skype, Twitter, or even the e-mail address Erin had given her. Erin would be busy with clients, and they'd planned to text each other after six, when Erin would be free and at home, eating a bucketful of lean calories.

Isabella retrieved her phone. A quick text message couldn't hurt.

In the airport. Alberto's sleeping, I can't focus on writing, and my macchiato tastes like iron. Unless you are busy, this would be an excellent time for my court jester to entertain me.

Isabella put the phone down and took another sip of her disappointing beverage. A moment later, it beeped.

Hey there, Martinez. Is that your way of saying "dance, monkey, dance?" I don't get paid to entertain you, you know. In fact, I'm not getting paid at all right now, because my client just cancelled. Wanna talk?

A ball of joy exploded in her belly. How could talking to someone make her this excited? With quick fingers she dialed, grinning when Erin answered immediately.

“Hey, Ms. Writer! Sorry your day sucks.”

Her grin broadened at the sound of Erin’s voice. “Well, some might say it just got better, now that I can while away some time with you,” she said quietly.

She was trying not to wake Alberto, who might wake from hearing her voice amplified in his position tied to her chest.

“Charmer. I like that better than being ordered to entertain you. So, almost on your way to your new life in Philly. You pumped?”

The question confused Isabella for a moment. She wondered if Erin was wondering if she had pumped out milk for Alberto, but then she realized that Erin was asking if she was excited. She worried that motherhood had erased everything else from her once-so-sharp brain.

“I suppose so, yes. It’s strange going back. I feel a little like I’m returning to a chapter of my life that’s over and done with. Then I remember I’m going there with Alberto, and it all feels new and thrilling again.”

“Yeah, and it means you won’t be as bothered by loads of cheerful sunshine, huh?” Erin asked in a teasing tone.

“Precisely. The Philadelphia weather suits me much better. Hopefully, I’ll see fewer men who think that a warm day is an excuse to walk around topless. Or worse, topless but wearing camouflage shorts, socks, and flip-flops,” Isabella said with disdain.

“All right, Fashion Police, chill. I’m sure most Floridians had better taste than that.”

“Oh, that was the damned tourists.”

Erin chuckled, and Isabella was startled at how the sound of it made her feel safe. *Strange.*

“So, you got a good seat on the plane?”

“Aisle seat. I usually prefer the window seat, but I have to be able to walk around with Alberto if he needs comforting.”

“Well, at least you’ll be closer to the stewardesses, so you’ll get your coffee quicker.” Erin pointed out.

Isabella's mouth curled into a wicked smile. "Oh, I thought you meant that it was good that I was closer to the stewardesses, so I could check them out."

"Whoa! Isabella, you can't go from 'I would be open to dating a woman if I was ever attracted to one' to objectifying women in short-skirted uniforms in, like, six weeks."

Isabella pitched her voice a little deeper, as she always did when she wanted to make Erin blush. "Can't I? Who's going to stop me? You?"

At Erin's little laugh, Isabella closed her eyes, willing Erin to take this further. There were so many replies to that comment which would be seductive, or at least suggestive. Isabella knew she shouldn't be hoping for that, not right now. But it was so very tempting.

Erin cleared her throat. To Isabella's simultaneous disappointment and relief, it was a serious, sobering throat clearing.

"So, are you sure about staying with your parents? I know you want to move back to Philadelphia because it feels like home, but staying with your parents? After all your mother's abuse?"

Isabella felt herself tense up to full rigidity. *Why would she bring that up when I'm in an airport?*

"I wouldn't call it abuse. She never physically hurt me," Isabella said quietly, increasingly aware of the people around her.

"There is more than one kind of abuse, Isabella."

"I'm fine staying with them for a couple of days. I've missed Daddy, and I can handle my mother."

"Okay, if you are comfortable staying there, then great. I was just thinking about it last night when I couldn't sleep. I know it's ridiculous, but I just laid there, staring at the damn ceiling and worrying about you."

"Thank you for your concern. Really. Can we please change the topic?"

"Yeah, of course. Sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Anyway, um, I checked the weather this morning, and most of the country seems to have okay conditions, so there shouldn't be much turbulence."

Isabella's tense body relaxed. Erin had actually taken time out of her morning routine to check the weather for the whole country to make sure that she and Alberto wouldn't be buffeted around by bad weather somewhere on their flight.

“Thank you for checking. I really appreciate that. I’m not used to that kind of consideration.”

“Hey, I gotta look after my...new friend. And the stressed-out lil’ man. Turbulence might give him an ulcer.”

“Erin, he’s not that bad. That does remind me, though. I’ll need to find him a new doctor when I get settled.”

“Yeah. Um, what else are you going to do when you get settled?”

“Hmm. Are you asking me if I’m hoping to get a visit from a certain New Yorker?”

Erin started stuttering, and Isabella cut her off right away.

“Please don’t freak out, Erin. I do want to meet you face-to-face soon, yes. Obviously not right away, as I have two days with my family and then I have to decorate my new home. But when the dust settles, I would be very happy to meet you.”

“Yes!” Erin shouted into her phone.

Isabella held the phone away from her ear and watched Alberto squeeze his eyes shut and fidget a little at the noise.

A couple walking past stared at her. She ignored them; she’d made Erin and herself happy. Their stares were unimportant compared to that.

“Sounds like you want to see me too, *preciosa*.”

“Hell, yeah. Even if it’s just as friends, I’d love to meet you and maybe even get a hug or something. If you’re a hugger, that is.”

“I will be when I meet you. As I say, just give me a little time before we set a date,” Isabella reiterated.

“Of course, as much time as you need. Just let me know a little bit in advance, so I can warn my clients and refer them to someone else while I’m away.”

Isabella carefully watched Alberto as he fidgeted again then relaxed and resettled. She took more care to be quiet when she replied. “Isn’t that a tad risky? What if they decide to stay with your competitors when you come back?”

“Nah, once you’ve had Erin Black, you won’t settle for any less.”

A snigger that was pure naughtiness escaped Isabella. “Oh, I bet.”

“Hey! Mind out of the gutter.”

“Why? I’m a single woman reclaiming her sexuality.”

“Reclaiming it? What does that mean? Did someone steal it?”

“You know what I mean. I haven’t been in the right headspace to think of anything amorous whatsoever. That’s obviously changed now, but I’m not discussing this in an airport. Speaking of which, I should probably start making my way over to the gate. My flight was just called.”

“Yeah, you should get going. Hey, do me a favor?”

Isabella stood and pushed her chair in under the table. “Of course. What?”

“Text me when you’ve landed so I know everything’s okay?”

Suddenly, the day was a whole lot better than Isabella had given it credit for. “I will. Thank you for looking out for me and the little prince.”

“Um, yeah, well, you’re really precious, y’know?” Erin replied, sounding embarrassed.

“So are you, Erin. I’ll text you as soon as we land.”

“Cool. Have a safe flight.”

“I’ll try. Speak soon.”

Isabella realized with amusement that they both sounded so reluctant to hang up. She kissed Alberto’s sleeping head and wondered if Erin was smiling stupidly and feeling her heart beat faster. Just like she was.

Chapter 2

Change Is Hard and Distance Is Worse

ERIN WAS FINALLY HOME FROM work and listening to the radio as she prepared her dinner. She whistled along to the music, thinking about things that might make the distance between her and Isabella feel smaller.

It was odd; the distance hadn't preyed on her mind when Isabella was in Florida. But now that she was closer and there were fewer hurdles to overcome, Erin felt the distance between them like a constant ache.

Erika had been helpful, sharing sisterly advice and brainstorming. She'd mentioned watching TV shows simultaneously so that they could discuss them over Skype and playing games online together. Neither of those ideas seemed very fitting. She certainly couldn't imagine Isabella playing online games.

The song stopped, and the radio DJ came on. That's when it hit her. *Music! We could talk about music and share our faves.*

She washed her hands and grabbed her phone from her back pocket.

Hey you! When you land and have time to message me, remind me to ask you about your favorite music. I hope your flight was good. Xoxo

A smile was on her face as she went back to preparing her salad and steak. Her mind continuously fixed on Isabella and what kind of music she might like.

It was almost 7 p.m. Erin was sitting on her bed, watching some ridiculous game show on TV. Her phone buzzed and startled her.

“Christ,” she muttered, as she retrieved her phone and looked at the text message.

Hello. I'm not your external memory bank, you know. ;-) But by all means: remember to ask me about music. The flight was fine. Alberto did have a screaming fit halfway through and caused some angry looks, but I was expecting that. We're in a taxi on the way to my parents' house now.

Erin looked at the winking emoji in the text with pride. Isabella had always refused to use emojis. She'd bent the rules to ensure that Erin knew she was kidding. Isabella, with her sharp edges and sarcastic comments, was trying hard not to offend. And that said a lot.

Hm. Discussing music via text might be complicated.

Okay. Can I call you? It'll make your taxi ride go faster.

The answer came back quickly.

Sure. Any excuse to talk to you, preciosa.

Erin bit her lip around a smile as she called.

“Hello. Well, hello again, I suppose,” Isabella answered.

“Yeah, hi again. Anyway, let's get to the important stuff! I can't believe we have been talking for months and never discussed music. What do you like?”

Isabella laughed. “You're so impatient when you have something you want to discuss.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess. Sorry.”

“No, no, don't apologize. It's sweet. It shows passion and focus. Hmm, what sort of music do I particularly enjoy? I have quite a few Billie Holiday and Nina Simone CDs. Some classical albums and a few contemporary compilations I've picked up on road trips. To be honest, I've not really listened to much music since Alberto was born.”

“Wow, okay, that's gotta change. Why don't you make me a playlist of your favorite songs, and I'll do the same? It'll be something we can do for each other from a distance. I mean, other than just talk.”

They were both quiet for a few moments. Over the phone, Erin could hear the muffled sounds of traffic and the *tick-tick* of the taxi driver's indicator.

"Is the distance bothering you, Erin?"

Erin grinned up at the ceiling. "Ah, man, am I that transparent? Never mind, it doesn't matter. What matters is that music is important, and it's a good way to get to know each other. Do you wanna try the playlist idea?"

"Well, I'm certain I would, if you could just explain to your favorite technophobe which program or platform we would use to make them. I'd burn you a CD of songs like I used to for friends in the old days, but this tablet doesn't seem to have any place to insert one..."

It was impossible for Erin not to love how clueless Isabella was about this stuff. "Tell you what. I was thinking of sending you a little package when you got settled in your new place. A bit like the packages you've sent me. I'll find my old USB stick, fill it with music I like, and put it in the box I post to you. Then you just plug it into your PC and press *play*. Sound good?"

"On one condition, that you are not sitting there pitying me for not getting all this techy stuff," Isabella said tersely.

"Nah, the only thing I'm pitying you for is having a BlackBerry."

"Oh, shut up," Isabella grumbled.

Erin laughed. "I'm sorry. Can you *ever* forgive me?"

"I'll think about it," Isabella said playfully. "Anyway, we're about to pull up at my parents' house now. Obviously, we shouldn't video chat or call each other while I'm there, not without my eagle-eyed and equally eagle-eyed mother asking a million questions. But you can still text me, and we can text chat on Skype."

Even though Isabella obviously couldn't see her, Erin nodded. "Sure, it's only two days, right?"

"Yes. In two days, I'll have my own place, and we can talk as much as we like, well, as long as we don't wake Alberto."

"I can wait. It's not like it's that great to see you or anything. You're kinda hideous."

Isabella scoffed. "Hideous, am I?"

"Yep, terrible face-wise, as they say on *Parks and Rec*." A wide smile tugged at Erin's cheeks.

“Oh, hang on. I know that reference, I used to watch reruns while I fed Alberto in the afternoon.”

“Busted. You act all serious, like all you do is adult stuff, caring for a baby, cleaning a house, writing a book, but you were watching TV at some point. You *are* human after all.”

“Yes, dear, you caught me. I’m a terrible person. Can I go now? I believe the taxi driver wants payment.” Isabella’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

Erin’s cheeks ached from grinning so much. “Yeah, all right. Try not to scare him or her off with your terrible face.”

“Thank you for the advice. I’ll text you later.”

“Yep, let me know how seeing your mom again works out.”

“I will. Bye for now.”

When Isabella hung up, Erin sat down at her table. After some searching, she found a pen and started a list on the back of an envelope from an insurance company wanting her business.

The playlist ended up mainly classic rock with female leads, and Erin realized she was aging herself. She chuckled and let a few newer bands like *Ex Hex* and *The Pretty Reckless* join the likes of *Siouxsie and the Banshees* and *The Runaways*.

Pleased with her choices, she sat back, chewing the pen as she wondered where she’d put the damn USB stick. She made a mental note to check the drawers in her bedside table.

A deeply uncomfortable feeling niggled at her, and slowly she realized what it was. She missed Isabella. She squeezed her eyes closed. *How can I miss someone I’ve never met?*

It seemed meeting someone face-to-face wasn’t necessary to miss a person so much that it felt like someone had punched you in the heart.

Chapter 3

Arriving at the Martinez Residence

AFTER ADJUSTING ALBERTO IN THE baby harness, Isabella put her hand on the brass handle, but the grand, white door opened first.

“*Mija!*” Alberto Sr. exclaimed.

He pulled Isabella, and the harness-attached baby, into his arms for a bear hug.

“Daddy! Careful, you’re squashing Alberto,” Isabella said with a happy laugh.

Alberto Sr. immediately backed off, making way for Isabella to walk into the spacious hallway. *Has it always been this big?*

The hallway might look different to her now. But so did her father. He’d lost more of his thick, salt-and-pepper hair since she’d last seen him, leaving his head more bald than covered. His face was wrinkled, but his sparkling smile made him look twenty-five again. God, she’d missed him. She was still such a daddy’s girl, and she leaned in to kiss him tenderly on the cheek.

“I’ve missed you, Daddy. ¿Cómo estás?”

He beamed at her. “I was good, but now that you are here, I’m excellent. How are you, *mija?* And how is my little namesake?”

Alberto Sr. put his big hand on his grandson’s head and managed to wake little Alberto, who gave an annoyed little squeak that sounded more like a seal than a baby. Both Isabella and her father laughed.

“He’s fine. As you can hear, a little grumpy, but otherwise fine.”

“Your flight arrived safely and on time?”

A voice answered from the staircase. “Clearly, otherwise she wouldn’t be here, Alberto.”

Isabella counted to ten in her head before turning to her mother. “Don’t snap at Daddy. Come down here and say hello politely.”

“Oh my, look at that,” Judith said tersely. “Barely through the front door and already giving orders in someone else’s home.” Her face cracked into a sneaky smile, and she added, “That’s my girl.”

Isabella shook her head, forcing down a smile at her mother’s approval.

While she hated her mother, the child inside still needed to impress her. And, yes, sometimes she even wanted her mother’s company. A strange quirk she could never quite accept—nor forgive herself for.

Isabella knew that trauma from her mother’s own childhood made her so cold and unkind. They’d even spoken of it after Isabella had moved out.

Her mother loved her and wanted the best for her. Of that, Isabella was convinced. It was simply Judith’s own issues that warped her love and made it controlling in the extreme. Understanding the past didn’t make her mother’s actions forgivable. Far from it. But sometimes it was enough to make Isabella able to be around her. At least for short intervals. Like two days. Maximum.

Judith walked gracefully down the stairs, all purpose and class and beauty. Her shiny, brown, shoulder-length hair was perfectly coiffured. Her milk-white skin might have started to wrinkle, but Isabella knew her mother used only the best potions and makeup to keep herself looking youthful. Isabella’s own vanity hoped she would look as good when she got to Judith’s age.

Judith kissed the air in the vicinity of Isabella’s cheek. When she bent down to kiss her grandson on the head, she left a trace of dark lipstick on the skin under his hair.

Isabella could see her father looking over her shoulder and waving to the baby. She smiled and loosened the harness to lift Alberto free. She held Alberto Jr. out to her father.

“Would you mind holding him, Daddy? Having him in the harness has done a number on my shoulders and back.”

For a moment, Alberto Sr. looked frightened. Then he beamed again, reaching out to grab his grandson. He held him like he was made of glass before cradling him close to his chest.

It was only the second time Alberto Sr. had held him, and just like the last time, it took a while to get used to such an important job. Isabella prayed her son wouldn't start crying and terrify his grandfather, but Alberto snuggled into his granddad's mohair sweater and gurgled happily. Alberto Sr. puffed out his chest.

"Oh, look at the old fool, he looks like he struck gold," Judith sniped.

"They both look happy to me. You're just jealous because he got to hold Alberto first," Isabella replied.

Her mother threw her a scornful look, which Isabella ignored. Instead, she focused on removing the harness and hanging it up with her coat before retrieving the luggage the taxi driver had carried to the doorstep. She rolled the overfilled suitcase inside, and Judith helped pull it farther into the hallway so they could close the door.

Alberto Sr. was busy whispering in Spanish to his grandson, and Isabella was happy to let him get on with it, keeping Mother's sharp tongue away from the two happy Albertos.

* * *

A little after nine, Isabella had finally dispensed with the pleasantries and the late dinner to escape to the guestroom. While feeding Alberto, she gathered her iPad from her rucksack and connected to her parents' Wi-Fi, before opening the Skype app and looking for Erin. To Isabella's joy and relief, Erin was online.

She typed out a message with her free hand and grimaced at how slow she was.

IsabellaMartinez1: So, guess who has done serious damage to her back and shoulders carrying around a baby in a harness for half the day?

BlackVelvetBitches: Judge Judy? Miss Piggy? Hillary Clinton?

Isabella rolled her eyes and went to answer just as Alberto let go and stopped eating. She looked down at him and saw that he was drifting to sleep. She started to rock him as much as she could with one arm.

IsabellaMartinez1: Very funny.

BlackVelvetBitches: I know, right? I'm hilarious!

IsabellaMartinez1: I wouldn't go that far, Erin. If I did, you'd start with those silly jokes off the radio again. Anyway, can we get back to my aching muscles?

BlackVelvetBitches: Sure! I'll run you a hot bath and then give you a full body massage.

What Isabella felt at that comment was anything but pure.

IsabellaMartinez1: I'll remember that offer for when we meet. Especially the full-body massage, I'm thinking nicely scented massage oil and sensual music?

She could imagine the look on Erin's face as she read those words. She wished she could see Erin's face.

BlackVelvetBitches: Dammit! I hate it when you make me blush like this.

IsabellaMartinez1: Really? I love it. Those high cheekbones of yours look amazing in that warm shade of pink.

BlackVelvetBitches: They do not. Shush. :-(Anyway, we shouldn't be talking like this. We're just friends, remember?

Alberto was getting heavy on her arm, and she put the sleeping baby in the crib her mother had bought for their visit.

IsabellaMartinez1: I know. I'm sorry. I just can't help myself. You're being so respectful. I shouldn't test you by tempting you.

BlackVelvetBitches: That's right! You could make it up to me, tho.

IsabellaMartinez1: Really? How?

BlackVelvetBitches: Video call me. I'll mute my mic so no one will hear me. We'll just type, but I'll be able to look at you. I just want to see you, you know? Just to make sure you didn't lose any limbs on your travels today.

Isabella glanced around the empty room as though she was about to do something naughty. It struck her that this room had once, for all of two years, been hers. It had been redecorated since, but still, these walls had heard her sneak calls on the house phone to whatever bad boy she'd been crushing on.

Now, here she was, feeling the same thrill at letting a crush see her on camera as they spoke. She'd swapped Philadelphia's teenaged bad boys, with strong arms and leather jackets, for...well, a woman in New York with strong arms and a leather jacket.

IsabellaMartinez1: Yes. As long as you come on camera too.

BlackVelvetBitches: As long as I...COME on camera?

BlackVelvetBitches: Whoa there, sailor. ;-)

IsabellaMartinez1: Erin! Behave.

BlackVelvetBitches: Sorry, sorry! Dammit, I was doing so well.

Isabella experienced that light-headed, buzzed feeling she got after a couple glasses of champagne. Erin was so damn intoxicating.

IsabellaMartinez1: Yes, well, I quite like it when you can't help yourself.

BlackVelvetBitches: Ditto. Okay, I'm gonna video call you with my mic muted now. You ready?

Isabella turned the volume down, just in case the muted microphone thing didn't take. Technology couldn't be trusted.

IsabellaMartinez1: Absolutely. Call me.

Her screen resolved into the gorgeous view of Erin Black in a thin, tight, gray hoodie. It looked soft, and it fit her like a second skin.

Erin was beaming, and that extraordinary smile hit Isabella like a ton of bricks. She was overwhelmed by the wish to hug Erin, to hold her tight and bury her face in the blonde hair that hung loose and straight. She swallowed and forced herself to calm down.

IsabellaMartinez1: My, don't you look cozy in that sweater.

Isabella saw Erin look down at her top and give a shy, lopsided smile before typing her reply.

BlackVelvetBitches: I'm glad you like it. I've had this hoodie for ages and was thinking about throwing it away, actually.

IsabellaMartinez1: While it's not my style, I'd like to request you keep it. You look very...huggable.

Erin grinned widely and held out her arms as if to hug her laptop. Isabella felt her breath catch. God, she wanted that hug.

BlackVelvetBitches: Hey, don't look so sad. We'll meet up soon, and I'll hug you so tight you'll wish that we were in different cities again!

Isabella looked right at the camera, seeking eye contact.

IsabellaMartinez1: I doubt you could ever make me wish that. I don't doubt your strength to hug the breath out of me, though.

Erin shrugged, looking humble.

BlackVelvetBitches: I'd say that I'm pretty strong. But mostly I'm just a helluva lot invested in the idea of hugging you.

Isabella sat up and cleared her throat.

IsabellaMartinez1: All right, that's too much sappiness for me. Let's either talk about your day or go back to being borderline inappropriate. Better yet, let's combine the two, and you can tell me about working out today, preferably in hot, sweaty detail.

BlackVelvetBitches: Hey, has anyone ever told you that sometimes your smile looks REALLY wicked? It's killer sexy. ;-)

Isabella sighed pointedly.

IsabellaMartinez1: I had an ex-boyfriend who said I often looked "evil."

BlackVelvetBitches: Yeah, well, no offense, but that's dumb. It's not an evil look as much as, I don't know, wolfish? Wicked? I don't have an exact word for it, but I really love it. It makes me feel like you could eat me whole, and I'd end up thanking you for it.

With a suggestive smirk and a raised eyebrow, Isabella looked into the camera.

IsabellaMartinez1: I might be new to girl-on-girl relationships, but should you really talk about me eating you if you plan to keep this platonic?

Erin looked down. Was she hiding a smile? Then she started typing, a frown forming.

BlackVelvetBitches: Okay, first of all, don't call it girl-on-girl. That makes me think of lesbian porn for straight guys and creeps me out. Pick "woman-loving-woman" or "sapphic" or "queer" or whatever else you're happy with. Secondly, you're the one leading me astray, damned temptress!

Isabella read the message and winked, trying to make it as seductive as she could.

IsabellaMartinez1: Guilty as charged.

BlackVelvetBitches: Yeah, well, behave until we decide we're ready to start dating each other. If we ever are, I mean. No pressure. But if we do, then you can be as bad as you want, I'm very good at punishing bad girls. ;-)

Isabella laughed at Erin's grinning face on the screen.

IsabellaMartinez1: Oh, I bet. We'll see what you dare to try when we are face-to-face. I can be quite scary.

BlackVelvetBitches: Scarily flawless, yeah.

IsabellaMartinez1: Flatterer! So, how was your day?

Erin read the message and shrugged noncommittally.

BlackVelvetBitches: Pretty dull and normal, really. Like I told you, I had a cancellation and got to talk to this annoying but pretty chick instead.

IsabellaMartinez1: Pretty AND scarily flawless? I thought I was "terrible face-wise?"

BlackVelvetBitches: Well, yeah. But I've gotta to be nice to you, since you bought me coffee, that awesome book about women in comics, and this thing.

Erin pulled up the sleeve of her hoodie to show her wrist with the FitWatch 9000.

IsabellaMartinez1: It looks good on you.

Isabella was going to add that she assumed everything would look good on Erin, but she was interrupted by the door being opened without any warning. From the doorway, Judith looked at her and then at the iPad in her lap.

"Isabella? Sorry, I wanted to ask if you and Alberto had everything you needed in here. Am I interrupting something?"

"Oh! Of course not, Mother."

She pushed the lock button on her iPad, turning the screen black in an instant. She was almost certain it was in vain, and her mother had seen Erin on the screen.

Why was she feeling so guilty and caught in the act?

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COFFEE AND
CONCLUSIONS

BY EMMA STERNER-RADLEY

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