

## It Won't Be Like This For Long- Devina Douglas

### 1.

Two months after leaving the life she had worked so hard to build behind, all in the name of true love, Erin Taylor wearily eased her car into a parking spot in the back corner of a typical suburban shopping center and dashed inside the Starbucks there, unaware that what would transpire over the next hour would change her life more so than accepting a wedding proposal from her boyfriend of three years had. So that Alan Chambers, now her fiancé, could pursue his dream of starting his own magazine, she had given up a job writing for the *Silicon Valley Daily News*, the perfect apartment and the mental stability of being 3000 miles away from her father, a man who had irreparably damaged any semblance of self confidence she ever had. When she had left Massachusetts at the age of eighteen to accept a scholarship at Stanford she vowed she would never go back. Yet there she was.

After the two-plus hour drive down to Cape Cod from Boston, she was desperate to use a restroom and, knowing they'd never turn away a paying customer, figured Starbucks was a safe bet. After checking her watch, she frowned realizing she still had over an hour to kill before heading off to find the perfect wedding gown; traffic had been much lighter on highway 495 than she'd anticipated and she'd made the voyage in record time.

She quickly shut the car door behind her, clicked the automatic lock over her shoulder and frantically scurried inside, smiling politely at the over-caffeinated woman behind the counter, eagerly joining a short line waiting for the only public bathroom, pretending to admire her surroundings. This particular chain coffee house was anything but unique with its beige walls, small, busily-decorated tables, splashy collections of coffee gadgets and pseudo-artistic music playing softly in the background. Nothing grabbed her attention for long. But it had a bathroom, and at that precise moment, a toilet was the only thing in the world that mattered.

A firefighter in front of her in line turned habitually to stay abreast of what was going on around him, then forced himself to turn away, wishing now he'd stayed at his corner table across the room as to admire the woman behind him from afar. Whatever "it" is that so many poets write

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about, so many writers wish to define and so many of us search within ourselves to find, this girl had. It wasn't the way her light blonde hair was piled on top of her head haphazardly, but yet seeming perfectly in place. It wasn't the way her clothes, although wrinkled from the drive, seemed to fit her perfectly. It wasn't even that she was unfathomably beautiful (although, even without makeup, she had a face that could launch a thousand ships.) There was an intangible perfection to her whole being and he knew he had to talk to her. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of a thing to say that she probably hadn't heard a million times before.

Unaware of the thoughts madly racing through the mind of the man in front of her, and unable to feign curiosity in her prosaic environment any longer, Erin's eyes locked desperately in on the restroom door swinging open and then closed again. Every muscle tightened in aching anticipation of the relief that lay several feet away.

"I can't believe that," the firefighter heard himself saying, turning again to flash her a disarming smile, "did you just see that? He totally cut in front of us in line."

"W-what?" Erin sputtered, previously so unconscious of the man in front of her in line he might as well have not been there. Simultaneously scrutinizing ideas for her next piece and trying to figure out how she'd explain to her fiancé how upset she was that he didn't attend an important dinner the previous night, the past and the future occupied every recess of her mind, leaving nary a synapse free to handle the present.

"I— I was just kidding," the man choked, frantically backpedaling, already preparing himself for the worst. "I... never mind. God, I feel like an idiot." His dazzling smile was gone as suddenly as it had appeared and he uneasily shifted on the balls of his feet, still unable to peel his eyes from hers, praying his brush with the greatest girl he never knew wasn't going to end before it had truly begun.

It was quite unlike Erin to make conversation with a perfect stranger, but oddly the words tumbled forth. "No, really," she sympathetically cooed with a distant sparkle in her Tahoe-blue eyes. It had finally registered how alarmingly good-looking he was. "What did you say? It's probably my fault I missed it anyway." Then she forced an encouraging smile.

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The man before her instantly made her uncomfortable in the best possible way. He was significantly taller than she was and had dark, smooth skin and brilliant brown eyes, accented by thick, dark, unending eyelashes. There were a million mysteries locked behind that gaze. On top of that, there was the uniform: a matching navy-blue shirt, well-fitting slacks, a Barnstable County FD patch on his sleeve and a name-tag that read only J. MARQUEZ.

Mr. Tall-Dark-And-Handsome started to shrug and was a split second away from turning around when he saw some faint glimmer of something that he hoped was interest. Seizing the opportunity, he smiled warmly. "I said my buddy, here, just jumped the line and now we have to wait even longer," he explained, tossing a nod towards another firefighter.

"Oh, that's okay," Erin lied offhandedly. "I've waited this long; surely I can wait a few minutes more." Mr. Marquez gave her a look that seemed to urge her to continue so she did. "...I just drove down from Boston."

"Vacation home out here?" he guessed, seeming to take a small emotional step backwards. Nearly all the women who could afford to drive down from Boston on a Thursday afternoon were rich, spoiled and impossibly pretentious, despite their outward attempts at civility. Hoping desperately the creature before him wasn't one of them, he tried to maintain a poker face.

"I wish," Erin smiled, starting to sway, a weak attempt to distract herself from the fact that her bladder was moments away from bursting. "I've got an appointment at the bridal salon down the street in a bit." Then she added at a lilt "we crazy brides will come from miles and miles away for the right dress."

Mr. Right-Now tossed a quick glance down to her left hand and was genuinely disappointed to see the ring adorning her finger. "You're getting married?" he chuckled. "What a shame."

Erin felt warmly sick to her stomach, convinced she was a failure at flirting if, indeed, that was what she was doing. She blushed, peeling her eyes of him for the time it took to pick up the keys she'd just accidentally let slip out of her hands. Thankfully, the tension was cut when the bathroom door swung open again and, chivalrously, her companion

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insisted she go before he and his friend, saving both of them from having to formulate any further response.

Alone, she collected herself and then, done using the facilities, she breezed back past, looking up at her new friend only long enough to smile in spite of herself. While she waited in line to order a drink, deliberately not glancing towards the back of the store, her eyes glittered as her mind filled with witty retorts it seemed a shame she'd never be able to use.

Iced, single, soy, vanilla latte in hand, she took to wandering to the other end of the shop, looking over the coffee-themed merchandise blanketing every available shelf, nook and cranny, wondering what kind of people actually bought the stuff. Forcing herself to focus on something other than the handsome man emerging from the restroom, she picked up a green ceramic mug and held it as if she was contemplating its deeper meaning.

At the other end of the store, Marquez rejoined his fellow firefighters, wishing he could have prolonged his interaction with her. From the periphery of her vision, Erin was fascinated to see they were all staring at her, conspiratorially mumbling. When it appeared the two men she hadn't been conversing with had made some valid point, their friend did the only thing he could think to do, cringing in advance, knowing how crass it would sound. "Hey," he called. "Come here."

At first, Erin could only stare friskily, mouth agape, at the man, but eventually her incredulity gave way to sense of puckish curiosity. Obediently, she returned the mug to a shelf, albeit the wrong one, and obliged, wandering carelessly towards three men, a red fire engine glinting outside in the background. "Yeah?" she blithely smiled once she was close enough to hold a conversation without yelling.

"Sit down," he offered, pulling a chair over to table. Erin smiled at the invitation then daintily lowered herself into the chair, placing her purse on the floor at her feet and crossing her legs at the ankle. "We can't have a pretty little thing like you sitting by yourself, can we?" No sooner had the words left his mouth than his coworkers erupted in groans. Not to be dissuaded, he ignored them. "I didn't mean that to sound as derogatory as it did," he explained in his own defense. When Erin indifferently waved off the previous comment he tried again. "So, you got a name?"

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“Erin Taylor,” she shyly grinned, holding out a hand. “You?”

“Captain Jacob Marquez.” Continuing the introductions he made his way counterclockwise around the table, ignoring Erin’s eyebrow cocked in disbelief. “This is Brian McDermott and this,” he motioned towards the man who had supposedly cut the bathroom cue, “is Lieutenant Tim Zarganes.” Brian was young, rather stocky with big, broad sweeping shoulders, gut to match, a pallid complexion, medium-length dirty-blond hair and an expression that made wonder Erin if the local fire departments were no longer screening applicants for basic intelligence. Tim, on the other hand, couldn’t have been more different: he was a little older, tall, solidly built, with ebony skin and bulky muscles peeking out from under the tight, short sleeves of his shirt, his hair neatly and meticulously trimmed.

“Nice to meet you,” Erin bubbled.

“You too,” both men responded in unison.

“So... *Captain*?” Erin teased, her gaze being drawn back to the man transfixed with her. “Aren’t you a little young to be a captain?”

“Oh god, no,” he choked, interrupted as he’d attempted to take a long swig of his coffee. “How young do you think I am? ...And just call me Jake.”

Erin eyed him carefully and then, her words dutifully measured, settled on “twenty-nine.”

“Thirty-three.”

Soon, the stiff formality of their exchange melted into an easy and lighthearted repartee. Although four of them sat around the table, it was obvious there was only conversation for two. Forty minutes passed quickly and Erin’s eyes rarely strayed from Jake’s, although twice she did force herself to make small talk with his coworkers just to be polite. Jake’s eyes *never* left hers. Despite the fact she’d never previously been accused of being a flirt, she found herself disarmingly good at it and she willingly ignored the ring on her left hand. The time flying by, Erin politely grilled Captain Marquez on every aspect of his day-to-day life: where he was born and raised, how he ended up living in Massachusetts, how long he’d been firefighting and, finally, what his wife or girlfriend thought of him choosing such a dangerous profession.

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Jake, who had ben about to take a sip of whatever caffeinated beverage was contained in the simple white paper cup he was holding, lowered his drink back to the table, awed, fascinated, entertained and enchanted by what was going on. "I haven't had any complaints from either as I have never been married and, well, the dating situation has been a little bleak recently," he responded with a wry smile. "This job isn't very conducive to maintaining a serious relationship. But I do have a dog, and he doesn't mind as long as I keep bringing home the kibble." Erin smiled comfortably and Jake instinctively switched gears. "But you never told me what it is *you* do for a living, Ms. Taylor," he inquired, giving Erin's hand, perched dangerously close to his, an approving smile.

"I'm a writer," she glowed.

"A writer?" Brian gasped. "So what do you write, children's stories?"

Erin deliberately looked herself up and down, realizing that in a knee-length grey wool skirt, pressed white button-down shirt and black, square-toed, leather shoes, her hair pulled away from her soft face, she did look a little like a first grade teacher. "No," she chuckled, seeing why they'd get that impression.

"Biographies of influential presidents?" Jake suggested spontaneously.

"No."

"You're a poet!" Tim ventured.

"No, I'm not really creative enough for that sort of thing," she explained.

"*Screenwriter!*" Brian tried again.

"No."

By this point Jake had sunk back in his seat and seemed to be enjoying the frantic exchange, knowing he didn't dare venture another guess.

"Blender and waffle iron manuals?" Tim teased.

"You write those horoscopes in the paper."

"No," Erin laughed, honestly enjoying herself.

"Good," Brian continued, "'cuz mine's never right anyway."

Tim's turn. "No, seriously. You're well dressed, have impeccable style and are very good looking." Across the table Jake nodded earnestly in agreement. "You must write for a fashion magazine."

"Oh no," Erin sighed delightedly.

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“So that only leaves cheesy romance novels?” Brian gasped, he and Tim doing their best to quash sniggers.

“Something like that,” Erin teased, deciding it wasn't worth the fight. This wasn't the first time she encountered people who believed that, as a woman, she would be incapable of writing sports and no doubt it wouldn't be the last. And really, just because they all looked like the all-American kind of guys who probably had life-long subscriptions to every sporting magazine under the sun, it didn't mean she expected her name to ring any bells. No one outside the profession knew that she spent the first couple years of her career ghost-writing a sports column on the West Coast and, although she had interviews lined up with both ESPN and *Sports Illustrated*, her name hadn't yet been published in print.

As she racked her mind for some way to change the subject, it suddenly dawned on her she had no idea how much time had elapsed since she'd started talking with the guys. While the guys warbled on and on about her supposed romance novels, Erin reached across the table and gently rolled Jake's wrist over as to see the dial of his watch, politely not daring to interrupt. “You have to go, don't you?” Jake inquired, needlessly at a whisper. The feel of her soft skin on his, however casual the physical contact, was enough that he was unable to focus on anything else.

The words wafted away, gone in the blink of an eye, for as much as Erin wished she hadn't heard them, Jake wished he'd never spoken them. Cognizant of the fact that her fingertips were still oh-so carefully encircling his wrist, Jake didn't dare move, except to broaden his smile, a silent appeal for her to stay a little longer. As she withdrew her hand slowly, both already wordlessly apologizing for having to leave and begging him to conceive of a reason, any reason, she should stay.

When he said nothing, she surrendered to the futility of the idea, immediately, painfully aware that she was leaving to resume the preparations for her marriage to another man. “I need to be across town in five minutes,” she hesitantly informed the table, pretending to be addressing them all. “But it was a pleasure meeting you.”

“You too.” She shook hands with them all, not surprised when it took a significant amount of effort and will power to pry her hand from Jake's.

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"Umm, maybe I could call..." he began. He stopped once it became clear she was conflicted about the idea of him finishing the sentence.

"I've got to go." After a few steps backwards, she spun around, biting her bottom lip, readjusting her purse on her shoulder. This last cup of sub-standard chain-store coffee had been the best she'd ever had. Mere steps away from the door, she paused, pretending to be looking for the car keys that she knew were tucked in her skirt pocket, unable to take that last step away from a man she hardly knew. Indulging this silly fantasy the only way she knew she could, she spun around and, with one hand on the door, gave him one more smile before it was all to be over. All six eyes were still on her.

Her appointment lasted just under an hour and a half, but eighty-seven minutes being pushed and prodded at by a Ukrainian woman with big hair, strong opinions and a heavy hand had felt like a lifetime. Exhausted, Erin climbed into the car, started the engine and slumped sleepily into her seat, scanning the radio for a station that could, at the very least, hold her attention. Nothing seemed to fit the bill. All she could think about was Jake. Jake had been everything a girl fantasizes about. An easy charm. Indescribable good looks. Unpretentious intelligence. And every bit the hero. She could still feel the spot on her wrist his hand had accidentally brushed. ...The muscles of his strong arms flexing underneath her fingers as she reached for his watch. ...The feel of his hand, wrapped around hers for that final handshake. The mere thought of Jake was enough to make her instantaneously forget about her encounter with Svetlana.

Her regular, delightful, comfortable life loomed ninety-five miles ahead of her, but she allowed herself the guilty pleasure of reveling in the memory two hours behind, cheerfully winding her way through the sleepy town, keeping an eye peeled for the bright red fire engine that had been parked in the Starbucks parking lot hours before. Although it was out of her way, she even zipped back past, longing to savor the moment a little longer, confronted by evidence their chance encounter had actually happened. Sadly, the lot was full of sedans, SUVs, a few small trucks and a smattering of expensive sports cars, not a fire engine to be found.

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Tired of inwardly berating herself for her foolish actions, she turned around in the coffee shop parking lot, found her way back to highway 28, setting a course for Boston. Hardly five minutes into her journey, her trek was cut short when a Lincoln town car, driven by an elderly woman hardly able to see over the steering wheel, ran a stop sign and struck the right, front fender of her Civic. The sound of metal buckling brought all action on the street to a stop.

Immediately, Erin's heart was thundering in her chest and her hands were shaking. She had a hard time flipping the car into neutral and applying the parking brake, and an even harder time impelling her lungs to inhale her next breath. Things like this never happened to her, she was an amazingly safe driver who hadn't had so much as a speeding ticket since she was seventeen.

A quick, cursory inspection of the interior of the car revealed she was fine, but looking out over the hood she saw the car was not; the Lincoln was embedded several inches into her fender and her car was now about 45-degrees askew of the single yellow line to her left. "Shit," she burst, rolling down her window to let the person approaching know she was all right.

"Just stay where you are," the man told her, simultaneously yelling for someone to call 911.

"I don't think we need 911," Erin chuckled nervously. "I'm fine."

"911, the cops, whatever. Trust me, I'm an insurance agent; you'll need a police report to get *that* fixed. I guarantee it."

Too shaken to do much else, she succumbed and sank dejectedly into her seat, slowly realizing her mind was skipping around too fast for real thought or pain.

In minutes, two police cars had arrived, she was carefully helped from the car, being handled with kid gloves the whole time, and given a perfunctory inspection by an officer. "I'm fine," she repeated, feeling a whole lot better knowing that the old woman had accepted blame for the collision.

"I'm sure you are," the officer groaned, feeling her pain, "but we need an EMT to check you out before we can let you go. Trust me, I don't like

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this red tape stuff any more than I'm sure you do. Here, why don't we go sit over there?" Numbly, Erin followed, sitting down on a bench watching another officer jot down her license plate number, almost amused by the whole thing now that she knew everyone was safe. After giving a brief statement, she was about to call Alan to let him know what was going on when, two key-punches away completing the call, she sheepishly flipped the phone shut, finding herself once again incapable of speech.

A fire engine had just pulled up.

Jake was the first to jump out, dutifully heading straight for the old woman, police officers springing to his side to apprise him of the situation, making sure to point out both key players in the ordeal. Jake stopped mid-stride when he saw Erin sitting pathetically in the middle of a wrought iron bench and then abruptly he changed his course. Instantly, Erin could see why he'd been promoted to captain so quickly. He was both magically drawing out the best in everyone around him and completely in control of the situation.

"Hey Tim, Brian, can you..." He threw a nod towards the woman and the other members of his crew dutifully complied. "You again?" he blurt, playfully sidling in Erin's direction. Erin nodded, not saying a thing, but smiling to assure him he needn't be concerned. He got the message, but still felt obligated to ask. Kneeling down to get at her level, he calmly sighed "you alright?"

"I'm fine," she reiterated for what could possibly have been the hundredth time that day.

"Look, let me go check on the old bat over there and then I'll be back. Stay here okay? I don't care what anyone else says, don't move." With a wink he was off, transforming before her eyes from just another good-looking guy with a screwy sense of humor to a real professional.

It was another fifteen minutes before Jake returned, but when he did it was easy to see he was elated to see her. He sat down lightly on the bench next to her and started half-heartedly going through the motions of examining her. As he held her wrist, checking her pulse, he made more small talk. "So she ran the stop sign, huh?"

"Yeah."

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His deep voice arrived at a chuckle. "It sounds like the old woman has already volunteered to have your car towed to Boston, if that's any conciliation."

"It's not."

Jake laughed and then started filling out the requisite paperwork, having given her a clean bill of health. "Name?" Erin looked over at him, waiting to see if he could do this part himself. Proudly he smiled, returning his attention to the form on the clipboard in front of him. "Taylor-comma-Erin. Address?"

"80 Chestnut Street, Beantown, Mass, 02215."

"*Chestnut*," he repeated dreamily. "That's Beacon Hill, right?" She nodded shyly. "Wow. Home phone?"

Erin raised one eyebrow skeptically, certain they had just circled back in time to their last moments together at the coffee shop.

"I need it for the report," he explained, smirking nonetheless. "See? There's a spot for it and everything."

"(617) 555-1820," she sighed.

"See, that wasn't so hard." Jake triumphantly made note of this and then flipped through a notepad pulled from his pocket for an empty sheet. He jotted something down, tore the page out and then handed it to her. "(508) 945-5120," it read, his name scribbled above. "It's only fair," he smiled once she looked up to give him a quizzical grin.

She folded up the paper, tucked it in her coat pocket and then resumed helping him answer every other question necessary for her release.

She had health insurance. She had no history of heart or head trauma. She *was* suffering from allergies. Her head didn't hurt. Her neck was fine. Her vision was perfect. She could recite the alphabet forwards and backwards. "Captain Mar--" she began.

"Jake," he insisted.

"*Jake*. I'm fine. Seriously. The only damage I suffered was actually sitting here. I broke a nail and then accidently scratched my own knee."

Looking at her knees peeking out from underneath the hem of her skirt, he winced melodramatically. There was a red line, about half an inch long, scratched just above her knee cap, the only imperfection on her otherwise flawless skin.

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"Would you like a band-aid?"

"No," she giggled. "I--" When it dawned on her that Jake was doing everything in his power to prolong their second meeting in as many hours, and that she was equally as interested in keeping him at her side, she relented. "You know, if you think I need a band-aid, who am I to quibble? However, what I really need is a nail file."

"Sorry. Nail files aren't standard issue for first responders." Meticulously, he smoothed the small piece of gauze and plastic over her knee, while a member of Chatham's finest strolled back over to see what was taking so long.

"Marquez," the officer grunted. "You done flirting yet? Because if you don't mind, we've all got places to be and none of us can go until you give us the okay."

"Busted," Erin smiled.

"What was that?"

"You're flirting with me," Erin chirped.

"I am not." Jake looked up at the officer and repeated the sentiment. "I am not. She's engaged."

"Never stopped you before, Marquez." The officer shook his head as he walked away, buying them just a few more seconds together.

Knowing he had no other choice than to let her go, Jake helped her to the tow truck, her car already loaded on. "You going to be okay?"

"*You*," she teased, "just said I was fine. Isn't that good enough?"

"You kidding?" he scoffed. "I have *no* idea what I'm doing." Jake pulled the door open for her and watched protectively as she climbed in.

"I'm fine," she groaned with a beleaguered smile.

"Because," Jake suggested devilishly, "I was thinking that if you didn't feel up to it I could wait here with you until you did."

"I'm okay," she affirmed fastening her seat belt. "Really. But I do appreciate the offer."

Jake half-smiled, half-grimaced, knowing she was going to get away, but delighted he now had a way to find her again. "Sounds good. I'll let you go, but if you ever want to write one of those steamy bodice-rippers about a beautiful blonde-haired woman who falls for someone in the

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firefighting profession, feel free to give me a call. ...Or if you just want to see me, I'd love to see you again."

"Who knows?" she enigmatically replied, the tow-truck driver slipping the truck into reverse. "And, by the way, thanks. ...For the distraction at Starbucks... patching me back up...everything."

"You're welcome, ma'am." He retorted seeing Brian and Tim approaching. "Have a good evening." With that, he shut the door firmly, gave the side of the tow truck a solid pat and then turned away.

Although her every intent had been to suppress the giddy grin bubbling up from inside, she allowed herself to laugh and roll her eyes, in reality, more flustered due to her run-in with Jake than her encounter with a Lincoln Continental.