

Chapter 1

"Where are you hiding? Come on, Ric . . . we don't have much time before we have to pick up the kids!" Chase pleaded, unable to ignore the bulge pressing against his zipper. Erica had been all over him moments before then literally disappeared. "When I find you, you'll be sorry!" He shouted teasingly. With that, her laughter echoed in the distance and he turned to the familiar melody.

Normally, he loved the playful games that Erica thrived on, but this one had gone on long enough. "Please, sweetie . . . I need you . . . I need you right here, right now . . ." Her laughter continued—only—slightly less than hysterical for some odd reason. His brows narrowed with concern. "Erica?"

Suddenly, he felt the warmth of her presence, "Sweetheart?" then her touch, as her palms pressed against his chest. He closed his eyes and sighed as a contented smile slowly spread across his face. "Ah, there you are." Erica pressed her length to his, tucking her curves easily into his contours, as her hands roved his body with languorous precision. He craved her touch and groaned with the unyielding pleasure. "Oh, babe—don't stop." Her caresses moved gradually lower until she reached his idle hips. He swallowed hard as she centered her attention, first grasping his arousal then massaging him into contented submission. Another deep throaty moan escaped him. "Oh yes . . ." Chase encouraged with a sigh.

Her tongue brushed his lips, his chin, sliding seductively along his neck, leaving behind a long, wet tantalizing trail. In chorus with her mouth, he felt a tug at his zipper and this action alone sent a heated rush straight through him—though when her hand covered the proof of his excitement—the wonder re-emerged, only stronger.

Chase opened his eyes, but it had become strangely dark. So dark in fact, that he could no longer see his beloved, but he could feel her—*oh could he feel her*. Too entranced

to internalize anything other than the fervent sensations commanding his body, his muscles quivered with the sublime ecstasy of her ministrations. She stroked him harder, faster—her mouth, soft and pliant, tongued every inch of bare flesh she could expose. With labored breath he encouraged her, panting loving sentiments, until he was soaring, nearing the end of his restraint—but wait—it was all moving too fast—he wanted to move inside her instead.

“ Slow down, Ric . . .” he implored her, but she only became more aggressive. “ Sweetie, please,” he continued as he reached a hand down to stop her—but he felt nothing—only his rock hard erection. “ Erica?”

Confused, he reached out, his hands fanning the air, searching like a blind man. She was gone. *How could this be?* His appendage was still being manipulated. “ Christ, Erica, what’ s going on? Stop! This isn’ t funny! Where are you?” He growled and again reached down. In a panic, Chase closed his hand tightly around his hardness determined to halt the insanity, however the sensation continued, and Erica’ s laughter rose to an alarming pitch, suddenly becoming the only prominent sound. “ What’ s going on?” he asked, grinding out the words, weak from pleasure and confounded by fear.

Her laughter resonated loudly, mockingly.

“ Erica? Please, I’ m begging you!” He cried out.

Then he saw a light at the end of a long dark corridor—the laughter was coming from there. However, Chase was only slightly relieved, since the laughter emanated eerily from the tunnel-like hallway, and the pitch was escalating steadily. He maintained a firm grasp of his maddening erection, which combined with the gripping nature of his affliction made it very difficult to move forward—though he managed—struggling with each step, desperate to reach Erica.

As he closed in, her spine-chilling laughter became more concentrated, easily overshadowing the steady thud of his heart beating wildly in his ears. He forged on, battling both his rising hysteria and his traitorous body.

Finally, the hum of climax neared.

He continued toward the light in near agony, driven to reach his suffering wife, though he could not fathom why release continued to elude him. He wanted it over with—now! Halting his tracks—realizing his only option was to give into the relentless phenomenon, though he quickly learned that aiding the effort proved futile, as he remained in an insufferable state of agony and ecstasy. He was virtually paralyzed by his predicament and equally frustrated.

Until, Erica's raucous laughter turned to deep heaving sobs and concentrated fear triumphed, freeing him of his burden—and with the raucous cry of a tormented man he shouted her name as he erupted with an explosive orgasm that knocked him to his knees.

"Help me, Chase! Help me!" she screamed—the strident plea reverberating endlessly in the shadows. "It hurts, help me!"

Stumbling to his feet, still weak from the bittersweet release, "Where are you?" he cried, hearing the terror in his own voice. "Erica!" he choked out more desperately this time, his body trembling uncontrollably as he frantically searched, his eyes darting in every conceivable direction, revealing nothing. "E-r-i-c-a!"

Only her tormented pleas cut through the darkness, taunting him—the pitch, almost inhuman, terrifying him. His chest, tight with dread, squeezed and ached.

Feeling helpless, he gave way to the emotions that gripped him, allowing his tears to flow freely as deep sobs racked his wilting frame.

Then reason reached through his grief and shook him, forcing him to realize that the resounding shrill gave direction. With revived, if not desperate purpose, Chase rushed toward the source of her horrific cries. The tunnel seemed endless, though he continued, running as fast as he could—until her screams became so convoluted, blending with sirens, shouting—but there was something else—something powerful and fierce . . .

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With each anxious step, Chase felt an incredible heat and her terrifying screams intensified. "I'm trying, Erica!" he cried, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

He knew something horrific was happening, but no matter how hard he tried to get to her, he couldn't seem to move fast enough—his legs felt like leaded weights—and it was so God awful hot, and he was so weak and so scared.

Suddenly, a firefighter appeared out of nowhere. "I'm sorry, Sir," he said, grabbing Chase by the shoulder. "You're too late, she's dead!"

"NO! GOD NO! N-O-O-O-O-O!"

Then he was awake—thrashing about his own bed. Calming, he scanned the bedroom that was still so full of her presence, and slowly, reality registered—it had been nothing more than a horrible nightmare. Chase gasped, bringing his hands to his face, attempting to wipe away the devastating images.

Shaking relentlessly, his body was racked by sweat and fear, vertigo and nausea—until emotion gripped him entirely, and he whimpered long desperate pants, completely overcome by irrepressible guilt and unconscionable pain.

It may have only been a dream, but his reality was the empty bed he dropped back on—the lonely place where he'd spent the last two years crying himself to sleep—and tonight was no exception.

The following evening, as Chase headed north on the Oyster Bay Expressway, his mind was still clouded by the oppressive dream. All day he had been unable to shake the intensity of his nightmare. He had functioned normally, so he thought, though he had burnt the toast and given Marley's lunch to Lexi—which he learned about at four o'clock when Marley called him at the restaurant

complaining about how she hated tuna fish. At work, he'd ordered fifty new tablecloths instead of the fifty napkins they actually needed, and then proceeded to argue with Gail, the woman who had handled his account for the last five years, when she questioned him.

He felt fuzzy—his mind only capable of focusing on one thing—those horrible screams—Erica's screams.

Erica Paige Knapp—she had meant *everything* to Chase Garson. His needs simple from the start—the love of his wife, then, of the three precious daughters their love eventually brought them—that was enough for him. He wished he could say the same for Erica. Their relationship had changed drastically over the last few years. Logically, he knew their physical detachment was troublesome, but emotionally nothing could tear him away from Erica or their shared past.

Their marriage had not been flawless—Chase and Erica Garson had been married for nine years—what relationship was perfect after this length of time? Nevertheless, Chase had loved her and Erica had loved him. Period. Their feelings for each other had never been in question, by them or anyone else for that matter—at least that's what he believed.

They'd had it all—love, three healthy children, a house in the suburbs, a thriving business, expensive vehicles, and the best private schools for their girls—everything—hadn't they?

Then why had their lives turned so sour the year after Kasey was born? The birth of their third child should have added to the blissful family portrait—right?

Then came a rift between the partners in the restaurant that Chase and Erica co-owned with Chase's brother, Kyle and another partner, Bill Hancock, the one they were trying to force out. It was a terribly stressful time for everyone, and Chase's long hours in trying to keep the restaurant afloat, hardly helped the increasingly tense situation at home.

Adding to their frustrations, Kasey was colicky for the first few months after her birth; Marley, who was six at the time, was jealous and angry; and an already potty-trained, three-year-old, Lexi was suddenly back in diapers—leaving, Erica at her wit's end, and either too stubborn or proud to accept help. Instead, each day Erica slipped farther away from her true self. In her place, Chase found an illusion, a mere shadow of the Erica he had once known and craved.

Chase suggested selling the house, the one in Rockville Centre that Erica had searched so intently for years earlier. She had been determined to live in the charming community with its oak-lined streets, fifty-year old brick colonial homes, and a wealth of family values. With a then ten-month-old Marley hanging heavy on her hip, Erica had found her dream house and bid on it instantly knowing Chase would approve.

His intention now was not to tear her away from her life in RVC, but to provide them *all* with a better way of life, convinced that a move to the North Shore, where both of their families lived and where the restaurant was located, would *help her*. However, Erica loved the town, her friends, and her way of life in the suburban community and she adamantly refused to leave. Instead of seeing Chase's suggestion in the spirit it was intended, they spent much of their infrequent personal time arguing over everything and anything—*especially* moving.

Fighting had become the mainstay of their relationship—no longer the exception, and before long, it became the relationship. Their only means of escape was isolation, retreating to neutral corners in hopes of avoiding the depressing pattern. Chase began to dread coming home, and sadly, he knew that Erica sensed his reluctance. They never thought about the possibility of divorce—at least as far as Chase was concerned—they were simply going through a rough patch in their marriage—they would find their way back to each other. After all, they were still in love . . . he still felt the connection. Time was all they needed.

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Though time together was something Chase had never dreamed they would fall short of—especially not on the night that Erica greeted him at the front door fiery with determination, accusing him of malicious intent, and vengeful manipulations. The ensuing exchange of words escalated, sending Erica storming from the house and into the night.

Those words of anger would be the last they would ever share.

He tried desperately to suppress the images flashing through his mind in odd sequence and horrid shreds. A fearsome chill seized him in response to his unconscious thoughts, causing him to shudder. The fateful phone call—the panic and desperation he felt as he made his way to Erica—as real at this moment as if he were on his way to her now. He became aware of his breathing, labored and ragged, and the beads of sweat, cold and moist on his forehead, temples, and upper lip. Yet, he was helpless to his own torment.

He struggled to will the memories away, but they were relentless—images of sirens, people, confusion. He had arrived at the hospital just as Erica's ambulance pulled to the curb. He rushed forward, his eyes fervently scanning the patient, but even though his gaze was fixed intently upon the victim, she was barely recognizable.

Then came a series of desperate gasps and sobs, as slowly he recognized first her jewelry—then her clothing mostly discolored with blood—and finally her long blond locks stained with the same life-threatening liquid. And that was all he could absorb, the details he would recall later in the form of constant, punishing nightmares that would awaken him, his body drenched with sweat, dazed with fear and confusion—much like the night before.

Lunging his body toward her, being pulled away, the struggle, tears, fear, and gripping pain, all of which took

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only a matter of seconds, but would inevitably take a lifetime to erase.

Then came the waiting, the agony of making phone calls, and then more waiting—the arrival of frantic parents, the tears and questions and guilt—and yes, more waiting.

The waiting and wondering had been nearly impossible. During this time, his mind unwittingly flashed back to their beginning. Happy, cherished times—with a love that bound them so deeply—immersing them in a whirlwind of passion and excitement toward life . . . together.

His first glimpse of her, the first night of lovemaking, the crazy times dancing in the rain, and beautiful sunrises shared at Jones Beach—so much history between them. Their picture-perfect wedding where everything went wrong and they managed to laugh through it all—their first pregnancy, sonogram, Lamaze, and childbirth. The joys of parenting . . . together.

Sundays spent walking the Third Avenue street fair or the South Street Seaport with Marley safe in her snugly, and trips to museums on rainy days. Lexi's birth and learning to parent two—making love all afternoon while the girls napped, taking turns staying up with sick babies, or scary dreams that ended with a child snuggled between them. Watching their children grow and learn and become independent—precious moments at the pumpkin patch, Christmas mornings, going to the park, and stolen kisses at the swings.

Moments of reconnection—foreplay on top of stale popcorn and spilled apple juice, Barney video tapes and quickies against the nearest wall, midnight rendezvous on the lounge chair in the back yard— so much yet to experience . . . together.

Finally, the waiting had come to an end, but with it so had Erica's life . . .

It seemed so surreal—still did, actually. Chase swallowed back the nausea rising from his belly, opening the car window as he turned onto the Long Island Expressway (LIE). The blast of cold air was as welcome as a sound slap, but it wasn't enough. Tears trickled slowly from his lashes as he recalled the tragic end to their storybook romance.

Nothing in life could have prepared him for the heart-wrenching pain of love lost, and nothing could stop the all-consuming guilt for his role in the tragedy. Then—thinking things couldn't get any worse, Chase had to bear witness to the ultimate shredding of his heart as three pairs of sky-blue eyes looked to him for what their future held—the grief-stricken expressions of his little blond beauties. Their individual levels of sadness determined simply by age and maturity, but pure agony felt just the same with the loss of their beloved mother. Even the littlest one knew that much.

And the hurt just cuts deeper like a knife in his belly, twisting, plunging as he absorbs the intimidating glares of his oldest daughter, Marley, whose expression probably held little comprehension of the moment, if one were not so guilt-ridden. As she stood defiantly at her mother's graveside that bitterly cold day, she appeared to be a justifiably distressed child who knew little more than her mother would never be come home. Only Chase knew that Marley hadn't spoken more than a few words to him since he had inflicted the most horrific pain upon her tender life, though he couldn't help but internalize her silence as condemning judgment. It was more than he could bear. Until the moment of their final farewells, when Marley could no longer contain her grief, and in her hysteria, she had rejected her father's consolation in lieu of her maternal grandmother's.

Now, fighting hard to focus on the road, his tears clouding his vision, but thankfully not his judgment, Chase knew that at the very least he had to make some changes. It was obvious that they could no longer live the way they had for far too long, and though it was hard to admit, the girls had to be struggling as well.

He had done little more than stay afloat these last two years, unable to deal with anything substantial. His mistake? Probably. His salvation? Definitely.

Nothing had changed since Erica's death two years earlier—not a fork went astray to another drawer—her robe still hung on the back of the master bathroom door—and it was she the PTA mistakenly called to partake in their annual bake sale. And, worse—Erica's car was still parked in the garage at the end of each day—it was *his* car she had totaled that fateful night.

It couldn't be healthy—not one thing had changed other than her absence—especially their grief . . . and it was eating him alive.