

Chapter Eight

It had been ages since I'd gone to the movie theater, but Mom insisted I should. We could afford it now, especially since Mrs. St. Claire had already given her an advance on her pay so we could make the mortgage payment. Van still paid for everything despite Mom sending me a handful of cash.

"You didn't have to pay," I said.

Van laced his fingers between mine and tugged me closer. "Of course, I did. It's a date, Erin. I want you to be happy." His eyes traveled over me for a second, then back to my face. "You look beautiful, by the way. I like the way your hair is wavy now."

I tugged on one of the curls and blushed. "Thanks. Uh, should we wait for Reid and Isabella, or should we find a seat?"

Van looked over my shoulder at the concessions stand where Isabella and Reid were debating how much butter was too much butter on their popcorn. Turned out they both hated butter and opted for the ridiculously unhealthy and disgusting cheddar cheese dip instead.

"They'll find us. Come on." Van tugged me along. "I'm not sure what Reid got us into here, but this may be a sappy romantic comedy."

"Wait, what? Reid likes romcoms?"

"I think he thinks you and Isa like them, so he's willing to sit through two hours of torturous love gone wrong then right again just to impress her." Van found the theater and pushed the door, letting me enter first.

The walkway lighting was enough to show the room was practically empty with only a few minutes before the show. Judging by the movie's name, I assumed Van was probably right about the film. We were running late, so we let Reid buy the tickets just in case. I didn't mind a romcom but watching it *with* Van might prove to be the worst thing I'd ever done, at least where my senses were concerned.

I chose a row, scooted to the fourth seat, realized I might want to sit with Isa, and took one back. Van squeezed past me and flopped onto the chair, losing the top layer of our popcorn to the floor.

"Oops, now I feel bad. I'll see if I can get a broom to clean it up." He handed me the popcorn and darted toward the door, leaving me alone in the darkened theater.

A few people trickled by, then I heard an unmistakable voice.

"Tee, I think you can sit anywhere and not worry. It's practically empty." Rose, Hazel's sister, scanned the theater and her eyes landed on me just as I stood to say hello. "Erin! Hazel was just talking about you earlier today. How are you?"

I accepted her hug and nodded to Tee. "I'm doing okay. I'm sure she filled you in."

"A little. Are you here with Van?"

"Yes and no. He's here, but Reid and Isabella are here too. Do you remember them?" I asked.

"I do. Is this like a double date?" Rose asked, glancing at Tee, her boyfriend of just over a year.

"Yes? I mean, Reid and Isa are on a date, and... Okay, don't judge me, but yes, it's a date." I practically shrank into the seat, but Rose only laughed and pointed to the seat beside me.

“May we join you?” she asked.

“Yes, please. I need all the help I can get. I’m in so far over my head, and I’m sure I’ll do something completely stupid.”

Rose scooted around me and sat beside me, then Tee slipped on the popcorn, did an awkward flailing bird dance to stay upright, and clutched the back of the seat in front of him. Rose bit her lip to keep from laughing, but Tee just chuckled and baby-stepped to his chair. Once settled, he gave his attention to me.

“So, correct me if I’m wrong, but wasn’t Van like... a total jerk to you?”

I sighed. “It’s a long story. We were close growing up, then he got popular and became an egomaniacal idiot. Now, he’s different, I guess. I’m not sure about it myself if I’m honest. I guess I’m just seeing what happens.”

Rose licked butter from her fingers and relaxed into the seat. “I think it’s good to give him a second chance as long as you don’t let him get away with treating you badly. He can’t just waltz back into your life like he didn’t make it suck for years.”

I nodded, ready to respond, but everyone else had made it to their seats. Isabella waved to Rose and sat. “It’s been a long time, Rose. Is Hazel in town?”

“Soon. She and Daniel should be back tomorrow night.” Rose spoke to Isabella, but her gaze pinned Van where he stood.

Reid sat beside Isabella on the outside while Van stared at the empty seat beside me. He made no move to sit—or to sweep up the mess, considering he had no broom—and waited for someone to do or say anything that might give him some feel for the situation.

“Uh, you gonna sit or hold the floor down all night?” Reid asked.

“Yeah, Van. Are you going to sit with Erin and be on your best behavior?” Tee asked, his arm draped over Rose’s shoulders. She snickered, nearly choking on her popcorn.

“Sure. Yeah. Yes, I was planning to sit with Erin,” Van said, snapping out of his stupor. If seeing Rose and Tee put him that much on edge, I couldn’t imagine what seeing Hazel might do. After the whole debacle with Ronin, Hazel had reached new highs on the social ladder. Nothing and no one could stop her, but that was the thing about Hazel. People liked her because she was a great person. They were intimidated by her ability to bounce back from anything, including near social devastation.

Van slipped into the seat beside me, ramrod straight. He kept his eyes focused on the screen, pretending to watch the pre-movie advertisements. Isabella and Reid carried a conversation, mostly about their families and other things one might discuss when getting to know someone. Tee and Rose occasionally spoke about their plans for the weekend, including me, so I didn’t feel left out sitting there, completely ignored by my supposed date.

I glanced at Van several times, but he never took his eyes away from the screen. After the advertisements, the room darkened further, and the previews began. First, it was an action movie, then a horror flick. By the time the actual movie began, I wasn’t even paying attention. My mind had wandered, and I evaluated why I’d even agreed to this stupid date. It was clear Van was uncomfortable, and if being seen with me in front of Rose and Tee made him clam up like that, then there was no way he could do it in school.

Fifteen minutes into what promised to be the most disgustingly lovesick movie in existence, I excused myself to go to the restroom. Isa and Rose instinctively followed, something like a pack mentality among girlfriends. A sob lodged in my throat, and my eyes stung with the threat of tears. I pulled the bathroom door open, marched directly to the last stall, and then locked the door behind me. I let loose the sob, followed by streams of tears.

“Erin, don’t cry,” Isabella whispered from the other side of the door. “I think he’s just nervous. That’s what Reid said.”

I choked on a sob, then said, “It’s so obvious he’s ignoring me, even Reid noticed!” I ripped toilet paper from the roll and blotted the tears, absolutely sick with myself for even caring.

“It’s probably me. He wasn’t expecting any of your friends to be here, and he’s probably nervous. It’s not you, sweetie.” Rose, who had dropped herself onto the disgusting floor to crawl under the door, popped up in front of me and ran a hand through her hair. “Sorry. When you grow up with a sister like Hazel, you learn things. And I know face-to-face discussions are always better.”

Erin wiggled her way under the door, too, leaving us with precious little space in the stall.

I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing, despite knowing everyone who came into the bathroom could hear me. Erin grabbed more toilet paper and dabbed under my eyes, where my mascara smeared all over my face. Rose rubbed my shoulder and popped the lock on the door, so we could have a little space.

The main door opened, and a girl walked in dressed in a theater uniform. “What is it with you Simmons girls and this bathroom?” she asked.

“Hey, Nat.” Rose waved to the girl who, I remembered, was Ronin’s girlfriend—also sweet and kind, but much less *go big or go home* than Hazel. “Erin isn’t having the best night.”

“Do I need to dump a slushy on someone?” Natalie asked, her hands on her hips.

Rose chuckled. “No, but maybe an easy exit would be nice? I’ll take you home, Erin.”

“No, no, don’t do that. You’re here with Tee, and I wouldn’t want to cause trouble.” I smoothed my blue dress, one with cute ruffles at the wrist and hem that I adored. It was a waste of the dress, to be honest, to go on a lousy date with a boy who couldn’t even stomach being seen with me in front of *my* friends.

“He won’t mind, Erin. In fact, he’ll probably give Van a piece of his mind before—”

“Hey, you can’t go in there!” Natalie jerked her arm across the bathroom entrance, interrupting Rose. I couldn’t see who it was but assumed it was just another poor girl who needed to actually *use* the restroom.

“Please? Please just... just let me in for a second to see if my... my... I need to see if Erin is in there.” It was Van, and my entire body froze.

“Why?” Natalie asked, her eyes zoned in on Van. Burned popcorn aroma infiltrated the bathroom, fighting to the death with the air freshener for dominance in the cramped bathroom.

“I didn’t mean to upset her. I just... Who are you?” Van asked, peering into the bathroom.

“It’s okay, Natalie. I’ll go out so we can stop making a scene.” I trashed the toilet paper tissue and left the stall, flanked by Isabella and Rose. Out in the lobby, I hugged Rose again. “I’ll see you Tuesday, okay?”

“Erin, I can—”

I shook my head. “Really. I’ll see you soon.”

Isabella frowned. “Let me get Reid, and I’ll be ready to—”

“No! No, don’t do that, Isa. You and Reid are getting along great. Go enjoy your date. I’ll just... I’ll... be back in a few minutes. I just want some air, that’s all.”

Isabella offered Van a glare, then headed back to the theater, the movie already a quarter over. I passed Van and headed to the double doors, determined to breathe before I even looked at him. Had I overreacted? Was I making a big deal out of something I already knew would happen? Should I just count my lucky stars that I’d never put too much of my heart out there and move on? The problem was—and it hit me so hard I audibly gasped—I’d put more of my heart into this thing, this *opportunity* with Van, than I realized.

He followed me out and grasped my hand just as I reached the sidewalk.

“Erin, come back. It’s not what you think, honest.”

“It wasn’t you afraid to be seen on a date with me in front of someone who was popular at our school? Someone who still knows a lot of the popular crowd? It wasn’t you worried someone might find out you were with me before you had a chance to control the narrative?”

“That’s fair, Erin, but it wasn’t what happened. That was me trying to let *you* decide how much *your* friends knew. I didn’t want them to think you were there with me because I didn’t want it to be weird for *you*.”

“What? That doesn’t even make sense,” I said, afraid to admit it did make just the slightest bit of sense.

“Erin, I’m not stupid. I know your friends don’t like me, and with good reason. I was trying—and clearly failing—to distance myself until I knew what you wanted. Maybe you didn’t want your friends knowing that we’re trying this yet? How would I know? We didn’t discuss it.”

I took a breath. “Wait, you were waiting for *me* to give *you* a sign?”

He huffed and smiled, but it wasn’t a happy grin. “Yeah. I was sitting there freaking out, thinking you didn’t want Rose to know about any of this yet, but praying you’d just... I don’t know... take my hand or something. Then you ran out with the girls, and I was so confused until Tee basically called me the world’s biggest moron, then told me to check on you.”

I squinted, my brain working overtime to process what he said. “So, you’re *not* embarrassed to be seen with me?”

Van stepped back like I’d smacked him in the face. “No, pretty girl. Not even a little. I told you, I’ll do anything to make this right between us. I don’t care what I lose because the truth is, everything I need is right here in front of me.” He pointed to me, then shrugged and said, “Okay, and I kind of need Reid, too, but he’s one hundred percent pro-Erin, and not because you’re friends with Isa.”

I sat on the bench outside the theater and tried to let that sink in. Was Van really willing to throw away ten years of popularity for me? I leaned against the cool bricks and stared at the starry sky. It was unseasonably cold for a fall evening, and I’d forgotten my coat, of course. Van sat beside me, close enough that I felt his warmth but far enough that he didn’t invade my space.

“Erin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to take it the way you did. I was trying to respect what you might want, but I can see why you might have taken it the way you did. Can we try this again?”

He offered his hand, fingers trembling. I made him nervous, but the jury was still out on whether that was because I intimidated him or if the situation itself wore his nerves thin. I accepted his hand and stood with him.

“I’m sorry, too. I should have just asked you what was wrong instead of running away crying.” I lowered my head, too ashamed to let him see how awful I felt.

“Wait, you were crying?” He lifted my chin and observed my runny mascara and red-rimmed eyes. He shook his head, and his lips parted. “Pretty girl, don’t cry. Don’t cry over me or anything any stupid boy ever does.”

He opened his arms wide, letting me choose the level of affection I would let him offer me. I gulped down the nervous energy and let him tuck me into his embrace. The scent of him—something spicy and woody but not overbearing—filled my senses. That was new. He never smelled that good when we were kids. I buried my face in his shoulder, and another sob snuck up on me, choking out into the crook of his neck. He only squeezed tighter until I was hardly standing on my own feet.

I didn’t know how much time passed that way, but when he released me, and I wiped my face, neither of us was in the mood to catch the last bit of the movie. Reid and Isabella had planned to get ice cream after the movie, so I knew leaving her with him was okay. I nodded toward the sidewalk.

“Let’s just go for a walk. I need the quiet time.”

“Sure, yeah. We can do that, but I wanted to say something.” He brushed my hair from my face. “I don’t really understand all these feelings I have right now. Maybe some of it is a dependency on something familiar, you know? You know my Dad, and in some weird way, that’s really comforting. But it isn’t all that, okay? I had these feelings about you even before he got sick, but I didn’t know what to do about it.”

I sighed. “Then why did you keep acting the way you did? You didn’t stop until my father died.”

His gaze locked with mine, and he licked his lips like a nauseated dog. It wasn’t the most attractive look on him, but it did tune me into his true feelings. “That’s when it started. I mean, that’s when I realized that sick feeling in my gut was this, whatever it is. For a long time, I convinced myself you hated me, which was a good reason to keep doing what I did. But eventually, I couldn’t lie to myself anymore. I knew good and well the reason you hated me was my own fault.”

“So, what changed? Just me losing my father?” Heaven above, don’t let it be pity. Please, please, don’t let him mistake pity for caring about me in some other way.

“No. I just saw you there at the funeral, and I had this overwhelming urge to take you in my arms and protect you from anything bad ever happening to you again. Obviously, that did not make sense to me.”

“You still kept calling me Error.” That one, whether he knew it or not, hurt the most.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. “Because I’m an idiot, and I had no idea how to talk to you or get your attention. I’m sorry, Erin. I know I keep saying that, but I don’t know what else to say. I’m a stupid, stupid boy.”

“You’re a straight-A student, Van,” I teased because I’d had enough of crying, enough heavy conversations, and enough pretending I didn’t want exactly what he offered me. As much as me

from even a week ago would have hated how I felt, it was real. I cared about Van St. Claire. I might have even, maybe a little, sort of, kind of, and against my better judgment, developed a crush on him.

“I might be, but I’m an idiot.”

I shrugged. “Well, I’m not going to argue that point. When you’re right, you’re right.”

A cutting wind crossed us, bringing little bits of ice with it. Van looked at the sky, then back to me. “Is that... is that snow?”

I ran my hands over my arms, freezing. “Yeah, I think it is. What the heck? It was sixty degrees this morning.”

“Come here. You’re freezing.”

“I’m like a penguin pop over here. Why do we have snow in early fall? This is not allowed!” I said and stomped my foot. “It *just* became pumpkin weather. What will I do with snow?”

Van laughed and dragged me close again, wrapping me in his coat. He would freeze, but I wasn’t refusing his warmth, not when I was sure we would get stuck in a blizzard and die. He slowly wrapped his arms around me from behind, giving me every opportunity to side-step him or refuse until I was encased in warmth, cozy as a muffin in a pan. As we watched the fat flakes accumulate, he nestled his face against mine, breathing in the scent of my shampoo—my favorite pumpkin swirl scent from the local spa—the only thing I ever splurged on.

“I think I’m gonna fall in love with you someday, Erin, and it doesn’t even scare me.”