

## Epilogue

Five years went by in a blink, but they were full of fun and love. Van and I both had backslides, times when we missed our fathers so much we could hardly breathe. High school graduation, college graduation, and more holidays and special occasions than we could count always brought our thoughts around to the men we had looked up to. But their spirit followed us everywhere, and they were with us in heart no matter where we went.

New Year's Eve had become a solemn time for Van, and since his father's passing, we hadn't attended a single party. I didn't mind, really. We stayed home and watched movies, shared memories of our fathers, or had a quiet date night out. However, when Van expressed a desire to turn the holiday around and give it a different meaning, it sparked a bit of a frenzy for me.

"Are you absolutely sure you want to do this? It's... really... *big* even by my standards," Hazel said. I trusted no one else with the party planning, and I knew whatever she settled on would be perfect.

"It is, but I think he's ready for it, honestly. And if he's overwhelmed, then we can always disappear from the crowd and go for a walk.

A giant tent filled with twenty tables at ten chairs each came out to two hundred people—family, friends, co-workers—who adored and loved us. We would be in good company to ring in the new year right smack in the middle of a park where Van and I had taken many walks planning our future together. Hazel hired a band and a pyrotechnic wizard for firework time, a caterer she loved working with, and I'd custom ordered a cake. Everything was planned down to the last detail... including the documentary movie I'd made about our fathers.

Van had known for some time that I was working on it as a sort of audition movie for various film agencies, but what he didn't know was that I'd decided to go independent. I wanted full control over my career so we could stay in North Carolina, and he could accept the coaching job our old high school had offered him. It would be difficult work, but I was so excited. And the movie was finally complete and polished, ready for its first public viewing.

I looked up at the giant screen, realizing what Hazel meant. It was a big idea, but I wanted to do it. I wanted to be surrounded by people who knew our fathers, too... and I was nervous. What if the movie sucked? What if something went wrong during the viewing?

I shook my head and went back over the checklist again.

"That's everything. Now we go get cleaned up and dressed while my team finishes set-up," Hazel said. She checked her phone for the thousandth time since we'd arrived at the park that morning. All the while, she chewed her cheek and kept glancing back at me.

"Everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah. No problem. Just checking up on another party scheduled next week. A few last-minute changes that take time to organize, that's all." She shoved her phone in her pocket and smiled. "Ready?"

We headed to my mother's house to prepare and check-in. Reid and Daniel were supposed to keep Van busy while Isa and Hannah helped us set up. Both ladies were already back at my house getting ready with my mother, so I expected them to be there when we arrived. However, they

were nowhere to be found. A quick text to my mother, and I discovered we'd just missed them. They'd gone to pick up Corrine, Van's mother. Everything was going according to plan, so I took a deep breath and showered.

My nerves struck while I stood under a steady stream of hot water, working through the timetable for the party. I trusted Hazel completely, and everything was gorgeous, but I couldn't shake the feeling I'd forgotten something. I chalked it up to missing our fathers, the focus of the memorial party, and got ready. I avoided anything gold-colored when picking a gown. Heaven knew Van would never forget that night or the dress I'd been wearing when his world fell apart. I went with a simple yet elegant navy blue that matched his eyes.

Hazel was finishing up her make-up when I exited my bedroom.

"You look amazing," I said, taking in the deep green gown that made her eyes pop.

"You do, too. Van will love that dress. It's beautiful." Hazel admired my dress while I did a little turn.

"I'm nervous," I admitted. "I'm so scared something will go wrong."

"I've triple-checked everything. It's all good, and my people are amazing. If anything happens, they can fix it in a nanosecond. We've got this."

After a few more scans in the mirror, I decided I was as dolled up as I could get and headed out with Hazel again. By the time we arrived back at the park, it was dusk. The twinkle lights were on, and the space heaters worked well, creating a warm area for our guests. People arrived in droves and had begun conversing while the caterers set up the food on the tables. It was almost time for Van to arrive, and I was almost freaking out again.

"Hey," Hazel said. "It's okay. He's going to love it. Daniel said they were on their way. Just a few more minutes."

I nodded and accepted the water she offered. I sipped and scanned the area for my mother and our friends. I finally found her sitting at a table with Corrine talking. I excused myself to head over, but the speakers crackled to life. I was startled and nearly dropped my water. Hazel was beside me and put a steadying hand on my shoulder.

"What's wrong with the speakers?" I asked. They weren't supposed to begin music until later, and the movie wasn't for another few hours.

"Nothing. This was the plan," she said, a sly smirk on her face.

"No... the plan was for everyone to arrive and eat, then we'd dance before the fireworks and the movie. It's not even time for..." My gaze swept over the tent. Everyone was surrounding us in a semi-circle, staring at me. "What's... what's happening?"

My hands trembled, so Hazel took my water and slowly turned me around. "Surprise," she said when Van came into view.

He was ten or so feet behind me dressed in a tux, his hair combed to perfection, and that silly grin plastered on his face. He licked his lips and approached me, his confidence waning with each step. By the time he reached me and took my hands, his palms were sweaty, and his forehead glistened.

"Hey, pretty girl." His smile widened, and he took me in. "You look gorgeous."

"Um... thank you? What... what is happening?"

He licked his lips again, then cleared his throat. "You see, I knew if I said I wanted to do something for the holiday, something to change how I viewed it, that the first thing you would do would be to call Hazel and plan something. I knew it, so I called her first."

"You... what?" I glanced at Hazel, who shrugged and leaned against Daniel. Everyone looked so amazing, decked out in their best clothes.

"I called her and told her to let you go wild, plan anything you wanted. She might have encouraged you toward a few things, like the cake design and the caterer, maybe suggested a few more guests than you might have considered."

I blinked, confused. "I don't understand. You knew I would plan a big New Year's party?"

He chuckled. "I had an idea, yes. And some spies."

Isa, Reid, Hannah, and her boyfriend tried not to look suspicious, but their flushed cheeks and smiles gave them away.

"I actually had something very specific in mind when I said I wanted to make this a happy holiday again. When I think about this day and losing Dad, the thing that brings me out of the darkness is remembering how you looked that night. You were so beautiful, and I wanted so badly to kiss you and just... just take it all back, everything that had happened. Then Dad passed, and you were there. You didn't care about anything that night except for me. That's the only thing that has ever helped me think of better times when those memories hit me."

I started to speak, but he pressed his finger against my lips and kneeled.

"So, Erin Carpenter, because you are the person who lightens my world when it goes dark, and because you are the most selfless, loving human being I've ever known, I'm asking you to marry me and spend forever making each other happy."

He pulled a box from his pocket and opened it, offering me my mother's diamond ring. I hadn't even noticed she'd stopped wearing it because I'd been so busy planning. My jaw fell open, and my heart raced.

"And... to sweeten the deal, I also have this." He pulled an envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to me. My name, printed in my father's handwriting, was on the front of it. Tears stung my eyes and fell over my cheeks.

"This is... from my father?"

He nodded. "Yes. He'd given it to your mother for this day, like he... like he just *knew*, Erin. He wrote one for me, too."

"For you... for when *you* asked *me*?" I asked, pressing the envelope against my chest. "He knew we'd end up here?"

Van nodded, his eyes welling with tears. "Somehow, yeah, he just knew, pretty girl. So, what do you say?"

I broke into a sob and fell onto him in front of literally everyone we knew. "Yes. Yes, I've only thought about this every day for five years, Van!"

He chuckled and hugged me closer. "I know. So have I, but I wanted it to be perfect, and... gosh, I never thought you'd finish that movie."

I shoved him back with wide eyes. "What? You were waiting for *that*?"

He laughed again and kissed me, then snuggled against me and said, “I wanted it to be perfectly perfect, just like you, Pumpkin. Everything just worked out at the right time.”

“So, you planned this like an engagement party?” I asked, glancing around. Two hundred sets of eyes were all on us.

“Or...” Mom said, stepping beside us with Corrine, “It can be your wedding ceremony.”

“This is... How... How did you do this?” I asked, looking back at Van. “How did you somehow create the perfect wedding exactly how I’d want it, without me ever saying a word?”

“Please, I know my Pumpkin. I know everything you love, and when Hazel told me you’d settled on definitely showing the film, I knew it was the perfect time. Our dads are here, baby, and it’s all because of your big, loving heart. What do you say? Want to marry me right now?”

I bit back my tears and nodded emphatically. I’d never wanted anything more.

So, in my navy gown—because I never really was a fan of white—I married my childhood best friend in front of everyone we loved, and then we went for a walk in the park where we sat under a tree and read our letters from my father. He had known, somehow. Maybe he knew our hearts better than we did, but I liked to think he and David had planned it all along, that somehow, they knew if they gave us time, we would realize we were perfect for each other. Maybe they knew I never *really* hated Van St. Claire and that one day he’d see me as the ultimate goal rather than popularity.

Whatever it was, they were right.

My film was a hit, and I rang in the new year with my one and only true love, my best friend, my forever from the start.