

Chapter Eleven

Van's ability to make even the instructor laugh with his flirtatious Romeo impression eased the worry from that morning until it was a distant memory. As far as practices went, we didn't accomplish much, but at least the comedic relief set everyone's nerves at ease. Everyone, at least in our drama class, had accepted Van and I were the new thing.

My relaxation only lasted for a few classes, and the moment I stepped into the cafeteria, everything changed. Bailey had gotten her claws deep into a lot of students, so I got glares, sneers, whispers, and snickers all through the lunch line until finally, Isa caught up with me. I hadn't packed lunch, so I had to buy something, which meant even more snide comments as I worked my way through the line.

"Ignore them," Isa said. "They're jealous and stupid." Her voice carried enough that several students shifted their glares to her, but she shook them off like a pro.

"Excuse me, sorry," Bailey said as she slipped past one student after another, all of them parting like the sea for their precious queen bee so she could stop behind me. It promised to be a show, so no one balked when she cut in front of them. In fact, they seemed downright pleased. Who knew dating your childhood best friend would cause so much trouble?

Bailey grabbed my arm and turned me around. "Listen, I don't know what's going on, but back off of my boyfriend."

Isa stepped between us—all four and a half feet of her—and pushed Bailey back. "Hands off of my friend, or you'll have a real bad day."

Bailey focused her venomous eyes on Isa, practically growled at her, then shifted back to me. "Whatever it is, he's just messing with you. There's nothing you have that he needs, and once he figures that out, he'll drop you again... *Error.*"

I grabbed a sandwich and threw it on my tray, not bothering to check what kind it was. I wasn't even hungry, thanks to ridiculous high school drama.

"If anything was a mistake, it was your mom and dad—"

"Isa, it's okay. Come on." I pulled my friend through the line, paid, and tried to escape before Bailey made a bigger scene. Unfortunately, that was impossible.

"I'm still talking to you." Bailey stepped in front of me. I tried to go around her, but she only sidestepped and grabbed my backpack.

I sighed and turned around. "Look, Bailey, Van came to me. If he wanted to be with you, he would be. But he's not, so get over it."

"He's just getting you out of his system, that's all. That whole best friends as kids, blah, blah, blah thing. This is real life, and girls like you don't get guys like him. Remember that when he dumps you like the pile of garbage you are."

Isa tensed, but I put my hand in front of her. "She's not worth the suspension, Isa. Come on."

Bailey feigned tripping, and before I knew what hit me, I was covered head to toe with sticky cherry soda. My brand-new birthday dress from my mother was ruined, I smelled like fake cherry, and my hair would be sticky all day. I squealed, shocked stupid by the cold as it dribbled down my arms and legs right into my shoes.

Isa growled like a howler monkey and lunged at Bailey, but Reid swooped in just in time to protect his girlfriend from a full-on expulsion. He'd grabbed her around the waist while she flailed and screamed at him to let her squash Bailey like the disgusting insect she was. Meanwhile, the entire school watched as Bailey pouted and shrugged.

"You know, if we didn't need you as a flyer, I'd kick you off the team. You'd better come up with something good for the routine, or you'll be sorry." Then Bailey walked away like it was just another Monday. For her, it was.

"Come on. I've got a clean shirt in my locker." Reid looked me up and down, then said, "Um... not that a clean shirt will do you much good." He took my lunch tray and bag, chanced letting Isa go so he could help me out of the puddle of soda, then led us both outside amidst laughter and stares.

"I should go back in there and rearrange her teeth." Isa paced while Reid worked—without much luck—to dry me off. I was still in shock as he patted my hair with paper napkins and a frown.

"Um, where's Van?" I asked, finally emerging from my stupor.

"I was actually on my way to tell you about that, then that crazy thing happened. He went to his mom's office. Said he had forgotten something he needed. He'll be back, probably before lunch is over." Reid gave up and tossed the sopping paper towels in the trash.

"Thanks," I said. "I have an extra pair of pants in my locker, so if I could borrow your shirt, that would be great."

Reid glanced at Isa, who scowled. "Uh, yeah, of course, I'm okay with that. She's my friend." She waved her hand around as if he should already know loaning his shirt to a girl who was not his girlfriend was totally fine. Now that the question of whether I would be able to finish school in clean clothing had been answered, I flopped down on the bench and grumbled.

The only dry thing on my tray was the sandwich I'd grabbed. I still wasn't hungry, but I was mad and didn't have anything to take my frustrations out on except the sandwich. I ripped into it and took a big bite, chewed it like it was Bailey's eyeballs... then realized my mistake. I spit it out and grabbed my bag, already feeling my skin crawling.

"What's wrong?" Reid asked.

My lips tingled, and my throat started to swell. I couldn't answer him. I was too busy looking for my epi-pen that was *supposed* to be in the front pocket of my backpack. I patted my throat and pointed to the sandwich, but I wheezed every time I tried to talk.

"Oh no, she's allergic to peanuts. The sandwich is peanut butter and jelly," Isa said and dropped the sandwich after inspecting it. She dumped the contents of my bag on the ground, but it wasn't there. She and Reid searched every pocket, all the while my throat swelled until each breath was a fight.

"Screw this. They keep some in the nurse's office!" Reid dropped everything and lifted me. By then, I was dizzy, and my head flopped against his chest. He ran to the nurse's office. Everything was a blur—faces, doors, lockers—they all flew by, merging with everything else until all I saw was a haze of color and darkness creeping in.

“Peanut allergy. Lost her epi-pen,” Reid said. I was jostled around for a minute before I realized he’d laid me on the bed. Nurse Malloy rushed to the medicine cabinet, unlocked it, then grabbed the backup epi-pen and jabbed it in my thigh.

“Erin? Erin, can you hear me?” Nurse Malloy checked my eyes with a pen light while Reid and Isa stood aside, waiting anxiously. I nodded. “Good. Okay, can one of you call an ambulance, please? The other check the contact database and call her mother.”

Reid and Isa got to work while Nurse Malloy monitored my vitals. Breathing was still difficult, but it eased each second. When Reid returned from calling the ambulance, I was already upright again. He sat in the chair beside the bed and rubbed my back while the nurse monitored me.

“I texted Van. He’s kinda freaking out, but I told him you were okay.”

I huffed, still too weak to speak, but I tried. “Was with me... first time.”

“Van was with you the first time you had a reaction?” he asked.

I nodded. “Was bad.”

“You need to rest, Erin. And you two can head back to lunch. I’ll make sure she’s okay.” Nurse Malloy had dealt with my allergy once before and was well-versed with the treatment, but Isa would have none of it.

“I’m staying. My friend is freaked out, and I’m not leaving unless it’s in an ambulance with her.”

The nurse didn’t bother fighting with her, nor did she shoo Reid out. Once the paramedics arrived, I felt much better. Even so, I knew my mother would be upset if I didn’t go to the hospital to get checked out, so I loaded up and pretended I wasn’t completely miserable.

“You’re not hearing me, so I’ll say it louder. I am going with her if I have to hitch a ride on the bumper of that ambulance. You got me?” Isabella stepped into the back of the ambulance and planted herself right beside me, much to the dismay of the paramedic. She brushed the hair from my face, said something rude in Spanish—which only reminded me I should learn it—and told me to rest.

Reid watched us until they shut the ambulance doors, but after that, I can’t say how long he waited until he finally went back to class. As far as birthdays go, mine was the absolute worst, and it was barely past lunchtime.

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Isa’s no holding back attitude only got her as far as the hospital waiting room. The nurses were much less impressed with her and refused to let her in the treatment room with me. I sat staring at four white walls and a plethora of emergency equipment and monitors for half an hour before a doctor finally entered, but I recognized him right away.

“Erin, what happened?” Dr. Simmons, Hazel’s father, stood in the doorway with a clipboard in hand and a frown.

“A little mistake, that’s all. I grabbed a sandwich without checking the label, and poof, I almost killed myself.”

His frown deepened, but instead of chastising me for my horrible joke, he put the clipboard down and checked my vitals. I felt much better, just a bit jittery and tired, but I knew the prescriptions he would give would make me even more exhausted.

“You got your epi pretty fast despite losing your pen. You don’t have any swelling, so I’ll write the prescriptions just in case. Stay on the antihistamines and have the steroids ready just in case. How are you feeling otherwise?” Dr. Simmons leaned on the table and gave me his full attention.

“Okay, I guess. I don’t feel as bad as the last time I had a reaction.”

“Can I ask why you’re covered in soda? Did you pass out during the episode?”

I fidgeted with my stained dress hem and shook my head. “No, sir. I didn’t pass out. This was an unfortunate incident with a mean girl at school. Not a big deal, really.”

His eyes widened, and he nodded once. “Ah, yes, I’m familiar with the mean girls. Hazel had one too.” He didn’t bother to mention that I had been in Sarah’s pack for a while, at least, until I realized she was a lunatic. Instead, he finished my discharge paperwork just as my mother arrived.

Mom burst into the room like a superhero, panting and eyes frantically scanning me.

“She’s okay, Mrs. Carpenter.” Dr. Simmons stood and settled a reassuring hand on my mother’s shoulder. “I’ve checked her out, and her vitals are great. Oxygen levels are perfect, and I’m refilling her epi-pen prescription here. We’ll keep her a few more hours as standard procedure, but I think she’ll be just fine.”

Mom relaxed, but she was still stressed.

“Oh... and... happy birthday, Erin,” Dr. Simmons added, then shrugged. “Maybe you can make it up tomorrow.” He smiled, bid us both goodbye, and moved on to his next patient.

Three hours later, I was discharged with a new pack of epi-pens and a stern warning not to lose track of them again. I could have died. I was reminded of this a dozen times as my mother drove us home. I was reminded another dozen times during dinner and again when I was getting ready for bed. Mom had taken Isa back to school and banned Van from coming over until I had rested. By bedtime, I was ready to pull my hair out. Even so, I understood her concern. She’d already lost her husband, and losing me... well, it would kill her.

An hour into tossing and turning, I heard a light knock on my bedroom window. I stiffened, at first terrified there was a burglar or serial killer there to steal me away. My phone lit up with Van’s name and a text message. I relaxed and climbed out of bed, pulled my curtains back, and pushed my window open.

“Hey, pretty girl,” Van said, then leaned forward and kissed me.

“Do I even want to know how you got on the balcony?” I asked, peering out my window. It wasn’t even a balcony so much as a one-foot space around my window meant as decoration, but somehow, he’d managed to scale the house and lower himself into the tiny space.

“Probably not. Reid told me what happened, and I wanted to come but—”

“It’s okay, really.”

Van took my hand and pressed his lips against my palm. “No, it isn’t. I should have been there. I could have taken care of Bailey if I had been, and you wouldn’t have been distracted. You could have died, and I was freaking out.”

“Yes, my mother reminded me of that a hundred times already, but I’m fine. Reid got me to the nurse’s office, and I got the epi. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

His brow furrowed. “I’ll take care of everything tomorrow. Bailey will leave you alone, and things will calm down soon. You’ll see.”

I wasn’t so sure his optimism was warranted, but I kissed his cheek anyway and leaned out my window just enough to see the stars more clearly. It prompted Van to scoot closer to me. He leaned against the side of the house, but his eyes were nowhere near the sky. Instead, they were still on me. I still hadn’t figured it out. Whatever happened between us made me do a complete turn from hating him to picturing every moment of my future with him. But with him sitting so close to me, focused on me like I really was everything he needed and wanted, I felt pretty. I felt wanted. I felt like someone *worth* working for.

“Are you really okay, Erin?”

“I’m fine, Van, really. I was scared, but you’ve got a great best friend. He took care of me, and Isa was right there for me. I’ll be more careful.”

He swallowed hard and leaned in to kiss me but slipped. He gasped and grabbed the frame of my window, catching himself before he took the fast way down to the ground. Once he was stabilized, he grinned and kissed me. I knew if my mom walked in to check on me, she’d staple him to the wall and play a game of darts, so I ended the kiss.

“You better get some rest. You picking me up in the morning?”

“Of course. Just one thing before I go.” He handed me a box and said, “Sleep well, beautiful.” He kissed me again, just a quick peck, then maneuvered his way over the roof and down a ladder he must have dragged from his house. He folded it down and jogged across the yard, looking back once. I blew him a kiss, then slipped inside and ripped open the box. Inside was a heart-shaped locket. I popped it open to find two pictures—one of me as a kid with pigtails, the other of him at the same age with his signature grin. I fell backward on my bed, exhausted and elated.

I must have fallen asleep shortly after Van left because when my mother woke me, I was still on top of my covers with my window open. Her soft knock roused me, then she pushed open the door. Red lights flashed through my room, bringing me fully to the present.

“Erin?”

I wiped my eyes and sat. “What’s going on?”

“It’s David. He had some kind of episode, and they’re taking him to the hospital. Corrine asked if I’d go with her. Will you be okay here alone?”

“What about Van?” I asked, pulling on my robe. How could I sit there or go back to sleep knowing Van was awake worrying about his father?

“He’s going, but I’d rather you...” She hesitated and let her gaze drop to the floor. After a moment, she sighed and said, “You can text him. If he wants you to come, I’ll allow it. I know you could have used a friend those nights.”

She turned quickly and hurried down the hall, probably to let her tears fall where I wouldn’t see them. She’d done that from the beginning. Once Dad was diagnosed, she would stay strong in front of me, but I always heard her at night. I heard her cry and my father comforting her, knowing one day he wouldn’t be able to hold her and help her through it anymore. She was right. If I’d had

Van back then when all I wanted was a friend who would let me cry without judgment, someone who would hold me and tell me it sucked, but they would sit in that suck with me for as long as it took... well... it wouldn't have been any easier, but I wouldn't have been alone, lost in darkness while my mother cried herself to sleep.

I fired off a quick text.

Mom just woke me. Do you want me to come?

I tapped the side of my phone, waiting while those little dots blinked and blinked. I almost threw my phone and ran down the street to be with him, but I also remembered there were times I just needed to process, to be alone and focus on my father. I didn't want to intrude if this was one of those moments for him.

Finally, my phone dinged.

I'm not sure. I don't even know what to think. I don't want you to be tired tomorrow, so stay home, and I'll call you if I need you to come.

My heart sank. I wanted so much to be with him, but this was not one of those times. I swallowed down my bruised feelings and replied.

I understand. I'll keep my phone on and volume up just in case. My mom is on her way.

I put my phone on the nightstand and went to make myself a cup of tea. Mom was locking up without saying goodbye, but I knew it was an accident. She was scared; she remembered this, and I knew it was just an absentminded moment. I made my tea and went back to my room, sure I would stare at my wall all night. My phone was illuminated when I got back to my bed.

I'm scared.

It was a gut-punch of epic proportions. I knew that feeling, too, and no matter how many times I told myself I would be strong for my father, I was always reduced to a sobbing mess. Truth be told, I was scared, too. David St. Claire had been like a father to me, too. At least, he had been before things went wrong with Van. I swallowed the lump in my throat and started to type, but another message came through before I finished.

Thank you for being here for me. I'm scared, but I know I have you. It helps.

The dots showed up again, indicating he was still typing, so I waited. It took a while, so I sipped my tea and stared at my screen until three words popped up. When they did, I spat my tea out and stared at my phone like it was an alien lifeform. My hand trembled, but the words never changed no matter how many times I read his message.

I love you.

This was not the time to reply with empty words, to tell him I felt the same way just to make him feel better. It would only open a whole host of new problems, not to mention it would make things super awkward between us because I wasn't there yet. I didn't... I couldn't... I paused and closed my eyes. There was hate, and then there was sadness fueled by pain. Had I truly hated Van, or was I so sad that the only way I could control my pain was to project my anger onto him. How *did* I feel?

I couldn't pinpoint an exact emotion. I cared about him. I wanted to be with him, and the thought of losing him again made me sick... but did I love him? My phone saved me, at least for a little while, from trying to figure that out.

I'm sorry I just threw that at you. I do love you, but it's different for me. I understand why you might not feel that way, and it's okay. Just know that I do, and if you ever feel the same way, you can rest assured you will never be rejected. I'm heading into the hospital. No phones allowed. Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow, pretty girl.

I typed a quick response, something neutral about calling me if things changed, then put my phone down. I sipped my lukewarm tea and snuggled deeper into my bed, leaning against the wall. I knew as I sat there, I would lose my heart. I knew it, but I didn't care anymore. Like Van, I had been afraid of losing everything I'd known... and then I did. My father died, and everything changed, but if there was one thing my mother had shown me, it was that I could do anything if I truly put my all into it.

Mom had scraped and saved and did everything she could to ensure I was taken care of, even when my older siblings seemed to move on. Sure, they loved us, but it had been Mom and me for a long time. I loved my mother more than anything, and now... I knew that feeling had spread. It grew and opened me up to new possibilities. Van was still Van. When you peeled away all his mistakes, he was still the goofy kid who adored me when we were small. Maybe those feelings never went away?

I looked at my phone again, stared at those three words for a few minutes, then typed something I knew he wouldn't get until he turned his phone on again. Maybe he would turn it on and see them, and it would make him smile after a long night.

I love you, too, Van. I think I always have.