

## Chapter Twelve

Mom came home while I was getting ready for school, exhausted and emotionally spent. David stayed in the hospital for observation, but it was just a scare, a bad reaction to one of his medications. Van was home resting, so I drove myself to school in his truck; Mom said he'd insisted since my car door still hadn't been fixed.

I knew driving his truck would have implications. Of course, it would, but no one seemed to notice or care when I parked in his space and headed inside for what promised to be a long, miserable day. Either his friends knew Van had a rough night, or they felt sorry for me for nearly dying the day before and decided to go easy on me.

I'd made it all the way to the building without a lot of stares, and then...

"Knock, knock?" Reid said, whispering in my ear. It gave me chills, so I pushed him with a playful grin.

"Who's there?" I asked, rolling my eyes.

"The interrupting cow."

I sighed. "The interrupting cow—"

"Moo!"

Isabella giggled and squeezed between us. "How are you feeling today?"

"Tired, and I think I still smell like a hospital, but I'll be fine." I glanced up to find Reid staring at me. "I'm fine, honestly. Thanks for getting me to the nurse's office. You're a lifesaver."

Reid finally smiled and spread his arms wide. "I'm a superhero like that. Stick around, and I'll show you other awesome feats of bravery and villain-crushing power. I laugh in the face of peanut allergies, mwah ha ha!"

"You're so full of yourself," Isabella said. "How's Van?"

Well, that was a loaded question, and since I didn't know what he'd shared with Reid, I was hesitant to say anything. They would wonder why he wasn't at school, though, so I tried to come up with something that would ease their minds while not piquing their curiosity. It was, however, unnecessary.

"He told us last night," Reid said. "Well, he told me, and Isa was over for dinner, so he said I could tell her. How's his dad?"

"From what my mother said this morning, he's doing fine. It was a bad reaction to one of the medications. That happened to my dad, too, but not as bad." I didn't want to talk about it. I prayed they would change the subject, move on, get a hint.

Isabella cleared her throat and said, "Well, it's a private matter, and we're almost inside. How's the play going? I heard they need some volunteers for props?"

"Yeah, so we have a big cast for the play, which leaves only a few people for costumes and props. I could ask Mrs. McAlister to add you to the list if you're interested. It's a full credit if you sign up."

"That could be fun, yeah?" She waited for Reid to agree, but he shook his head.

"Uh, uh. You're not dragging me into that mess." He brushed his hair from his face and offered Isabella his sparkly smile, but it didn't save him.

“You like building things. Help a girl out?” Isabella batted her eyelashes and arched her eyebrows. It seemed Reid was as taken by her pouting as she was by his smile.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine, if I must.”

We’d reached locker row, but everyone was so preoccupied with something that I didn’t even have to fight to get to mine as usual. I turned the dial and pulled the door open, then leaped back when a burlap bag filled with peanuts spilled out. After having a reaction the day before, I was sure just touching one might trigger another.

“What the—who would do something like that?” Reid asked, then slammed my locker door closed. His cheeks flamed, and his eyes narrowed. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen Reid annoyed before, much less seething, but there was no mistaking he’d had enough of the childish antics. “You two head to class. I’ll clean this up and report it.”

“It’s okay. I can—”

Reid shot me a glare that said he planned to do a lot more than clean up the peanuts, and he didn’t want Isabella or me in the middle of it. “Please. I need a minute, okay?” The way he ground his teeth almost made *me* afraid.

“Come on, Erin. You can borrow my book for second period.” Isabella linked her arm with mine, and we disappeared around the corner just as Reid raised his voice over the din in the hallway.

“I don’t know who did this, but you’re gonna pay for it when I find out! This could kill her!” Everything else faded to a whisper as Isabella hurried us along.

“He’s going to get in trouble, Isa. I don’t want him to get in a fight or something over me!” I looked over my shoulder, which was useless since we’d already turned the corner, but there was no mistaking the noise that erupted in the other hall. I yanked my arm free and ran back toward locker row.

Sure enough, Reid had Bronson—Bailey’s brother—by the shirt collar, his back against the wall. When I ran up to them, I distracted Reid, so Bronson took advantage and punched him in his adorable, perfect face. Isabella gasped, and before I could do or say anything to stop her, she shouldered Bronson right in the gut. Then, an all-out brawl started. I’d never even seen a school fight close-up, let alone been the *cause* of one, and my heart raced.

People moved all around me while I tried to pull Isabella out of the mass of students. Only a few were throwing fists, but dozens surrounded the fight. The feisty girl only dragged me in, where things were a lot scarier than they had been on the outside.

Reid had gotten the upper hand again and returned Bronson’s punch. Then someone reached back to hit, and I got a face full of someone’s elbow. My head snapped back, and I tripped over someone, then landed hard on my back, knocking the wind right out of me. I wheezed and coughed, then tried to wiggle free when someone grabbed my arm and pulled me. Soon, I realized the person was dragging me *out* of the fray, so I let it happen.

“Are you okay?” Deacon James helped me to my feet, then lifted my chin to check my face. “Ah, that’s gonna look nasty later. Let’s get you outta here.”

I didn’t have much say in the matter, not when he had a vice grip on my hand and my backpack in his other hand. He ran down the hallway, dodging students who’d come to see the fight. I heard teachers yelling over the students, and I knew Reid and Isabella were in big trouble because of me.

Once we were a few yards from the theater, Deacon released my hand and slung my backpack over his shoulder. He paused to take a breath, then looked over at me.

“What was that about? I saw Reid take a swing, then everything went crazy back there.” He wiped his forehead and opened the door, letting me enter first.

“Uh... I don’t know exactly how the fight started, but it was because someone filled my locker with peanuts.”

Deacon paused and ran a hand through his black hair, now damp with sweat from adrenaline and running through the school. “What? Aren’t you allergic to peanuts? I thought that’s why you left yesterday?”

I caught my breath and wiped my forehead, feeling like I’d just run a marathon. I wanted to check on Isabella and Reid, come to their defense, but I also worried if I tried to argue for them—with my luck—I’d end up getting them expelled or carted off to military school.

“Yes. I accidentally ate peanut butter yesterday, and it was not fun.”

“I wouldn’t think so. Why would someone do that? Was it Bronson?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I wasn’t there when it all went down, but I would say yes. Bailey is not happy about Van and me.”

Deacon chuckled. “Yeah, half the school is not happy about you and Van, but they’ll get over it. So, is that what the flyer was about, too?”

“What flyer?” I asked, pausing as we walked into the main theater where our classmates convened on stage for the next part of our table read.

Deacon swallowed and scratched the back of his neck, then shifted his weight. “I thought you saw it. There were flyers posted yesterday. They were set up like an advertisement requesting someone date the orphan girl and free Van from his servitude.”

I stopped cold. That must have been the paper that Van had snatched off the wall before I saw it. No one else had said anything, so I wasn’t sure how many there had been or who had seen them. I groaned and covered my face. “I knew it would be bad, but I never expected things to go this far. Who saw them?”

“A lot of people, but I ripped down as many as I could.”

I dropped my hands when my head shot up. “You... you did?”

Deacon blushed and nodded. “Well, yeah. No one deserves that, especially not you. I mean, I’m bummed I missed my chance, but that was just uncalled for. Bailey is a piece of work.”

“Missed your chance for what? Getting them all down?”

He smirked and shook his head, then nodded toward the stage. “Never mind that. We’re gonna be late.”

I followed him to the stage where people were already talking about the fight. Hannah separated from the rest and met me at the side. Her eyes were already wide, but when she reached me, her mouth fell open. “Erin, are you aware you’re getting a black eye? Was this from the fight?”

I didn’t have time to answer. Mrs. McAlister approached me with pursed lips and annoyance written all over her face. “Miss Carpenter, you’re wanted in the principal’s office. Take your things, please.”

My heart sank, and my anxiety skyrocketed. This was it. This was the beginning of the end. I just knew it. My mother would freak out and put me in private school over the peanut thing, and once she knew I'd been involved in a fight, I'd be lucky if she let me leave the house again. Hannah and Deacon watched as I walked, dejected, back up the aisle toward the exit.

The halls had cleared, and the janitor was cleaning up what was left of the peanuts—now crushed all over the floor along with ripped papers and other items. I hurried around to avoid the peanuts and dust, then headed toward the main office.

Several students, including Reid and Isabella, sat separated, waiting their turn in the principal's office. Reid winced when Isabella touched his split eyebrow, then giggled when he said something to her. I didn't hear, but I was glad he wasn't beaten to a pulp. He spied me standing and nodded, then scooted over on the bench for me to join.

I huffed when I sat, wishing I could just go home and try again. "I'm so sorry, Reid. I wanted to help, but I guess I just caused even more trouble."

"Are you kidding me? I'm not mad at you, apple fritter. This has gone on long enough." Reid shoulder nudged me. "We're alright, you and me."

"Yeah, I just fully expect you to take down a boy twice your size if I ever need it," Isabella added. She brought out a smile I didn't think I had. "I'll do my best."

"Miss Carpenter?" The guidance counselor, Mr. Granson, called me to his office. Reid and Isa wished me luck, but I wasn't sure luck was on my side, not lately.

Mr. Granson sat behind his desk and laced his fingers together in front of him, an authoritative display if I'd ever seen one. "Is it true that someone filled your locker with peanuts as a practical joke?"

"Someone put them in there, yes. If it was a practical joke, it wasn't funny. I'm severely allergic." My voice wavered but didn't break.

"Do you know who did it?"

"I have suspicions, but I don't know for sure, sir."

"How did you get a bruise under your eye? The fight?"

"Yes, sir. I tried to pull my friend out of the mess and caught an elbow to the eye. I'm... I'm sorry this happened. I didn't want—"

Mr. Granson held up his hand, silencing me. "That will be all, Miss Carpenter."

I was dismissed, unceremoniously dumped out the door while my friends remained to hear their fate. Two days of suspension for Reid and Isabella, and a week for Bronson, who had, it seemed, thought it would be hilarious to stuff my locker full of something that could kill me. Nothing happened to me, not even detention. In fact, no one bothered me for the rest of the day.

I finished the entire school day alone, except for Hannah and Deacon checking in on me at lunch. They deemed it necessary though they didn't stick around to eat with me for some reason. I sat alone, dejected and frustrated, while everyone else went on with their lives.

By the time I got back to Van's truck that afternoon, I was exhausted, but I knew Hazel wouldn't let me skip out on our girl's night. I'd invited Isabella, but she wouldn't be able to go now, not after her parents came down on her for fighting. When I pulled into my driveway, I spied Reid's car

parked at Van's house. I assumed he'd left school and went straight to his best friend's house, but much to my surprise, I heard them talking at the back of my house.

Instead of going inside, I walked around back to find the entire treehouse had been deconstructed and lay all over the backyard.

"What are you two doing?" The smell of cookies wafted toward me, distracting me for only a second before Isabella pushed out the back door. "What is happening right now?"

"Your mom said we could come over and wait for you," Isabella said. "My parents were annoyed about the fight, but after I explained it to them, they did something really weird."

"What's that?" I asked, clutching Van's keys.

"They said they were *proud* of me. I guess if you defend your friends, it makes a difference. Anyway, I'm not allowed to go with you to the thing tonight, but they said I could come and check on you. Also, your mom gave me her cookie recipe."

I blinked and looked around, confused. There hadn't been that many people milling around my house since... Well, since Saturday, but I had been home then. It was odd to come home and find people—*friends*—waiting for me. Van slinked up beside me and kissed my cheek. I sank into him, desperate for the comfort of his embrace.

"Hey, pretty girl. I missed you so much."

"Ew, enough of that! We have a treehouse to rebuild!" Reid waved a hammer at Van, but my boyfriend ignored him in favor of cuddling me.

"I'll call Hazel and see if we can reschedule," I said.

"Nope. Isabella has to head home soon, and the only thing Reid and I plan to do is work on this treehouse. I needed to work off some frustration, and Reid's parents agreed to let him help me. I guess physical labor is his punishment for fighting, and..." Van stopped mid-sentence and stepped in front of me. He lifted my chin, and his eyes grew wide, frenzied with pure, unadulterated anger. "Who did *that*?" he asked, pointing to my eye while staring at Reid.

Reid climbed down the tree and dropped his hammer. "I dunno. It didn't look that bad at school." Reid inspected my eye and hissed. "Wow, that's way worse. Have you even looked at it, Erin?"

"No, but I feel it. Is it bad?"

Isabella laughed. "Is it bad? Honey, it's purple, and you look like a raccoon. I thought you knew that."

I pressed my fingers against my eye and winced. "Ouch. That kinda stings."

Van, who evidently needed something to take care of, hoisted me onto his back. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on. "Come on, lightweight. Let's get that eye taken care of, and maybe your mom won't kill me."

And just like when we were kids, Van helped me with my boo-boos and kissed my nose, reminding me that he had a lot of sides. He was so gentle and caring with a tender touch, but those eyes—oceans of blue churning with anger—they said someone would pay for what happened, and it worried me.

"Van, whoever hit me did it by accident. It was an elbow, and I was in the way. You know that, right?"

His jaw tensed while he patted my cheek dry. I hadn't even noticed it had been scratched until he wiped it clean, then handed me an ice pack. "I know that. It's the peanuts that infuriate me. They know you're allergic. I'm gonna take care of it tomorrow, I promise. No fights, just me letting them know where things stand, okay?"

He tipped my chin up again, waiting for me to kiss him. I did, then leaped from the counter and tagged him. "You're it!"

I ran through the house and busted out the back door, ready to run, but I'd forgotten Van's teammate and best friend. He grabbed me around the waist and tossed me into Van's arms, then went after his own girlfriend, inciting a childish yet oh so needed game of tag. The fight had been forgotten. The peanuts and flyers and ridiculous bullying had been dismissed, and we just had fun. Four friends, some old and some new, just being kids.