

## Chapter Eighteen

At my mother's advice, I gave Van space. I wanted to be supportive but promised myself I wouldn't bother him unless he called. He didn't call. Mom took food to them, then returned within a few minutes, so I assumed neither Van nor his mother were up for visitors just yet. So, with a heavy heart and a mind full of worry, I headed to school for the first day back after the break.

"He hasn't called or texted at all?" Isa asked while she fixed her make-up in the tiny bathroom.

"No, but I didn't expect him to. I know what he's going through, and if he wants space, then it's his." I tried to re-braid my hair, but the rainy weather wouldn't have it. It was a mess, so I decided it was a messy bun kind of day and tied it up.

"He texted Reid, but it wasn't much. Just letting him know his father had passed."

"Did Reid respond?"

"He let him know he was available if he needed to talk, same as you." Isabella exited the bathroom and, as luck would have it, ran right into Bailey, who didn't seem the least bit torn up over her break-up with Van. For all the drama she'd caused, it angered me she didn't at least have the politeness to pretend it bothered her.

"Watch it," Baily snapped.

"I would, but that would require that I look past myself and care about others... Oh, wait, no. That's you," Isabella said.

Bailey arched her back like a demon cat and practically hissed. "Excuse me? Who do you think you are?"

I linked arms with Isabella and walked away, dragging my friend along with me. Bailey Fields just wasn't worth it anymore. Truly, she never had been, but now I was so over her I couldn't even stand to look at her. Unfortunately, she wasn't as sick of me.

"Where's Van? Is he too embarrassed to be seen with you that he skipped school today?" Bailey asked.

"Okay, that does it." I released Isabella and stomped back toward Bailey so fast she backed up against a row of lockers. "You... you..."

"What? Cat got your tongue?" Bailey pushed off the lockers and smirked, then straightened her shirt and scowled.

"You're a piece of work, you know that? Do you really have no idea why Van isn't here?" I asked.

"Nope. I just assumed—"

"His father died on New Year's Eve, Bailey. Dead. His father is dead." I stepped closer, daring her to push just one more button. "Stay away from me. Stay away from Isa and Reid and Van and anyone else who doesn't want anything to do with you, or you'll regret it. I promise."

Bailey's emotions played out over her face, though it was difficult to tell what they were since her usual expression was always holier than thou. "What do you mean, his father died?"

"You've gotta be kidding me," Isabella said, tapping her foot to control her frustration. "It means he's dead. Get it? He's gone, died, adios, never coming back, and you are a pathetic excuse for a human being, let alone a girlfriend if you had no idea he was even sick."

Bailey tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I knew he was sick. Van never told me it was that bad. He just said—”

“You didn’t listen!” I threw my hands in the air, past the point of calming down. “You don’t care about anyone or anything but yourself. Even your friends would drop you in a nanosecond if someone better came along, someone who challenged your sacred position. So, I wouldn’t exactly call them friends. Everyone knows you’re beautiful, Bailey. You’re pretty and smart, and you’ll be successful at whatever you do, so there is literally no reason for you to treat people like you do.”

“But I—”

“Furthermore, if I were you, I’d watch my back around your so-called friends. They’re a bit sociopathic, if you ask me. They sure turned on Van fast, and only because he wanted to be with me. I never told him he couldn’t still be friends with whoever he wanted. It was them who gave the ultimatum, not me.”

“Erin, you—”

“And don’t get me started on what you did to *me*! I can die from my allergic reactions; did you know that? Do you even care? And I spent eight weeks in a cast because one of your minions thought it would be funny to let me fall! And you *know* I didn’t cheat on that test. Everything you did was to screw me over so you could... what? What did you even gain, Bailey?”

“That was—”

“What’s worse,” I continued, “is that you don’t care about any of it! Your parents will get you out of any trouble you cause, and you even have teachers wrapped around your little finger. You know what, Bailey, my arm healed, and I survived the allergic reaction. But emotional scars are worse. Those can last forever and change how people see themselves. One day, Bailey, you might cross a line you can’t return from, but I hope not. I really hope no one ever hurts themselves or worse because of what you’ve done to them.”

Bailey’s eyes widened as if my words had smacked her across the face. There was so much more I wanted to say, so much to get off my chest, but the warning bell rang, pulling me away from the argument. People had surrounded us, but I hadn’t noticed while I was giving Bailey a piece of my mind. Isabella stood with her arms crossed, a smug look on her face. I tried not to smile, but the satisfaction in her eyes meant everything to me.

“Come on, let’s get to class,” Hannah said. When she appeared, I didn’t know, but I was glad to have an easy way to walk away. Bailey said nothing more. Neither did anyone else, then I realized I’d just told the whole school Van’s father had died. I didn’t know how much he wanted people to know, so instant guilt flooded me.

It wasn’t until I got home that I could think of anything else, primarily because said boy was on my front porch when I arrived. Isabella and Hannah were joining me for a study session.

“You go ahead in. I’ll be there in a few.” I unlocked the door and let the girls in, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the boy sitting on my porch swing.

Van was a mess—scruffy face, messy hair, wrinkled clothes, and red, puffy eyes. The girls offered sympathetic glances then disappeared inside to raid the pantry. My mother loved having a house full of kids again and had taken to grocery store splurging to keep us supplied with study

snacks. I dropped my backpack at the door and took a few steps toward Van. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to sit with him or wait for him to make the first move.

"I'm sorry to just show up, but I wanted to give this to you. We found it on my father's desk." Van stood and offered me an envelope. On the front was my name neatly scripted in his father's handwriting. I stared at it for a moment, lost in the last memory I had with him. Eventually, I took it and held it, wondering what was inside. "You can open it now or... I mean... I was hoping we could talk for a minute. If you want to, that is."

"Um... What is it?" I asked, afraid to make eye contact with him again.

"I don't know exactly. He left one for me, too. It was..." Van paused and inhaled, then ran his hands over his face and sat down again. I sat beside him, too afraid I'd fall over if I kept standing. My legs were wobbly and untrustworthy, just like my stupid heart. I wanted to hold him so badly I couldn't stand it, but at the same time, I was still hurt by the way he handled everything. The trust we'd built back was bruised, and I didn't know what it would take to heal it.

"It was what?"

"He told me he was proud of me with school and basketball, that he wished he could see me grow into the man he knew I could be. And... and that he wished..." Van paused again, then said, "Maybe you should just read yours."

"Oh." I blinked and refocused. "Sure, yeah." I opened the envelope and removed a sheet of lined paper. His father's handwriting only filled part of the page, but he didn't need a novel to convey his wishes for me.

*Dearest Erin,*

*Your father has been my best friend for so long, I can't remember a time before he was in my life. I miss him so much that sometimes I convince myself that's why I haven't reached out to you. But the truth is, I'm afraid I could never be the man he was. Your father was exceptional. But that does not mean I don't love you. I do, and I want you to know that my son does too.*

*Van is closed off like me. He holds his emotions close—I mean how he really feels, not the emotions he lets other people see. There will come a time when he can't hide anymore. One day, he'll open his heart to the truth, and he won't care what anyone thinks about him. I think that time is coming. He talks about you now, and when he does, he has a light in his eyes I've never seen before. It's the same way your father looked when he spoke of your mother.*

*You are his one, Erin, even if it takes him forever to figure it out. I know it's a lot to ask of you, but I pray you might see this in him, too. You always did call his bluff, and I hope you always will.*

*After your father passed, I opened an account for you. I never want your mother to worry about how she'll pay for college. I know, if things had been reversed, your father would have done the same for Van. I love you, Erin, and I know you will take over the world.*

*Love always, David*

Tears had stained the page by the time I finished reading the letter. I checked the date—about a week before Van auditioned for the role of Romeo. His father knew it then and pushed him to

speak to me. His father had been right, but he probably hadn't seen Bailey coming. She ruined it, but was it ruined forever, or could we find a way to fix what the world had torn apart?

"Are you okay?" Van asked.

"I'm a little speechless. Did you know your father opened a college savings account for me?"

"He told me a few days before he died, yes. He and my mother had agreed on it right after your dad died."

"And... do you know about the other things in his letter?" I folded it and held tight to it, fearing it might float away.

"No. I didn't open it. It's yours." Van licked his lips and sighed again. "Listen, I know what I did was wrong. I should have talked to you about it first. I hurt you again, and for that, I'll never forgive myself. For what it's worth after my father dying, breaking up with you was the worst thing to ever happen in my life."

"Why didn't you talk to me?"

"I just wanted Bailey to stop. Every time I looked at you and saw your arm, it killed me. That was because of me, and it made me sick. I wanted more than anything for you to be happy, and I thought things would be better for you if I wasn't a part of your life anymore. I hated every single second of it, but I don't deserve you enough for you to be miserable for me."

Something about how he said it, that he didn't deserve me enough, hit me all wrong and infuriated me. I felt my face go red and my heart race. "Well, it's not better, Van! Maybe if you had talked to me about it, you might have learned that you *are* worth it, that there was nothing Bailey could have done to me that I couldn't handle. I was *finally* happy again for the first time since my dad died, and you took that away from me."

Van's shock made him stand. "You could have *died!* Are you kidding me? Sure, the sandwich wasn't exactly Bailey's fault, but the peanuts in your locker were definitely her brother. She caused you to break your arm, not to mention she got Reid and Isabella into trouble. You lost your role as Juliet, and you got a failing grade on a test we both know you passed. How could you possibly have been happy?" He flailed his arms as if it made his point any clearer.

I stood to meet him, growing angrier by the second. "I actually discovered I like doing set design. I'm really good at it, Van, and Mrs. McAlister said I could participate in the summer production camp. She doesn't believe I cheated, but she can only do so much."

"I... didn't know that," Van admitted.

"How could you? You stopped talking to me. And I really couldn't care less about cheer. I wanted to quit anyway, but my mom didn't want me to. I've bonded with Hannah and Isa, and Reid has been great, but he misses you, Van. You just ditched us all."

"That's not what I was trying to do, Erin. Can't you see where I'm coming from here? I was terrified Bailey, or one of her friends might *actually* hurt you. I mean, *worse* than they already had. What they did was criminal, and if there had been more evidence... Look, I definitely didn't come to fight with you. That's not what this was about, okay? I wanted to bring you that and tell you again I'm sorry." He pointed to the envelope with the letter from his father.

I instantly cooled and rethought my position. I remembered what Daniel and Van's father had said and put myself in his position. He was an idiot, which made it difficult to see things from his

perspective, but I kind of did. If he had been hurt the way I had been, I didn't know what I would do to protect him.

I sighed and sat on the porch swing. "I don't want to fight either. I think we both see this from each other's point of view, but it'll take some time to reconcile everything, you know? I want you to be a part of my life because you made me open up to having friends again. And you brought great people into my life."

His lips spread into a faint smile. "So, friends then? I mean, once the dust settles and we've had time to grieve and think?"

The paper crinkled in my hands, reminding me our families were intertwined in more ways than one, that friendship wasn't always perfect and could be downright complicated. "Yeah, we can be friends."

His shoulders relaxed, and his smile spread. "Good. I'm glad to have that much. I'll let you get back to the girls. I haven't even showered yet today, so I should try to clean up."

I pinched my nose and scrunched my eyes. "Is that what that smell is? I didn't want to say anything but—"

He kicked the swing, sending me sailing backward. I giggled and stopped the swing feeling a little better about my place in the world and in Van's life. But as I watched him walk back toward his house, I had an overwhelming sense that it wasn't that easy. Things were nowhere near resolved. I couldn't be Van's friend because I was still undeniably in love with him, and that, my friends, was not an easy thing to ignore.