

## Chapter Five

"I will pay you a hundred bucks to make him stop whatever he's doing up there because that's not singing." It was not the first time a random stranger approached me at our table while Van was screaming into a microphone. As much as I could use the money, I couldn't bring myself to drag him away from the stage.

"I can't do that to him, but I will order another pizza to shut him up," I said, grinning at the waitress whose desperate plea did make me feel bad.

"This one's on me. Just keep him off that stage until my shift's over in fifteen minutes." She laughed, cleared our dirty dishes, and left to put the order in.

I doubted I'd keep him off the stage, especially since no one else was in the mood for singing. The place was practically empty, so I decided if I sang with him, maybe he wouldn't sound as bad. Before he dove into another poor rendition of a sad country song, I picked one I loved and grabbed the microphone from him.

"Hey! I was just getting warmed up!" he said, hip checking me.

"Yeah, you were bringing the house down, alright." I rolled my eyes and cleared my throat.

"More like *burning* the house down with my awesome swagger." He grinned and grabbed another microphone. We had garnered a little attention, and my stomach bottomed out.

It occurred to me that he hadn't heard me sing since we were kids. Singing in front of strangers wasn't a big deal, especially since they wouldn't tease me or make my life miserable, but Van? If things went wrong again, would he find some way to use this against me?

"What?" he whispered just as the opening beat to *Jessie's Girl* came over the speaker.

I shook my head and swallowed. "Nothing. I'm fine."

He grinned again and said, "It's your favorite song. I suck at this one. I'll just join the chorus."

I didn't have the heart to tell him he sucked at that too, so I wiped my sweaty palm on my pants and joined the song half a beat late. It was okay. I recovered fast and kept my eyes on the screen though I knew the words by heart. Only a few lines in, and I'd already reached the chorus. Van leaned close and joined me. I stuttered for a second, shocked by the voice that escaped his mouth. He *could* sing! I stopped for a moment and listened to him belt out a perfect chorus, stupid grin and all.

I shoved him, realizing he'd been singing badly for my benefit to get a laugh out of me. Evidently, eight years had improved his vocals. I shrugged it off and sang again, so loudly no one in the place could carry a conversation. A surge of something shot through my body, swirling from my stomach and up through my chest, making me lightheaded and free. It was... it was *joy*, but it had been so long since I felt it, I almost didn't recognize it.

Van's hand settled on my lower back, pulling me closer, so our voices blended seamlessly. A smile tugged at my lips, pulling harder with each word until my cheeks ached as I belted the lyrics. By the time we finished, we had drawn a crowd. People trickled in through the double doors, watching us having fun while they milled around, searching for a seat.

Van's hand slipped from my back, and he grasped my hand, then raised it and twirled me around before tugging me against him in another spin. I laughed through the last few words of the

song and didn't realize the next song had already begun until the person who was supposed to sing it smiled and motioned back toward the stage.

"Go for it," she said. "You two were great!"

"You want us to take your song?" I asked.

Chants of "sing it" started at the back and made their way to the front, so Van shrugged and dragged me back to the stage. It wasn't as upbeat as the last song, but Van transitioned us into the first few lines of *Livin' on a Prayer* quickly enough, and I joined a line later. By the time we reached the chorus, we were singing to each other. I couldn't think of a time I'd had so much fun, nor could I remember when I'd last seen Van acting so free and carefree. He was always so closed off at school, surrounded by his minions and gaggles of pretty girls. I couldn't have gotten near him if I'd wanted to.

My nerves struck again, and I felt myself receding, pulling back, so I wasn't so exposed. Van saw me, watched as I got quieter until I was hardly singing. He grabbed my hand again and pulled me close, and just when the crowd joined us, he leaned closer and whispered in my ear, "Don't stop, pretty girl. This is the best part."

His breath tickled in my ear, leaving me fainthearted and way more aware of every single thing around me. There were dozens of people singing with us. We were officially the center of attention, and all eyes were on us. Now, in the *pretend* world—one where we had always been friends and laughed like hyenas together every day—that might have been the moment we looked at each other, and it hit us. We'd realize we were perfect for each other and fall blindingly, madly in love with each other. But it *wasn't* pretend. It was real, and something from way back, something buried and hopeful, surged forward.

No. Nope. I could not look at Van that way, not like he was the same kid I adored when we were little. The guy who would do anything to make me laugh because he thought my dimples were funny. I couldn't see him like I did then because if I did, I would fall back into that girl, the old Erin, who didn't have a care in the world. The one whose father was still alive, the one who didn't have to worry about bills and how we would get groceries. If I was that girl again, then my mom would have to work even harder, and I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't be so carefree while she suffered.

When Van's gaze locked with mine again, that old mischievous sparkle in his eyes... I dropped the mic and ran. Though confused as they whispered the final lines of the song, the crowd parted to allow me to escape. I drowned in my own guilt and fear, desperate for fresh air that was not filled with memories. Once outside, I looked both ways and ran across the street. I'd have to walk home since Van drove, but it wasn't far. If I hurried, I would make it halfway before Van had time to retrieve his truck and come after me.

Was I ever wrong. The boy must have bolted after me before the mic even hit the floor. Two steps onto the curb, he had me. I spun on my heel, not quite sure it was him until his face came into view.

"Whoa, it's just me. Please do not hit me with your awesome kung fu stuff."

I sighed. "It's not kung fu, it's jujitsu, and I'm not going to hit you. I just need to be alone for a while." I shrugged his arm off my shoulder and kept walking, but he only fell in stride beside me.

“Erin, what happened back there? We were having fun, at least, I thought we were, then you got this terrified look in your eyes and ran out. Did I do something wrong?”

I glared at him with pursed lips.

He sighed. “Okay, but I meant just now. Did I do something wrong just now that made you run away?”

I ignored him and kept walking. He took two long strides and stepped in front of me, then put his hands up to stop me. In fairness, he *hadn't* done anything wrong except having a blast singing. He wasn't the reason I was so stressed, though he often contributed to my peak anxiety levels. This time, it was all me. His fingers tickled the tips of mine, waiting to see if it was okay to touch me again or not. I swallowed but didn't move my hand, so he laced his fingers with mine and stood, waiting, in front of me.

“I just remembered everything, that's all. I remembered how great things were when we were kids and my dad was alive. My mom didn't have to work so hard, and... and I guess I just felt guilty for having a good time when there is so much to worry about.”

His grip tightened, forcing me to look up at him. The intensity in that gaze—all-consuming, focused solely on me as if there was *no one* else in the world—made my stomach do that stupid fluttering thing again. No. No, I couldn't—*wouldn't*—be one of the girls that fell helplessly at his feet because of that smirk and those soft, comforting eyes. He was so *mean* to me. He'd said things and poked fun at me all so he could get popular... but not since the worst day of my life. Not since Dad died. No, since then, he'd just ignored me. Until he got the role of Romeo, that is.

Why did he have to be so charismatic? Why did he pull everyone in like the stupid, burning sun? If I let him in again, *really* let him in, he'd burn me up, and I'd be left a disintegrated mess just like I had been when we were ten, and every time he threw me under the bus for a good laugh. I couldn't.

“Erin, what can I do? For however long it takes, I'll do it. I can't take it all back, but—” The ding of his phone interrupted him, so he groaned and pulled it out of his pocket. A small grin took his frown, and he turned his phone to show me. It was a text from his mother. “It's not charity, I promise. Your mom is a hard worker, and my mom will need help... you know... after... Dad.”

My eyes flicked from his screen back to him just in time to see him swipe a tear away. His father would only get worse, and my heart exploded with sympathy. It didn't matter what stupid things he'd done. After mine died, he'd stopped. Maybe he knew then he'd been stupid, made mistakes he might never be able to take back, but whether he did or didn't wasn't the question. The question was, would I forgive him? Could I really, truly forgive him and make my father proud?

*When everything else has been taken away from you, my sweet girl, remember that forgiveness is always yours, in your heart where you decide how to use it. Always use it, Erin.*

“Your mom wants to hire mine?” I squeaked, too afraid to hope it was a permanent position.

He nodded. “Yeah, she's wanted to ask her for a while, but... but, I guess she was like me, too afraid to reach out because...”

“Because of things between us?”

He nodded again. "Yeah. Listen, Erin, I need to tell you the truth. The biggest reason I did reach out was that my father wanted things between us to be better before he passed. He and your father—"

"I... I know. College roommates, on the football team together, best buddies. I know." They were... until Van and I had a falling out, and the families drifted apart.

"And it's my fault everything went wrong. I had to be popular, just like he was, but I was going nowhere."

"You were ten, Van," I snapped.

"Yeah, well, your father always adored you. It was harder to please mine, but that's a lousy excuse for what I did. And I'll probably never forgive myself for ruining everything. Yes, my father encouraged me to reach out to you, but I've wanted to for a long time, Erin."

I couldn't tell if he was lying or not. Usually, I could, but it was beginning to rain, and my brain throbbed with all the new information. Van's mother, Corinne, ran a successful accounting firm along with his father. My mother would probably make more working for them than she ever had at her old job, which meant she would definitely—as she should—take the offer. But it also meant I'd have to get along with Van whether things worked out or not.

"Pretty girl?"

I shook my head. "Why are you calling me that all of a sudden?"

He grinned. "You *are* pretty, Erin. It's fitting, and I'm running out of pumpkin-inspired things to call you."

"You could just call me Erin. It is my name." Thank goodness it was dark, and the clouds covering the moon hid my blush. I didn't *want* to let his opinion of me matter... but sadly... it did.

He rocked onto his toes, his hands crammed in his pockets, that same stupid smirk on his face. He'd perfected it sometime during middle school, and by high school, it made most girls swoon—except the ones who saw right through it, like me. Ugh. Why did he have to look so adorable?

"What?" I asked since he just kept staring at me instead of saying something, like why he wouldn't just call me Erin.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just looking at you, that's all."

I glanced around, catching a whiff of the pizza from Lazy Charlie's. I couldn't go back in because people would stare at me, wondering why I'd run out like I was on fire. Getting into Van's truck felt way too intimate like I'd be trapped in a small bubble with him while he was acting so... *odd*. I could just walk home like I'd planned, but I knew he'd walk beside me the whole way.

"Um..." I licked my lips, unsure what to do while he stared at me. "Okay, you're freaking me out. Why are you staring at me?"

"I never really told you the rest of my idea," he said, his smirk developing into a full-blown smile.

I cleared my throat and fidgeted with the ends of my hair. The crowd inside was getting louder, singing along with almost everyone who got up on stage. Now it was a slow song, something sweet and quiet I could hardly hear. Van offered me his hand, but I had no idea what he wanted, so I just stared at it like a motionless amoeba with zero thought processes.

He wiggled his fingers and chuckled. "Dance with me, Pumpkin Spice." That was another new one, but before I could decline, he took my hand and tugged me closer. For reasons only God knew, I let him tuck me close and sway us to the music, leading me though I was stiff as a board.

When I finally found words, I asked, "What are you doing, Van? First, the play. Then you inject yourself in my life like you never left, and now we're dancing in the street."

"Is it okay?" he asked, his voice wavering for a moment, that innate cockiness not so sure anymore.

"I just don't understand, I guess. You've said some... some *awful* things that really hurt me. I want to be here for you because of your dad, but it's hard. Now you got my mom a job, and... and I'm confused." Confused seemed like such a small word. I was befuddled beyond reason, completely mystified by the boy who held me like I was always supposed to be in his arms. He even *felt* right, despite my mind screaming to take caution.

His breath fanned my face while we danced, slower than the music, but movement so it didn't feel too close to just stand there holding each other. "It was something my father said about us, and it got me thinking. We took our first steps side-by-side. He said, when you fell, I sat beside you until you got back up. When you learned to ride your bike and crashed into that maple at the corner of our street, I helped you up and put bandages on your scrapes. When you and your mom got into that car accident, and you broke your arm, I did everything for you. Whenever anything went wrong, you came to me."

"And then you left," I whispered, unable to hide the brokenness of my voice.

"I left. And I wasn't there when you needed me most, but that doesn't mean..." He tensed, took a deep breath, and pulled back. Van was nervous, so much that his fingers trembled against my back. "It doesn't mean I didn't care about you, Erin. Everything I ever said, it cut me so bad, and I couldn't figure out why I did it. I hated myself, still do if I'm honest. I know that doesn't make up for what I did, but I'm hoping, *praying* actually, that when I tell you the rest of my idea, you won't run me over with my own truck."

I froze. Anything that could make me that mad was something to listen very, very closely to, evaluate, and then grab his keys so I could run him over.

"Yes, I auditioned for the role because I need it for my scholarship, but there were other things I could have done. I wanted the role so I could be close to you."

My jaw ached, I clenched it so hard. "You had to know how I would feel about that, but you did it anyway? You tricked me?"

"Not exactly, no. I suspected how you would feel, but..." He sighed and released me. "I guess it was tricky, wasn't it? Now that you've said it, it feels... Erin, I just wanted a chance to talk to you again, and I thought this way we might be able to spend time together and talk."

"Van, if you had just told me about your father from the beginning, I would have talked to you. You didn't have to do the play to get my attention."

His smirk tugged at his lips, but he squashed it before it got him in trouble. "The play is only part of my master plan, Erin."

My eyes went so wide they almost fell right out of my head. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

“The master plan, the one I should have been following all along.” He shrugged his confidence returned. “See, there have been a lot of firsts in your life where I was right beside you, and I figure the reason you’ve never dated anyone or even had a first kiss is because... well... because maybe it’s supposed to be—”

I pressed my finger over his lips. “Don’t. Do not even go there, Van. You lost the right to say things like that to me when you turned your back on me, called me a mistake in front of everyone we knew, and climbed a social ladder that has done nothing but smack me in the face.”

I turned and walked away, leaving him behind me. I’d forgive him eventually. I knew because it’s what my father would have wanted for us. It’s what his father wanted, and if my mother would work for his, then we had to get along. But I didn’t have to forgive him that second.

“Come back, pretty girl, please.”

I froze. My feet wouldn’t move despite my best efforts to persuade them to not just move but to run. Van took this as hesitation on my part when it was really just my lousy, traitorous, stupid feet working against me.

He stepped behind me, speaking to my back. “I like you, Erin. I’ve liked you for a long, long time, and no matter how many times I tell myself I don’t deserve you, I can’t make my heart stop wanting to change that. I wanted the role because I wanted to kiss you, if only because that’s the only way to prove how I feel. But more than that, I want you to *want* to kiss me, too. Because maybe, if you want to kiss me in that play, you might also want to go to prom with me. And if you want to go to prom, then maybe you’ll want more than that.”

I spun on my heels, almost too shocked to speak.

“I gave you two choices, and instead of kissing some other guy, you chose me. Please, please tell me that means something to you.”

*Devastated.* That was the only word I could think of to describe the expression on his face. It had started raining harder, but it was of little consequence to him. He just stood there staring at me, rain pelting us until we were both soaked to the bone.

Did it mean something? What were the odds of convincing Deacon to go out with me? What about Isabella’s brother? Could either of them be my first kiss? Or had I, deep down, shot those options down because I wanted exactly what Van presented—a second chance, not just for our friendship but... for more?

“Erin?” Blue eyes searched mine, everything on the line.

I swallowed down that surge of fear that threatened to swallow me whole and remembered I had control of this, the way it ended, and how much I was willing to lose on this bet.

“You have until the day of the play to convince me, Van St. Claire. Convince me you meant what you just said, no matter how far you fall down from your pedestal at school, no matter what it takes, and I’ll kiss you. I’ll go to prom with you. And if you’ve convinced me that much, then yeah, I’ll be your girlfriend, too.”

He half-sighed, half-laughed, and lunged toward me, squeezing me in a giant bear hug. “Come on, let’s get you home and dried off.” His hand slid down my arm, and he interlaced our fingers seconds before dragging me through the rain. I squealed, so he lifted me and carried me to his truck, all the while my heart hammered.