

Chapter Nine

Well, it scared me half to death, but once we started walking in the snow, it felt like we'd never lost any time together. I was replaying every moment of the night before, staring at my ceiling, when my mom knocked.

"Van's here, baby. Dress warmly." I heard her walk back down the hallway and close her bedroom door. My guess was she planned to binge read most of the day, especially since it was evident Van had no intention of disappearing from our lives anytime soon... maybe never.

I'd already gotten up and showered and worked myself into a tizzy worrying about what Van had planned for the day. It had been a freak snowstorm the night before, but it still dropped a few inches of fluffy coldness I wanted to avoid at all costs. The weather report said it would warm up enough over the day to melt it before nightfall, so I only had to suffer through one day of winter activities.

I groaned and rolled off my bed, then lumbered down the stairs.

"There you are. Today, Miss Carpenter, I'm going to show you why snow and all things winter are superior over autumn so that when winter does come, you'll beg me to take you sledding."

"I feel like I'll be begging you to stop, but I'm willing to give you the chance to prove me right." I landed at the bottom step, eye level to him with the extra height.

"I think you mean to prove you wrong." He smirked and pulled his beanie on, covering his ears. Our high school mascot was emblazoned on the front, reminding me we only had one more day before heading back to school, where everyone would notice how our relationship had changed. Worries over Bailey flooded my mind, but I didn't have time to consider them before I was dragged out for so-called fun.

"I think you're crazy," I said, then jumped off the porch into a mid-shin high snowdrift. I immediately regretted my decision when the cold shot up my legs and chilled the rest of my body. I squealed and jumped back on the porch, prompting Van to laugh like a hyena.

"What is it with you and snow? Just have fun, Erin!" He leaped and fell into a roll right down the hill. I backed away because I was not that stupid. No one needed a broken leg or arm rolling down the hill *right* towards the road. Instead, I sat on the porch swing and kicked my legs out, settled in, and watched Van have fun.

A few neighborhood kids had joined him, so he chased them around in a snowball fight slash epic game of tag. Once he'd worn them all out, and they waddled home, exhausted and hungry, he made his way back to the porch and sat beside me. His cheeks were bright red, making his blue eyes more pronounced. Van stretched his arms wide and offered me a place to lean, but he was covered in snow.

"Uh, uh. You're covered with icicles of death, and I'm already cold." I pulled my coat tighter around me, covering the bottom of my frozen ears.

Since I wouldn't play along, Van decided to take matters into his own hands. He lifted me off the porch swing, ignored my screaming in his hear and pounding on his back, and unceremoniously dropped me in the snow. I kicked out and tripped him, then laughed when he fell face-first into the pile beside me. He shoved snow at me, then grabbed me around the waist when I tried to

escape. I shifted my weight and ran, but not for long. Van caught up to me as I turned the corner toward my backdoor and lifted me again.

“Put me down, Van!” I yelled but couldn’t stop laughing long enough for him to take me seriously. The only way to fight him was to get him at his own game, so I reached down and poked him in the side. He yelped and let me go, but only for a second before he tackled me, and we both flopped in the snow. I was sure it had gone down my pants, but who could tell when every part of you was freezing?

“Do you love snow yet?” Van teased and threw more at me.

“No! Lemme go!”

He released me, so I leaped onto his back and earned myself a piggyback ride all the way back to the storage shed, where I knew the sled hung in the same place my father had left it. My heart stopped. My grip around his neck tightened, so he froze in place.

“Van, I... I’m not... I don’t want to do this.”

He let me down and turned around. “This as in sledding or this as in spending time together today?”

“No, just the sledding. I just... *can’t*. Not yet, okay?” Every part of me trembled, but I didn’t know if it was from the cold or from fear. If I opened that shed, I’d see everything neatly stored just how my father left it—his tools, the sled, even his trophy collection from when he was in school.

“Okay, so we do something else. What do you want to do?”

“Um... have hot cocoa and watch movies all day?” I offered with a guilty grin.

“I think we can do that. I promised my parents we’d have family game night tonight. Do you want to join?”

I froze again. I wanted to see his father. Honestly, I did, but when presented with the opportunity, all I could do was think about my father. I wanted to be strong for Van, but how could I look at his father and not see mine wasting away while a tumor ate his brain?

“Hey, it’s okay,” Van said, brushing his hand over my face. “I get it. Maybe next time, okay?” I nodded and shivered. “Let’s get that cocoa and watch a movie, then I’ll head home. Sound good?”

“Sounds great.” I followed Van toward my house, passing the tree house as we went.

“Remember that time your mother freaked out because I jumped from the treehouse to the roof?” He looked up at the roof, then over to the treehouse.

“I wouldn’t attempt it again. I haven’t been in that thing in years. It’s probably a hazard at this point.”

“That feels like a challenge, pretty girl.” His eyes darted between me and the treehouse, taunting me.

“Van,” I warned. “You’ll fall and break your arm or something.”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty good at it. I’m sure it’s fine.” He tested the ladder, and when the first rung didn’t break, he tried the second. He was all the way at the top before he looked back. I shook my head.

“Van, please don’t. The floor is probably rotted, and I don’t feel like going to the hospital right now.” I stared up at him, begging him not to be so stupid. But he never could deny a good challenge, and that rickety tree house called to him.

“It’s fine, Erin. It looks sturdy enough, and I bet Reid could fix—”

The board snapped, and Van fell eight feet to the snow, landing on his back with an oomph so loud even I felt it. He didn’t move but stared up at the sky with wide eyes.

“Van! Are you okay?” I dropped to my knees beside him and checked him over.

“Okay, maybe you were right. The treehouse is a pile of junk.” He groaned and sat, then shook it off before standing and helping me up. “I still think Reid and I can fix it if you want. Could be fun, right?”

“Van, you almost died, you idiot!” I pummeled him with my tiny fists, but he only laughed and caught my hands.

“I’m fine, pretty girl, really. I was more shocked than anything, but see, I’m fine.” He lifted his arms and turned around, proving he was in one piece and not mangled half to death. “Yeah, it was a little uncomfortable, but snow is a good place to land. It’s sweet you’re so worried, though.”

I shoved him and pursed my lips. “It’s not funny. I was really worried, Van.”

Just when he came close enough to hug me or do the hair brushing thing, my smile broke. I grabbed his shirt and shoved a giant snowball down it, then ran.

“That was a dirty, dirty trick! And here I thought you were concerned for my well-being, but no,” he shouted. “You were only setting me up!”

“It’s not my fault you’re so gullible!” I shrieked and ran around the house, but rather than follow me, Van must have darted the other way. He met me on the porch, so I squealed and ran the other way. He was faster and caught me at the edge of the porch, wrapped an arm around my waist, and hoisted me up over his shoulder. I wiggled and shimmied, but he had a good grip.

“Not so sassy now, are you?” He plopped me on the porch swing again and sat beside me. I heard Mom inside banging around in the kitchen, maybe making cookies or cocoa. Van stretched his feet out and crossed them, then relaxed in the swing. “I remember when your dad put this up. I helped.”

That familiar lump stuck in my throat. “I remember,” I whispered. “It fell three times before you two got it right.”

Van laughed and said, “I think he would have gotten it up faster if I *hadn’t* been helping.” Van slid his fingers between mine and squeezed. “I miss him.” It was a whisper I almost didn’t hear, but I’d been looking at him, so I just made it out. Those pretty blue eyes welled with tears, and he sucked in a breath. “Why did this happen to us, Erin? Why did your dad have to get sick and die? Why mine?”

I started to answer, to give him one of the dozens of random reasons everyone had given me for the same question, but he shook his head and smiled.

“Let’s not be sad today. Forget I asked that. Let’s go see what your mom is doing.” Van squeezed my hand again and stood. “I think I smell chocolate chip cookies. I’ve missed this, you know? Not just you, but everything we did when we were kids.”

That light and giddy feeling flowed through me again, taking me back to a time when this was normal. We'd spend the day playing and wearing ourselves out, then either my mother or his would drag us inside for food before we'd go out and do it all over again. So much had changed in ten years, but some things like the way it made us feel—so loved by our parents, confident we had a friend in each other no matter what, and full of joy—had stayed the same.

So many times, we'd done exactly what we were about to do. We'd go inside, eat until our stomachs popped, then sit and watch television until we fell asleep on the sofa. Of course, he'd have to leave for family night, but before that, I was sure we'd end up in a cookie coma.

"Coming, pretty girl?" Van tugged my hand, bringing me back to reality.

And I couldn't have helped everything that came after that, even if I'd wanted to.

He pulled off his hat to shake out the snow, letting loose that oh so perfect blonde hair—only it was an absolute mess. He grinned, that stupid silly one he'd had for as long as I'd known him, the one I'd never—not even once—seen him give anyone but me. My stomach bottomed out, and my heart raced as my mind whirled over all those wonderful memories. He'd ruined it, sure, but he was here now. He was trying *now*, and he needed me *now*. And... and I kinda needed him, too. And even if I didn't need him, I *wanted* him and everything he'd offered. I wanted everything to go back like it was, to pretend all those bad things that happened *did* happen for a reason, and maybe that reason was him and me standing on my front porch looking at each other like no one else existed in the world.

It didn't matter if I might regret it later. It didn't matter that he'd messed up—repeatedly—and only now realized what he stood to lose. Because he'd figured it out. He'd finally *seen* me... and liked me.

Whatever expression showed on my face must have been amusing or confusing because he stood holding my hand, his damp hat in the other, with that grin and sparkling eyes.

I pulled him closer and stepped up on the toes of his boots for a boost, then I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. He froze and gasped, then relaxed and slid his arms around me in a cocoon of warmth and spice and comfort. He moved his lips over mine, so gentle I could have imagined us kissing until he held me even tighter. Van released a soft whimper, and everything inside me exploded like a bundle of love that had been waiting for this exact moment when we *both* figured it out.

My cheeks burned, and his nose was cold, but it was everything I could have wished for in a first kiss. And it was him... Van... the stupid, idiot boy who it should have been all along, just like he said.

"Wow," he whispered, his forehead pressed against mine. "I did not expect that. Was it okay?"

All I could do was nod because my brain had gone on vacation, leaving me a puddle of Erin in his arms. He kissed my nose, then pressed his lips against mine again, stealing a second kiss.

"I'm so glad you chose me. I know this doesn't mean I get to stop working. I know that, but this means a lot to me, Erin." His hands had made their way to my face, and I tilted it up to look at him. I was still a little dazed, maybe a bit confused, but soaring, nonetheless. "If I promise to keep working, to keep doing everything I can to make you happy, would you consider a new proposal?"

I giggled. “What is it with you and proposals?” He shrugged and helped me step off his toes. “I dunno, but would you possibly, maybe, consider being my girlfriend now? I mean, you don’t have to answer right away. You can think about it and—”

I smooshed his face and scoffed, then ran inside, laughing. “The answer is yes, Van. Race you for cookies!”

I wanted to photograph his face that moment, snap a shot, and frame it for forever because I knew no one had ever looked at me like that before. My parents loved me, of course, but this was different. This was him—*Van*—looking at me as if he saw me for the first time. Or staring at the most astonishing sunset he’d ever seen, a hundred-foot waterfall, or something else that made a person stop and ponder their place in the world. It was that kind of admiration, and he was looking at me.