

## Chapter Ten

Falling asleep had been a task, especially after Van left, and my mother wanted all the details of how things were going. She'd given me a reminder to go slow, give each other a chance to get used to these new feelings, and remember that space and respect were important. I knew she was right, but I still couldn't squash the giddiness in my stomach no matter how much I needed sleep. Van promised to pick me up for birthday breakfast at Fire and Ice, then we had drama practice first thing at school. It would be a long day with cheer practice after school, but Van also had training, so it wasn't like I was missing out on time with him.

Eventually, though, I fell asleep with the sweet dreams my mother had wished for me. By the time my alarm went off, I was well-rested, probably better than I had been in a long time. I couldn't help smiling when I thought of my first kiss. It happened! And with Van, no less. The best part was knowing he cherished it, that it *meant* something to him.

I showered and dressed quickly, ready for pumpkin tea and donuts.

"Honey, I'm heading out!" Mom shouted, so I ran down the stairs to wish her a great first day. She looked beautiful like life hadn't been knocking her down for over a year. Her bright smile warmed my heart.

"You look amazing, Mom. I'm so happy for you."

She pressed her hand against her chest. "I'm so nervous but excited. Corinne says I'll do a great job, and I trust her."

"You will, I'm sure. Love you," I said and hugged her. She held on for an extra second, gaining strength. Van knocked then pushed open the door just as mom turned to go.

"Hey," he said. "You two look great."

Mom patted his cheek. "You both be careful. Happy birthday, sweet girl." She kissed my forehead, leaving a bright red lip print I'd have to scrub off all the way to Fire and Ice. Van chuckled and slipped his arm around my waist. So far, being his girlfriend had a good many benefits—kisses, snuggles, and unexpected offers of support.

"You ready?" he asked as Mom headed to her car.

"Yes, just let me—"

Van lifted me, settled me on his boot toes, and kissed me. I giggled, breaking the kiss long before he was ready, but he smiled and grabbed my backpack.

"I can't believe I get to kiss you." He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

I giggled again and wiped my mother's lipstick off his lips. "Let me get a wet napkin, and we can go. We're both covered with Mom's lipstick."

"We'll be late. I've got those little wet napkin things in the car. Come on, pretty girl. Let's load you up with sugar before school."

My lips curled into something between a sneer and a grimace, but I recovered before he caught it. I knew he wouldn't ditch me the second we got to school—deep down, I knew it—but that small voice in my head warned me to prepare myself for the worst. I hadn't expected things to start going downhill as soon as we entered Fire and Ice.

Despite the warmer weather the afternoon before, there were still small patches of snow and ice dotting the landscape on the way. Van had taken extra caution and drove slowly while I called ahead for our order. My entire mood did a roundabout when he parked, thanks to the white convertible parked at the front door—Bailey Fields.

“We can skip it, or we can make them choke on their own spit. What do you want to do, Pumpkin?”

I chewed the inside of my lip and fidgeted with the hem of my dress—a present from my mother for my eighteenth birthday—and considered the ramifications of venturing into the café. It was now or later at school, so it was probably better to get it over with in front of a smaller crowd. I mustered up every bit of strength I had, inhaled, and shoved Van’s door open.

He hopped out on his side and waited at the front of the truck for me. Instinctively, our hands met, and he grasped mine tightly, so small wrapped in his. Van pulled the door open and let me step in ahead of him but was beside me a second later, towering a full head over me. His posture stiffened and took on a protective stature, but he let me lead him to the counter.

“Hi, Jeanine,” I said with as wide a smile as I could muster. I already felt eyes on me, so my voice was choked and strained. The heavenly aroma of donuts wafted from the back room while quiet chatter invaded my ears. I didn’t want to hear it. None of it could be good, so I widened my smile and pretended not to notice.

“Hi, Erin. I’ve got your order ready. To go, I assumed?” Jeanine raised an eyebrow and cut her gaze toward Bailey and three of Van’s friends sitting in the corner, staring at me.

“Please,” I said, my lip quivering. Jeanine reached across the counter and squeezed my arm, then disappeared into the back to retrieve our order.

“Slumming with the orphan girl, I guess,” Bailey whispered, likely her response to someone questioning why Van was with me.

Van’s grip on my hand tensed, and he opened his mouth to speak, but I shook my head slightly. Not creating a scene in Jeanine’s restaurant was more important than putting a stop to Bailey’s unkind words. I wasn’t an orphan. I knew it. It still hurt, but it wasn’t true, so I pulled up my armor and stood straighter.

“I’m not worried,” Bailey said, not even bothering to control her volume. “He’ll get it out of his system and beg me to take him back soon enough.”

Van growled but kept his lips shut. He looked down at me, his eyes searching mine. I knew it wasn’t like that. He wasn’t just with me to check off some task on his list, and he wouldn’t drop me to go back to her, not after everything that had happened in only a few days. We had history, one that was much more complicated and lasting than anything he’d had with her. Van’s brows knitted together, and his eyes softened—a kicked puppy face if I’d ever seen one.

I licked my lips and stood on my tiptoes, offering a bit of comfort. Van leaned down and kissed me just as Jeanine returned with our order.

“It’s on the house today. Happy birthday, Erin.” Jeanine smiled and handed us our drink carrier and a bag of donuts. Stapled to it was a gift card.

“That’s so sweet. Thank you, Jeanine.” I took the bag while Van grabbed the drinks.

“Anything for my *favorite* customers.” Jeanine’s gaze hardened as she glanced toward Bailey and her friends.

“Thanks. Later, Jeanine,” Van said, his tone a bit short, but Jeanine either didn’t notice, or she understood. He nodded toward the door and pulled his keys from his pocket, probably tired of keeping his mouth shut.

Bailey got up and took her empty plate to the trash, conveniently bumping into Van on her way back. Her hands lingered too long on his chest—that they ended up there at all was maddening enough—so he stepped back and scowled.

“Oh, excuse me.” Bailey’s narrowed eyes zeroed in on me, a threat as clear and present as any predatory animal could muster. I blinked, and it was gone, replaced with a sickeningly sweet smile as she traipsed back to her seat.

“Come on, pretty girl. We don’t want to be late.” Van pushed the door open with his back and held it open while Bailey and her friends giggled about something, probably a comment about me. I kept my back straight and chin up, knowing full well if she wanted to make it to regionals, she couldn’t do it without me. Hazel would never talk to her, much less offer her pointers for choreography and tricks. And I was her only flyer. Lose me, and it was goodbye national title.

With that in mind, I climbed into Van’s truck and buckled up, then dove into my birthday donut. Jeanine had made a pumpkin donut with white chocolate frosting and *happy birthday* written in maple icing. It was phenomenal, but Van didn’t bother eating his. He just sat behind the wheel and watched me devour my birthday one happy bite at a time.

When I noticed, I blushed and wiped my mouth. “Sorry,” I mumbled around a bite of donut.

“Don’t be. I like seeing you this way. It makes me feel good like maybe I’m doing something right.”

I swallowed and nodded. “You are. I’m happy, Van. Honest.”

“Yeah?” He smiled, some ridiculous, toothy thing that rivaled even Reid’s million-dollar smile, and my heart swooned. He was mine. Who knew what switch flipped or what my heart had done to win over my head, but I *was* happy. “I never thought I would say this about anyone, but you are the most beautiful thing in the world when your cheeks are all chipmunked full of food.”

I shoved him and grabbed my tea, but it didn’t hide my blush. “I’m always blushing around you. Stop it.”

“Nope. I’ll never stop. I love it.” He leaned over the center console, kissed my cheek, and then started his car.

By the time we reached the school, it seemed word had spread of our new relationship. I had never been stared at or whispered about so much in my life, not even after my father died. Van’s tense shoulders and stiff posture returned as we walked side-by-side to the school, ignoring everyone except Reid and Isa, who waited near the door.

“So,” Isa said, “This has been an interesting morning. You two are the talk of the town.”

“Wonderful,” Van said. “I can’t believe I ever wanted to be popular. People can’t go five minutes without diving head-first into my business.”

Reid shrugged. “I tried to tell you we should go into witness protection, but you never listen to me. It’ll be fine in a few days.”

I finished my tea, unable to contribute to the conversation because my nerves were already rattled. I just wanted to get to drama class and pretend everything was normal. Maybe if I pretended long enough, it would become normal, and everyone could go on about their lives worrying about something else. But I knew Bailey wouldn't let that happen, not while I had something she wanted.

"You, okay?" Isa asked.

"Yep. Totally fine. How did things go with you two after the movie?" I asked, desperate to change the subject.

Isa eyed me, reading me well. She went along with the subject change anyway. "Great, actually. We're sort of dating, I guess."

"Sort of? What does that mean?" I fidgeted with the strap of my backpack while Reid and Van talked behind us. I had to get to my locker fast, grab my books, then dart to drama before we were late.

"We're not official or anything, just dating exclusively until we get to know each other better." She paused and tilted her head, then said, "Which I guess means we are official." Isa chuckled and gripped her bag tighter. "I like him. He's got a serious side, and he knows when to use it. We talked a lot, and I guess you were right. I need to fit in some fun."

I glanced over my shoulder, then leaned close to Isa. "I kissed Van yesterday." I shouldn't have bothered whispering. Isa squealed and demanded the details. I checked over my shoulder again to find Van grinning—he'd heard. "Later, maybe after practice, I'll tell you all about it and inflate his ego even more."

"I'm not sure that's possible, so good luck," Reid said, then grabbed Isa's hand and hugged her before separating to go to his first class.

"I should go, too. Good luck today. I'll see you at lunch." Isa waved and headed the opposite way.

We were already at my locker, so I yanked it open and exchanged my books while Van waited, impatiently tapping his fingers on the door. He started tapping his foot, then groaned. I pursed my lips, remembering how impatient he'd always been when he was stressed.

"I'm hurrying," I said.

"Oh... No, pretty girl. I'm not..." He paused and sighed, then reached above my head and snatched a piece of paper from the wall over my locker. He crumpled it up. "I just wanted to get that before anyone saw it. I wasn't trying to rush you."

"What is it?" I tried to grab it, but he held it up over his head where I couldn't reach it.

"Nothing important. Listen, you head to drama class, and I'll be right there. I need to grab a book from my locker. I forgot."

It wasn't the entire truth, but I trusted he had a reason for stretching, probably that paper he held behind him, so I couldn't see it. It couldn't have been anything good, but if he didn't want me to see it, then I wouldn't pry.

"Sure. See you in drama." I kissed his cheek and headed to the theater. Everyone else was already there, scripts in hand, ready to begin our first read. My gaze immediately settled on

Hannah Pistoris, one of Bailey and Van's friends. This would not be fun, but I loved drama class, so I forced another smile and took my seat.

Immediately, Hannah switched her seat to sit next to me, initiating my self-defense mode. I tensed and leaned away from her, ready to defend myself against whatever hate she decided to sling my way. For some reason, her last name had never registered before. *Pistoris*, the same as Hazel's neighbor, Darcy. It was an uncommon name, so they were probably related in some way.

I cleared my throat, ready to initiate the conversation before she said anything offensive.

"Uh... I just thought about your last name. Any relation to Darcy Pistoris?" I asked, my voice wavering more than I would have liked.

Hannah's green eyes brightened. "Yeah, she's my cousin on my father's side. Do you know her?" She waved her hand, then said, "Of course, you do. She went here and basically ruled the school."

I chuckled. "I actually know her best through Hazel, her neighbor."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot you two are friends. How'd you manage to get her to forgive you after that fiasco with Sarah?"

"A lot of apologizing. Hazel is pretty forgiving, though. At first, she was pretty clear we couldn't be friends, but after a while, we started talking again, and things progressed."

Hannah shifted in her seat and licked her lips. "Listen, I just wanted to let you know Bailey is on the warpath. She was not happy about that incident at Fire and Ice this morning and basically told us all to go after you." I tensed further, but Hannah raised her hand defensively. "This is not that, I promise. I can't stand all that catty stuff. I was always more friends with Van than Bailey. Just watch your back, okay?"

"For how long?" I squeaked.

"I wish I knew. If Bailey doesn't get him back... maybe all year?" Hannah squinted as if telling me I had a target on my back for all senior year physically hurt her. "This might be tough to believe, but I'll do what I can to warn you if she plans anything horrible. That said, she might not talk about it much in front of me."

"Why are you still friends with her?"

Hannah tugged on her hair and chewed her lip. "I'm not, really, but a lot of my friends are, so we end up in the same places a lot."

"But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and this beautiful girl is my beloved sun." Van had arrived—lest there be any mistaking it—and he had snuck up on us. Half the class laughed while the other half stared in stunned silence while he wrapped his arms around me from behind and kissed the top of my head.

"That'll be enough, Mr. St. Claire. Please have a seat," Mrs. McAlister said.

Van dragged a seat across the stage and plopped it next to me, his icy glare focused on the few who scoffed at us. Hannah sat straighter and leveled hers at them, too. I had no idea what was happening, but it seemed I had two bodyguards flanking me, daring anyone to make another peep. The stage fell silent as Mrs. McAlister started her lecture about soliloquy, appropriate given Van's interpretation of Romeo's.

Most everyone eased into the new dynamic soon enough and focused on the play. Deacon kept looking at me, then shifted his gaze to Van, but said nothing. Only three or four days earlier, I would have been hyper-aware of Deacon's stares, worrying that my hair or make-up was messed up, that I was slouching or had a funny expression, or even that he was looking at me but not even *seeing* me. But now... all I could think about was the boy sitting next to me, defying anyone who got in our way.