

Chapter Three

Van's offers hung over me like a dark cloud. He wasn't *entirely* wrong, but those choices weren't exactly fair either. Maybe it was silly, but I wanted my first kiss to mean something. Of course, I knew the first boy I ever kissed wouldn't necessarily become my longtime boyfriend and eventual husband, but a girl could wish, couldn't she? Besides, if Deacon James was interested in me, he'd already had about a hundred opportunities to ask me out, and Isabella's brother was great, but did I want to kiss a guy I hardly knew?

Isabella was talking to someone else when I walked into the locker room to change for cheer practice, but when she saw me, she exited the conversation and hurried to my locker. She leaned against the row of lockers and crossed her arms, her signature smile a little less... *glowy*.

"Oh, no. What now?" I tossed my bookbag into my locker, then grabbed my shorts and t-shirt.

"Not much, just that Baily freaked out when Van brought you to school this morning."

"Yeah, I've heard. I'm not even friends with him. We rode together to practice lines, that's all. What's her problem with me?" I changed, rushing so Coach wouldn't make me do more than the five laps I already owed for being late to the game.

Isabella shrugged. "I don't know, but you know those types. Does she really need a reason to be awful? It's like a part of her DNA or something."

I rolled my eyes and braided my hair, then sat on the bench while Isabella's gaze fixed to the floor. She was a thinker, and I could almost smell the smoke filtering from her ears while she mulled over something. I knew I owed her an answer about her brother, but I honestly hadn't had time to really consider how I felt. The best thing would be to thank her, ask her to let her brother down easy, and commit to becoming the best Juliet I could be. I wouldn't have much time for dating anyway.

"I have an idea. Why don't you come over to my house tomorrow? We can work on your lines and try to figure out what to do about you and Van and that horrible, horrible image I'm sure you have glued in your mind."

I snickered. "Which one? There are so many."

"The one where you're stuck kissing Van on stage with hundreds of people watching not just once, but twice."

My head snapped up, and I nearly bit my tongue in the process. "Twice?"

Isabella narrowed her eyes. "Um, yeah. The practice run in front of the whole school? You forgot about the practice?"

I smacked my forehead and ran my hand over my face. I had forgotten. I was so worked up over the very idea of kissing him, I'd forgotten I'd have to do it not only in front of the paying attendees but the *entire school* only a few days before opening night. There was something even more intimidating about that, not to mention Bailey would probably shoot me from her seat during the school practice. Maybe that would be a good thing? Yes. She could shoot me seconds before I had to lock lips with her ex-boyfriend, thereby relieving me of my suffering.

"Erin? You okay there?"

"I'm so not okay. What am I going to do, Isa?" I felt the telltale sign of tears, that stupid stinging sensation that makes you clench your jaw to hold it back, then it just trickles down until your jaw stings, too.

"Don't cry, Erin. That's the *last* thing you want to do, and definitely not in front of Bailey. Come over tomorrow, and we'll figure something out. Besides, I could use some help with English Lit anyway." As an afterthought, she added, "Don't worry. Alex won't be there. He's not back in town for another week."

"I'm sorry. I haven't forgotten about him. I just... I don't know. I've been preoccupied trying to figure out what to do and why my life suddenly took a spiral right into Misery Town."

Coach called us into practice, so we headed toward the door, but Isabella gave my arm a little punch. "It's okay, really. He likes you, but if you turn him down, he'll survive it. He doesn't even know I brought it up, so just take your time."

I smiled, but my heart wasn't in it. It sucked because if she'd mentioned Alex liking me even *two days* earlier, I might have said yes and had a great date planned. But now it just felt like accepting to rush a first kiss, and he deserved better than that for sure. Not for the first time, I found myself wishing Hazel would be waiting outside so I could ask her advice, but since she wasn't, I committed to performing my five laps in record time.

"Miss Carpenter, five laps due now. Around the large track, please." Coach directed me toward the larger track—a whole mile.

My eyes bugged out of my head, and I stutter-stepped, almost tripping over my own feet. "I'm sorry, the large track? Five miles? That'll take me all of the practice." If I didn't die first.

"If the basketball team can do it, so can you. Hop to it." She turned her back to me and started ordering formations while Bailey smirked. I knew she had something to do with my punishment suddenly turning into outright torture, but there was no way to prove it. Instead of arguing and getting additional laps tacked on, I jogged to the track and got to it.

I was used to running two miles several times a week, so the first mile wasn't so bad. However, once I circled back to the starting point, I noticed the boys' basketball team all decked out in their running uniform and prayed they weren't headed to where I was running. Of course, my hopes were dashed when Van and his best friend, Reid, pushed through the gate door and jogged toward the track. I passed him, keeping my eyes on the dirt where they belonged.

"Hey, Erin! What are you doing?" Van called, but I pretended I was already too far to hear him. Why I thought that would work, I can't say, because Van ditched Reid to torture me by falling in step right beside me.

"Can't talk. Busy," I panted.

"This your punishment for showing up late last night?" he asked, committing to running beside me, it seemed. Reid fell in on my right, sandwiching me between two of the school's hottest basketball players.

"Yes, and I have four more laps. Please go away."

Reid jogged ahead, then turned in front of me and ran backward—jerk. "We have three laps. We'll pace you so you can do the final lap without dying."

It was officially the most Reid Sims had ever said to me. Van kept pace with me, even matching my stride for the first lap. It wouldn't have done a bit of good to argue with him, but I had to admit running in silence with them did make the punishment a little less miserable. Once they'd completed their three laps, Reid made a strange gesture to Van, then veered off and headed inside.

"What was that?" I huffed, my legs like jello despite my good shape.

"Nothing. Come on, one more." He was equally as winded, but if he wanted to put himself through one last mile, then so be it.

With a quarter-mile left, he tagged me. "Race you!"

Idiot. I kicked into high gear, sheer determination propelling me to the finish line... but he still beat me by a yard. Even so, he bent over and gave me a thumbs-up as he tried to catch his breath. "Nice. You almost got me."

I fell onto my back and sprawled over the dirt. "Need water. Dying." I swiped sweat from my forehead, sure I looked as gross as I felt.

"Oh, come on. Looks like practice is over for both of us. Hit the shower, then we'll head home." He pulled me up by my limp arms and forced me to walk back to the gymnasium. He was right, the court was cleared out, and everyone was either gone or finishing up in the locker room. It had taken me all of the practice to finish five laps, which was slightly embarrassing, but at least I got to avoid Bailey for the entire hour.

After finding the girl's locker room empty, I decided to shower in the corner stall to see anyone who entered. I was no fool. I remembered what happened to Hazel when Sara freaked out and cut her hair off at the shoulder, but I was sure Bailey would do worse. I'd be lucky if they found my body the following day if she got the jump on me. When I dressed and exited, I saw Van leaning against the wall waiting for me.

"Ready?" he asked, shaking his keys.

"I don't have a choice unless I want to walk home, right?"

"Nope." He grinned and took my cheer bag, though I tried to tug it back. "Quit. You just ran five miles. Let me carry this one." I released it and draped my backpack over my shoulder. I hadn't even let Isabella know if I could make it to her house, but I didn't blame her for not waiting around. I'd just call her or... ignore it and hope it all went away, whichever offered the least amount of embarrassment.

"So," he said, "have you given my idea any thought?"

"No," I lied. It was all I'd thought about in between worrying about what Bailey might do to me.

"Liar. You know, I can still tell when you're lying to me."

I turned my nose up and shook my head. "We're not ten anymore, Van. You stopped caring about me and my facial expressions a long time ago. Even if I am lying, it doesn't mean I have an answer." His truck was parked closer to the building, but the second I saw it, I froze. It was just parked there, looming over me like a giant elephant. He didn't actually *want* to spend time with me but had to for our play to go off without a hitch. He was putting in the effort to be as professional as possible while I... whined and complained. I sighed.

“Erin... Here, sit for a minute, please?” He motioned toward the bench alongside the bus pick-up and drop-off line, then dropped my bag in the grass beside it. Once he’d released the weight of his bag and backpack, he sat and patted the space beside him.

“Van, let’s just—”

“Please, Erin. Sit.”

I sighed again and let my head fall back. Van was exhausting, and between him and the stress from the play, I was sure I’d die from a stress-induced heart attack at the ripe age of seventeen. Once I’d deflated, I sat beside him and crossed my arms.

Van ran his hands through his still wet blonde hair and leaned his elbows on his knees. He clasped his hands between them and stared at the grass. “Your birthday is in three days, four hours, and...” He checked his watch. “...twelve minutes. You still haven’t told your mother you want to act and think business school is dreadful. You probably still have that stupid stuffed skunk I won at the carnival on your bed. You love fall and everything cozy, but secretly you’re afraid of snow, which is why you hate winter. I still haven’t figured that one out, but your expressions are a direct link to your brain and heart, that big heart that’s always thinking of others. And despite your siblings treating you like a nuisance, you still love them more than anything. You’re a great singer, an amazing writer, and a talented actress. I was a stupid, stupid boy for ruining our friendship just to get popular because I know for as long as I live, I will probably never meet anyone as sweet and kind and supportive as you.”

He licked his lips, and just when I thought I was supposed to say something—as if I could—he took another breath and went another round. “I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for letting you down, so I can’t exactly ask you to unless I change, right? I need to prove that I’m not a self-absorbed jerk who only cares about popularity and be the kind of person who deserves to have Erin Carpenter as a best friend. I miss our friendship. Even though we were little kids, we still had a great thing.”

A warning bell went off in my mind. It started as a little hum, then grew into an air-raid siren warning me not to fall for his lines. He was, after all, an epic prankster and joker of the highest order. Was this a setup for a senior prank? Draw me in, set me up, then destroy me? On stage, maybe? Would he do something like that? Surely, Van wasn’t *that* cruel.

“Don’t. Don’t look at me like that. I know that brain of yours, and the answer is no. No, it’s not a trick. I’ve wanted to approach you for a while now, ever since... Ever since your dad... but it never felt like the right time. I didn’t want you to think that was the only reason. Even before that, there were times I wondered if it was all just... just *stupid*.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, so tense even my fingers ached.

“Sure, I’m popular. I have everything, but I don’t trust it, you know? It isn’t solid.”

I chewed my lower lip and tried to ignore how incredible he smelled. It was Van. I wasn’t supposed to tolerate him, let alone appreciate *anything* about him, like the way he smelled like shampoo and some famous cologne. Or that, despite those warning bells, his speech felt sincere. Everything in me wanted to run away, to hide until the world forgot I was supposed to play the lead in the play, but that stupid heart he claimed I had wouldn’t let me.

“Okay,” I whispered.

He twisted on the bench to face me. “Okay, what?” Skeptical. I didn’t blame him.

“Okay, we can hang out, and I can try to not hate you anymore.” A goofy, wide grin spread his lips so far, I swore it reached his hairline. I held my hand up, calming him before he went wild with excitement. “But... you get one shot, Van. One shot. If you ruin it, I’ll hate you forever and quit my role.”

Van offered me his hand and said, “Deal. But you know what this means, right?”

“It means nothing. I said we’d hang out and try to be friends again. I never said I’d want to kiss you. Let’s just stop trying to figure out what to do and let life lead us, okay. I’m stressing out over whether I should just go on a date and kiss some guy or submit to kissing my mortal enemy.” I took his hand and shook it.

“Mortal enemy? Wow, I knew you hated me, but I didn’t think it was that bad.” I glared at him and picked up my bag. “And it’s a deal. A kiss is a stupid thing to stress over anyway. Now, if this is the first day of us—I mean, *me*—working to repair our friendship, then we have to do something fun. It’s Friday night, so you know what that means.”

“Um... get my homework done early so I can binge-watch reruns of—”

“What? No. No, Erin, it means we go to karaoke night and sing like our lives depend on it.” He grabbed the rest of the bags and lugged them into his truck, dumped them in the back, then opened the door for me.

“I haven’t been to karaoke night since... Okay, I’ve actually never been with you now that I think about it. I only went with my dad.” Thinking about it brought that sting back to my eyes, so I swallowed and tried to think of anything else.

“Is it okay? We can do something else if you want.” He stood with the truck door open, staring back at me.

I chewed my lip again and tried to decide if going to karaoke would make things worse or better... or maybe just... *different*? I missed my father so much, but never singing again was ridiculous. He loved singing, and it had been a long time since I just let loose and had fun. Van cared about my father, too. In fact, his funeral was the only time in eight years he said something kind to me instead of teasing me. It was at Dad’s *funeral*, but... it *did* make me feel a little less alone.

“I think it might be fun. Sure, why not?”

That grin took his face again, and he slammed the door. Once he was in the driver’s seat, he followed it up with a challenge. “Best singer buys dinner?”

“Oh, please, why don’t you just get my order now?” I teased.

“Hey, I’ve been practicing in the shower every day. My hairbrush has heard some impressive ballads. You never know, Pumpkin.” He pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward our neighborhood, leaving me staring at him with my mouth hanging open. He hadn’t called me pumpkin since we were ten. It had been Error or some other name meant to poke fun at me, but Pumpkin? Pumpkin was... well, highly descriptive for my obsession with the gourd, but also a very affectionate, personal nickname.

For four miles, I debated asking him not to call me Pumpkin either, but by the time he pulled into my driveway, I decided I didn’t mind it. Mom was home, surprisingly, so I was excited to get

inside to catch up with her. She hadn't seen Van since the funeral either, so I sucked down my anxiety and offered my half of the olive branch.

"Did you want to come in and say hi to Mom?"

Van fidgeted with his keys and tapped his steering wheel with his other hand.

"I mean, you don't have to if you can't. I just thought... never mind. You probably have better things to do before we go out later." I popped the lock on my seatbelt and gathered a few pencils that had escaped my unzipped bag. Meanwhile, Van thought it necessary to help me pick them up and leaned over to grab one from the floorboard. He smashed his head into my face.

"Ow!" I yelped and grabbed my nose. "I remember how painful it is to be your friend now, and I'm starting to see the downside of this arrangement."

"Oh, Pumpernickel, I'm so sorry."

Pumpernickel. It was one of the many variations he used, almost always when he'd done something that caused me pain. Pumpkin, Pumpernickel, and that one time he called me Princess Fancy McPumpkin Pants.

He pried my hands from my face to inspect the damage. "I think you'll survive. There's not even a bump. Let's go in and see your mom. I mean, if you think she won't mind."

"Why would she mind, Van? You know Mom, the more, the merrier." I swatted his hand away from my face—mostly because his palm had settled over my cheek, and it felt way, way too personal—and jumped out of the truck. I had no idea why my mother was home so early, but I hoped her boss had finally given her some time off after so many years of dedicated service.

The second I opened the front door and smelled the chocolate chip cookies... I knew something was wrong.