

## Chapter Fourteen

After only a few days, it had become customary for Van to pick me up for school. It had also become commonplace to ignore stares and the occasional comment. Unfortunately, I was also used to Bailey and her inability to move on with someone else. *Anyone* else, God bless his poor, poor soul. Van had gone to his locker while I was at mine, wishing Isa and Reid were there. Two days without them felt like an eternity.

“Here’s the thing,” Bailey said, leaning against the locker beside mine. “I’m sure I told you to stay away from Van, not ride to school with him. What will it take for you to get a hint?”

I slammed my locker closed and zipped my bag, then slung it over my shoulder without a word. If ever there was a substance that would just make a person disappear, I would have paid good money for a whole bottle of it—for her or me, I wasn’t sure, but it would have been great.

“Are you listening to me? Stay away from—”

“I don’t have to do what you say. In fact, unless you want me to report what your brother did to the police, stay away from me. My mom is mad enough.”

“My brother didn’t do it. You can’t prove it.” She brushed her hair over her shoulder with ease and confidence, then practically pushed someone over to keep up with me. “Anyway, this is your last warning. Van will be mine again, so just accept it and move on while you still can.”

I stopped walking, forcing her to stutter step so she could keep her icy glare on me. “Is that a threat? Please,” I said, stepping forward. “Please, let it be a threat so I can fight back this time.”

Bailey swallowed and straightened her back, her eyes darting around.

I’d had enough. Just... *enough already*.

“It’s a promise, Error.”

I smiled and stepped closer, forcing her back against the wall. “Bring it on, Bailey. Whatever you think you have, bring it on. Or maybe you should move on because Van has made it very clear he wants to be with me, not you.”

Bailey’s eyes flamed, and her face scrunched. “Why you—”

“Hey, gorgeous.” Van slid his arm around my waist and kissed my cheek, then glanced at Bailey. “Everything okay?”

I smoothed my shirt and cleared my throat, now terrified I had just provoked a rabid beast who would undoubtedly bring everything she had to use against me. Was I a crazy person? What had I done?

“It’s... it’s fine. I need to get to class.” I darted toward the theater with Van, but he was so tense I hardly made any headway.

“No, this is enough. This ends now.” Van turned around, practically dragging me with him. Bailey, with several of her friends and some she shared with Van—including Hannah—had crowded around. “We’re over, Bailey. I tried to be nice about it and let you walk away with some dignity, but this has gone too far. Stop acting like a crazy stalker, leave Erin alone, and go do something with your life besides bullying innocent people.”

“Are you *kidding* me? You’re choosing her? Her?” Bailey threw her hands in the air and shrieked. “*You’re* the one who started all the jokes about her, or have you forgotten that?”

Suddenly, just because you say so, we're supposed to... what... let her pretend she's someone special around here? Well, she's not, and the faster she remembers that, the better."

Before Van replied, one of his friends stepped forward. "Are you really walking away from all your friends for a girl? For this girl?"

Everyone watched us. My cheeks were on fire, and my palms sweat, but hiding behind Van was almost impossible. People even crowded behind us to see the action, the final showdown between the popular kids and the boy who got away, stolen from them by the so-called poor orphan girl, the nobody.

Van snickered. "No. I'd never walk away from my friends for a girl."

My heart paused, some small voice telling me I told you so. This was the ultimate setup, the biggest prank Van had ever played. I started to retreat, to wiggle free from his grip, but he only tightened it and looked down at me.

"But I would absolutely walk away for *the* girl. For this girl, I'd do anything." His gaze swept from me back to his former friends. "I never should have left her in the first place, so just let it go. Accept it and just... let it go."

Van's former friend stepped forward as if to punch Van, but little Hannah stepped between them and linked her arm with mine.

"And on that note," she said, "I believe I will also take my leave." She glanced over her shoulder at Bailey, whose broiler burned hotter than a steam locomotive, then shrugged. "I gotta say, this parting ain't all that sorrowful. It's been fun, but I've got things to do."

I was in a stupor. I wanted to be in control of my own life, to contribute to the parting of ways, but I was stunned into complete silence. All I could do was walk away, eyes glazed over, mouth agape, with Van and Hannah on either side of me. We had made it all the way to the theater, gone inside and taken our seats, and even pulled the scripts before anyone said anything else.

Hannah leaned in close. "You okay, there?"

I blinked, my death grip wrinkling the script sheets, and nodded. Then shook my head. I was so confused about how to feel I alternated between shaking and nodding until I finally said, "What did we do? Oh my gosh, she's gonna *kill* me! I'm a dead woman walking!"

Van smoothed my hair and ran a thumb over my cheek. "I'm sorry, but I'm sure she'll get over it soon. What can she do? The whole school saw that, and if she tried anything, everyone would know it was her. Even teachers saw. She can't really do much and get away with it."

"My mom was so mad, Van. She wanted to call the police about the peanuts in my locker. If anything else happens—"

"Shh... I know. I know, pretty girl. Give her some time to cool down. She'll realize I'm not worth the work and leave you alone."

"Ha! We just gave her more fuel for the fire. I'm not cut out for this. What am I supposed to do?" I was shaking with fear. I just knew Bailey would find something new to torture me with every day until we graduated. I'd have to go into witness protection, hide in my basement, live off the land until she was well on her way to college.

"Erin, you stood up for yourself. It was brave, and it's the Erin I know and love. You never let anyone mess with you when we were kids, and I know—"

I sighed and interrupted Van. "When we were kids, I hadn't been picked on and bullied for ten years, Van. Since then, I've learned to lay low and blend in. I can't exactly do that when I'm dating the most popular guy in school, can I?"

Van flinched. I replayed what I said in my mind and really heard it.

"I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean it like that, but it is true. I just meant there's no way I can hide from her, and standing up to her might lead to more problems."

"Standing up to her might *also* encourage more people to do it, Erin. There are a lot of us like you who are sick of the Bailey's of the world telling us what to do. Do you know she told a freshman to walk into traffic last week because she had the nerve to wear the same dress she did?" Hannah asked.

I rolled my eyes. Of course, I knew. I'd been there hiding in the shadows. I'd also been the one who told the girl she looked beautiful and shouldn't let Bailey make her feel less than worthy. The girl had changed by lunchtime. I wasn't exactly one to inspire the masses.

Van had gone quiet, and Mrs. McAlister entered, distracting me from my problems for an hour. Surprisingly, the rest of the day was relatively uneventful, probably because Bailey went home sick, which was code for going home to plot my death. I had almost forgotten about cheer practice until I spied Van with his gym bag. Fortunately, I had a chance at a decent practice with Bailey gone.

Without Isa, there was no buffer between the other girls and me, also known as Bailey's sidekicks, minions, and groupies. Even so, I hoped with Hazel's routine ideas, they might at least tolerate me for two hours. I changed and rushed out to the gymnasium, where the guys were already doing warm-ups. It was odd seeing Van without Reid, but I had to focus on cheer, so I averted my eyes and approached the group, already whispering about me.

"Hey," I said, fidgeting with my ponytail. "So, I saw Hazel, and she showed me some cool stuff if you want to talk about it. I mean... it's what Bailey asked me to do, so...."

I was met with nothing but glares and icicle eyes until Marybeth stood. "Fine. Tell us what she suggested, and we'll see what we think."

"Uh, okay, so she had a partial dance routine we can add to or whatever you want, but the new tricks, I think, will put us at an advantage if you're up for them all?"

"How many?" Marybeth asked.

"A lot, but the momentum of the music should keep us energized through the whole thing."

A round of sighs echoed in our corner of the gym. "Well, let's learn the tricks first. That way, there's time to adjust if we need to," Melanie said.

Fifteen minutes later, we were ready to attempt the first one. Marybeth and Melanie took Rose and Hazel's positions while Lena spotted me. I lifted into their hands and had a moment of panic. I'd leaped with them dozens... *hundreds* of times... but that was before Bailey outright hated me. Before Van, I was just one of her minions on the squad. Now... I shook off the panic and stood straight.

"Ready?" Marybeth asked. I nodded and bent my knees as they lowered, then tossed me into the air. I executed the twist with perfection, but my landing was slightly off. The gym floor was much different than the grass in Hazel's backyard, so I needed to adjust.

We tried the same trick a few more times before it felt exactly right, then Marybeth said, “Do you think you could do a full flip then a twist? If we gave you more height?”

I wiped my sweaty forehead and said, “Uh... maybe?”

“Let’s get a pad out here just in case and give it a try.” Marybeth motioned for one of the newer girls to get the floor pads while we discussed the routine. Once she returned, I was back in the air again. I tried three times before I managed to get a complete flip and a twist, but the landing was short. I needed more height.

“One more time,” Marybeth said, so we went again.

The second they lifted me, I felt Melanie’s grip tighten and pull me slightly off balance. My momentum was skewed, so I fell forward and headed toward the mat, only... the mat had shifted and was nowhere near beneath me. Marybeth overcompensated to try to cushion my fall, but it was no use. I landed on my side with my left arm beneath me.

Marybeth gasped and kneeled beside me. “Erin! Erin, are you okay?”

Melanie giggled and high-fived Lauren, who happened to be Bailey’s best friend. Melanie had done it on purpose? How could anyone inflict actual harm on someone over a boy? Why would they want me to fall just because Bailey was mad at me?

Marybeth’s eyes narrowed, and she stood. “Call her an ambulance! I think her arm is broken. Now!” The girls scattered, and Marybeth kneeled beside me again. “I heard a crack, and your arm is... not right. Don’t move, Erin.”

“Don’t pretend you’re not happy,” I said, jerking away from her.

Green eyes widened, and her mouth fell open, then she closed her eyes and sighed. “I get why you might think that, but I’m not happy you got hurt, Erin. I’m not that mean.”

“Well, Melanie is, apparently.”

“Bailey probably told her to do it. I shouldn’t have agreed to the tricks today.” She tucked her wavy red hair behind her ear. “This is ridiculous. Van’s hot and everything, but she’s gone off the deep end over him, for sure. Speaking of your boyfriend—”

“Erin!” Van slid on his knees, squeaking across the gym floor, and stopped beside me. “What happened?”

“She fell from about eight feet up, Van. What do you think happened?” Marybeth squeezed between Van and me, keeping him from picking me up. “Don’t move her. I think her arm is broken.”

It was definitely broken if the pain radiating up my arm was any indication. I tried to stay in one place, but the angle I fell put a lot of pressure on the arm, so I rolled slowly to my back, sending pain spiraling up and down my arm. I squeaked as tears dribbled over my cheeks. Melanie, who had been pacing, stopped and stared at me. She had gone too far, and she knew it.

Once the ambulance arrived, I was loaded up and taken back to the hospital. Van promised to call my mother and meet us there, while Marybeth apologized again for something she didn’t even do. I wondered, if only briefly, if she would tell the coach what Melanie had done.

I waited in the ER for almost an hour before I finally got an x-ray, then I was met with a familiar face... again.

“Erin Carpenter, you are having the worst week of anyone I’ve ever known. What happened now?”

“I fell in cheer practice,” I mumbled, already in more pain than I cared to mention.

“I see,” Dr. Simmons said. He didn’t push, which was a good thing since I had no desire to explain what happened. “The good news is you won’t need surgery. The bad news is, you definitely need a cast, no cheer for eight weeks.”

“That’s actually good news. I hate it, and I quit.” I grit my teeth to keep from lacing together every expletive I knew. My mom was stuck in traffic, so I had to wait for the hospital to get her permission before even getting pain medication. It hadn’t kicked in yet, so I was still in pain and cranky.

“Well, that’s up to you, but for at least eight weeks, you’ll need to be careful with that arm. I’ll write you a prescription for pain medication, and they’ll be in soon to cast the arm.” His gaze lifted from his chart to me. “I’m really sorry, Erin. I get the feeling this is about more than a nasty fall. If you want to talk about it, I’m all ears. Or you can call Hazel or speak to your mom. Just know you have people willing to listen and help if you need it.”

I smiled, weak and pathetic. “Thanks. I appreciate it, Dr. Simmons.”

And so, I left the hospital for the second time in a week with a brand-new cast—in purple, because why not—and a downright irate mother and boyfriend. There was no doubt my mother would visit the school now, but how could I prove Melanie had let me fall on purpose? Not just let me fall, but purposely put me off balance and kicked the mat away.

Reid and Isa, good-hearted to their core, were waiting for us when we pulled into the drive. Mom glanced over at me, then into the rearview to see Van. “Half an hour, Erin, then you need some rest.”

She left us on the porch and let the door slam on her way in.

“Wow. She’s furious,” Isa said. “She didn’t even say hello.”

“She’s worried,” I admitted and sat in Reid’s vacated seat beside Isa.

Reid leaned against the house while Van sat on the front porch steps, brooding. Reid frowned, then said, “Well, at least the cast is cool. I mean, it’s purple and... and... Okay, I’ve got nothing. I wanted to cheer you up, but I don’t know what to say.”

Isa’s face softened, and she smiled at her boyfriend. “It’s a sweet thought, but she probably just needs rest, like her mom said.

“Oh, no,” I said, grabbing her before she escaped. “I at least need my friends to sign it.”

“Well, yeah.” Isa rolled her eyes, and I pulled a marker from my bag. The cast was a bit dark for anything legible, but she drew a few hearts, wrote her name under them, and handed the marker to Reid.

In bold, giant letters, he wrote, *Erin is awesome!!!!*

I chuckled because the small sentiment actually did cheer me up, and I had a good feeling breaking my arm would be the final thing Bailey and her minions planned for me. Anything more would surely get them all in trouble... if I could prove it.

Van drew my name in an intricate script, then gently rotated my arm and wrote *Van loves* above it. He traced circles over my fingertips as he wrote, lost in his own world. I knew he blamed himself,

but neither of us—not even me—could have anticipated Melanie being so vindictive. And when she realized I really was injured, even she was worried. I still wanted her to pay for it, but at least I knew it had gone farther than she intended. Maybe it would stop now.

That's the thing about thinking... wishing... hoping. No matter how much you do it, it doesn't really change anything.