

## Chapter Four

“Mom, what are you doing home?” I dropped my bag on the kitchen table. Two boxes sat in the corner marked *Personal Items*. I swallowed. There was only one reason I could think of that those would be in our kitchen and not at her office. Van stood behind me with my cheer bag in hand, waiting.

Mom’s gaze shifted between the two of us, confusion clouding her already red-rimmed eyes. She saw Van, but it didn’t seem to register that my arch-nemesis was standing right beside me as if nothing had ever gone wrong. Her shoulders slouched, and she put another tray of cookies on the counter.

“There were some cutbacks at work,” she said. “They... they let me go.”

“They what?” My heart bottomed out.

“It’s fine, honey. I’ll figure something out.” She dropped her oven mitt on the counter and smiled. She was so tired, so worn out by life, it hardly seemed fair that nothing ever went right. Stress baking was her thing, and judging by the number and variety of cookies stacked in little plastic tubs, she’d been at it a while.

“How can they just fire you? You’ve worked there since before I was born!” I clenched my fists at my side, forgetting Van was even in the room until I felt his hand on my shoulder. I also hadn’t realized I was shaking until then.

“Erin, it’ll be okay. I’ll work something out. It’s not for you to worry about.” Her gaze slid to Van, and she offered him a sugar cookie heaped with frosting. “It’s been so long since we’ve had you over, Van. How are you?”

“I’m... good. Thanks for the cookie.” Van crammed it in his mouth, probably to keep from saying something that would only make things worse.

“Mom, what are—”

“Erin Louise Carpenter, we have a guest. We’ll talk about it tonight.” Mom’s tone was crystal clear. We would never discuss it. She would do whatever she had to do, but at what cost to her?

Van cleared his throat. “Um... maybe this is a bad time. Should we postpone our plans or—”

“Nonsense. Erin needs to get out more. Besides, I need to work on my resume, and I could use some quiet time. Go on now, run along,” Mom said. She kissed my cheek and hugged me, renewing her energy. I felt it, the way she pressed her cheek against my head, gaining strength from just holding her youngest child. I knew she loved me, surprise or not, and nothing would ever change that.

However, I was not prepared to spend an entire afternoon with Van, so I was a little put off when she shoved us both back out the door to finish anger baking and spruce up her resume. Did she even *have* a resume after working at the same job for twenty years? Didn’t they owe her some kind of retirement, even though she was still a few years from retirement age? I didn’t have much time to consider the situation before Van planned the rest of our day.

“So, I know we agreed on karaoke, but it’s a little early for that. I’m not sure it’s even open yet, so what if we—”

“It’s okay, really. I can just climb into the treehouse and read for a while before we leave. I’m sure you have other things to do.” I headed toward the treehouse, but he followed me like one of those Labrador retriever dogs that can’t take a hint. “I can definitely read by myself.”

“I’m sure you can, but I don’t have better things to do. I want to hang out with you, and I haven’t seen the treehouse in forever.” He trudged through the grass beside me, grass that hadn’t been cut in three weeks because the lawn mower broke, and we couldn’t pay to fix it, buy a new one, or hire someone to cut the grass.

I stopped midway to the treehouse and turned, my argument prepared for why I needed to be alone to think. But he was more prepared.

“Nope. We’re not doing this. You’re not going to sink into that hole and let it eat you alive, Erin. Your mom will find a job, and everything will be fine.”

“Oh, will she? How can you be so sure about everything, Van? How do you know we won’t lose our house and everything in it?” It was already more than I wanted him to know, but it was apparent from the state of disrepair our house had fallen into that we were sinking. In addition to the grass, the house needed painting, the porch needed boards replaced, and the treehouse... well, it would probably fall out of the tree if I tried to climb into it.

Van scratched the back of his neck and looked around, taking in everything as if only looking at it for the first time. With each shift of his gaze, my heart sank lower. Sure, I could do a lot of the work for my mother, but when? I hardly had time to breathe between school, practice, and homework. Just going to karaoke with him would mean putting homework off until Saturday.

I licked my lips, another argument ready. All I had to do was throw him off the scent, then he would go home to his happy, tidy house and leave me alone until it was time to drag me out for fun.

“Van, all I want to do is—”

“I didn’t know it was—” He chuckled, then said, “Go ahead.”

“No... no, it’s okay. What were you going to say?” I stared at his shoes while he kept scratching his neck, both of us one awkward word away from a full-blown, cliché, young adult novel.

“I didn’t know it was this stressful for you. I’ve got some free time tomorrow, so I’ll come by and cut the grass. You can help me. Then we can do whatever else you need done around here over the next few weeks. We can practice our lines just as easily painting as we could sitting in my game room, right?”

Drat. My eyes stung again, but I wasn’t sure if it was because he was so kind about it, because I was so tired of taking hit after hit, or if I was finally ready to let it go. But he wasn’t the best person to unearth all my insecurities and worries onto, so I bit my lip and held my breath to stop the surge of anxiety.

“Why,” I asked, unable to hide the tremor of my voice.

Blue eyes, filled to bursting with genuine emotion, locked on mine. “Because it’s what I *should* have done all along. I should have been there for you after he died, and I wasn’t. I kept pretending like... like *this thing* between us was okay, but it isn’t.”

I wrung my fingers, twisting them, so I had something to focus on besides the way his stare made me feel, how his presence in my life offered something I’d missed though I hadn’t realized

it until it was there again. He didn't know how much I needed to hear that, how much I wanted to feel something, *anything* besides the dread and despair I felt every morning when I woke. That dread followed me all day and tucked me in at night, always waiting, always wondering what would happen. It had robbed me of my personality, stripped me of any identity that wasn't focused solely on survival, and left me with nothing but numbness most days.

"Erin..." Van stepped closer and took my hands. "I'm really, truly sorry. And I won't stop working until I see you smile every day like you used to when we were kids. I won't stop until your life is full of laughter, so I'm standing here right now with an offer. It doesn't have anything to do with the play or that kiss or anything like that. I'm asking you to let me help you with all of this. Let me shoulder some of it."

"Van... It... It isn't that simple. You're asking me to just leap and trust you again, but can't you see how impossible that is?"

"Yes, but I'm willing to put in the work."

"Why?" I asked, shrugging as I wiggled my hands free from his. "Why me and why now? This is about more than a play, Van. It's more than feeling guilty about what's happened between us over the last eight years. What is it?"

Van's eyebrows darted, and his lips pursed until his face contorted. He looked like he'd both been smacked in the face and sucked a lemon at the same time. But as quickly as it came, his expression changed. It was the one he always had when he looked at me—cool, collected, king of the school. I'd seen that face a million times over the years, and it never meant anything good would come out of his mouth.

"Never mind," I said. "I don't want to hear a lie." I walked away from him, wading through the grass that reached midway up my calf. It was embarrassing, really, but what could I do? Trim it with a pair of scissors? Never once did it occur to me to ask the neighbor if we could borrow his lawn mower, not until Van mentioned using his father's. It was getting cold out, so if I mowed it once more, then it shouldn't grow again until spring—plenty of time to save for a cheap mower.

I veered to my right to ask Mr. Valencia if I could borrow it, but Van cut me off. He stepped in front of me with his hands up, defending whatever he was about to say. I didn't want to hear it. Life was hard enough without his lies or excuses.

"Not now, Van."

"Erin, stop. Please, just stop, okay? You act like you're the only person in the world with problems, but you're not. I get that it's been hard, and now everything seems all messed up, but you're not—"

I threw my hands in the air and stepped toward him, fuming. "Are you *kidding* me right now? You haven't been a part of my life for eight years except when you inject yourself to tease me. You apologized all of an hour ago, and now you expect me to let you preach to me? Go home, Van. I'll resign my position in the play, and you can kiss some other girl, probably one who'll fall all over you like a lovesick puppy, just like you need to fuel your massive ego."

"That's not what I want, and you know it." He leaned closer, matching my frustration. His cheeks flushed, and he waved his hands around. I realized then, we were at the beginning of an argument—a very public argument. He didn't seem to care, so I kept going.

"I wouldn't know what you want, Van! How would I know? All I know is, I got the part of Juliet and now... now *this*. I don't know what you expect from me in one day. One day, Van!"

"I don't know! I just need you, okay?" And just like that, Van deflated like a popped balloon, limp and useless in the middle of my backyard. His lower lip trembled, so he looked away. It was too late. Too late to change what I'd seen, too late to take back what he said, too late to hide that tears slipped over his cheeks.

"Van?" I whispered. "Tell me what's wrong right now, please."

In all my life, I would never have expected him to do what I asked, let alone let me see him that way—dejected, eyes welled with tears, weak and afraid. But he did. "It's not fair."

"What's not fair?"

He snickered and wiped his cheeks. "It's not fair for me to ask you for this, and it's not fair...." He sucked in a breath and tried again. "My father has a brain tumor, Erin. It's aggressive and inoperable. He's dying."

I wanted to wall myself in, to block out everything—every memory of my father's tumor, how he faded away in a matter of weeks, the way the house still smelled a little like him, so I expected to see him just turning the corner... all of it because if I didn't accept Van's words, then they weren't real. But they were real, and he was falling apart in front of me. He lost control of those tears and covered his face. He was just *standing* there, exposed and crumbling. And he needed me.

"Van," I said, then took two steps and wrapped my arms around him. He did need me, and as much as I hated it, I understood why. No one else knew what he was going through. No one else had been through it or knew what to expect. More importantly, no one else would cry with him. Mr. St. Claire had been my father's friend, and he'd always been kind to me.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled against my shoulder, but I squeezed him tighter. "I do need you, but that's not the only reason I want to be friends again, Erin. I miss you. I miss who I am with you."

"We'll figure it out, Van. We'll just... figure it out somehow."

He pulled away—and because he was a popular guy, his hair was still perfect—and smiled. It was fake, but at least he wasn't crying anymore. He wiped his face with his shirt and shook his head. "You probably think I'm such a baby."

"Absolutely not. Why would I think that? It's your father, Van." I checked my watch. We'd be early for karaoke, but we could eat dinner first. He needed a break. We both needed one, and it sure wouldn't kill us to laugh a little. He was right. I didn't have to carry everything alone, and neither did he. "Let's go get something to eat, then sing until we lose our voices."

"Yeah? Really?"

I ruffled his hair because no one deserved to have such perfect hair, especially not after snot-crying all over someone's shoulder, then giggled. "Yeah. You're right. At least, partly right. You might need me, but I think I might need you too."

Van headed toward his truck with a professional-level smirk. "You know you missed me."

"Yeah," I said, climbing into the passenger seat. "Like you miss a headache or a toothache or some other kind of dull, annoying pain you can't get rid of."

“Oh, you can do better than that, Pumpkin Patch. Come on, what happened to those zingers you used to throw at me?” He started his truck, a completely different person. He was happy on a level I hadn’t seen in... well, eight years. Of course, it wasn’t like I’d seen him around outside of school, but I was pretty sure he hadn’t smiled like that in years. “Remember that time you dared me to feed the geese?”

I doubled over laughing. “How could I forget? You were so gullible back then!”

“How was I supposed to know a gaggle of geese would fight me to the death for a piece of bread? That was terrifying, Erin! And I had peck marks for weeks! Weeks, Erin!”

“Aw, they were cute little goose peck marks. But don’t act like you didn’t get me back. My hair was purple for a week, and my mother was not happy.”

“I didn’t know powdered juice mix would dye your hair for that long, I swear.”

We were already out of our neighborhood, and I’d forgotten why I hated him so much. At least, I had for a while. Maybe he was right? Maybe if we hung out enough, I wouldn’t mind kissing him so much? After all, kissing a friend wasn’t as bad as kissing an enemy, even if he *wasn’t* who I wanted my first kiss to be with. There were certainly worse things that could happen. I’d already been through one of them, and he was about to do the same. My heart opened a little, enough to really, truly give Van a chance to redeem himself.

We were almost at Lazy Charlie’s when Van spoke again. “Erin?”

“Hmm?” I asked, dragging my gaze from the window to him.

“Thank you.” He reached for my hand and squeezed it, then put his back on the wheel and focused on the road. It was obvious to anyone who cared to pay attention that his offer of civility and restoration was more about him than me, but did it matter in the long run? Did it ever matter how two people found their way back to one another?

Only time would tell, but fifteen minutes after I inhaled my last French fry, I remembered why Dad and I never invited Van to karaoke nights. The screeching... oh, the screeching.