

Chapter Seven

“So, what’s up with you and Van? Are things going okay?” Isabella scraped the paint from a column on the porch while Reid was busy cutting boards to the proper length. “I mean, he’s here helping you get your house fixed up, so it seems like things must be good.”

I sighed and scraped a little harder. “It’s weird, actually.”

“Weird?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek, then decided it wouldn’t hurt to get her opinion. “He told me last night that he likes me and wants us to be together, you know, like dating, and for some reason, I can’t understand, I kind of...” I faded, unsure what to say that wouldn’t seem like an idiot falling for the boy who’d essentially bullied her for years.

“He made your life kind of miserable, Erin.” Isabella had stopped scraping and stood staring at me. She wasn’t wrong. In fact, she was so right I almost smacked myself. She noted my hesitation and raised a hand. “Wait, I wasn’t insinuating you shouldn’t offer him a second chance. My Grams is always telling me that we should forgive. I’m just saying be careful.”

I groaned and wiped the sweat from my forehead. Who knew scraping paint could be so tedious? “I know. I just can’t stop thinking about how it was when we were kids, but I know we’ve grown and changed. He seems sincere enough, right?”

Isabella started scraping again but slower and more methodically. “I agree. It’s just strange, that’s all. What brought on the sudden change?”

“It’s not my story to tell. It’s pretty private, but it’s a big life change. I think he wants me by his side for it, which makes sense, but I also think maybe he’s matured. Like he realizes some of his friends aren’t that great.”

Isabella huffed. “Yeah, like his piece of work ex-girlfriend. I’m a little worried about how she’s gonna take this. You are the least likely person anyone would expect Van to fall for.” She paused and looked at me. “Okay, that came out wrong. I meant you two are like enemies or whatever. It’s just strange, especially since I didn’t know you back when you were friends.”

I finished scraping, so I grabbed a sheet of sandpaper and wrapped it around a block of wood, ready to smooth the surface for painting. I didn’t know what to say. What would I do about Bailey Fields, especially if things with Van did work out? She’d not only kill me, but she’d also feed my body to her little dog.

Reid returned with the boards and got to work, ending our conversation. I noticed Isabella stealing glances at him, but I wasn’t sure she was interested. He *was* nice to look at, especially when he was working. I even caught myself staring a time or two.

Mom stepped out on the porch and let the screened door slam behind her. Her hair was tied up, and she wore her usual cleaning day clothes. It was time to get our house back in order, something we’d let slip in the time since my father passed. We did general cleaning, of course, but the house had a sort of neglected feel to it.

“I’ve made lunch if you’re hungry,” she said, circling her arms around me in a hug. She’d always been older than my friend’s mothers, but I didn’t mind. She was also better at mothering than most, so I always felt like I had it better than the kids with young moms.

"It's lunchtime already?" Reid asked, checking his watch. "Wow. Yeah, I'm starving." He pushed up through the porch and hoisted his legs through, then brushed off his pants, smiled at Isabella, and followed my mom inside.

Isabella quickly looked away, her cheeks tinged pink.

"You okay?" I asked. "You seem a little distracted."

She cleared her throat. "Yep. I'm fine. Definitely not distracted. Nope. Not me. I am totally, completely *not* distracted by... Oh, Erin, help me," she said, dropping her sandpaper so she could cover her face. "What is happening to me? Reid is an idiot. He's a complete show-off, a grade-A doofus, and doesn't take anything seriously. I cannot *afford* to be distracted."

I laughed, glad to be in good company where boys and distraction were concerned. "Well, I don't know what to tell you about that, but I have it on good authority that he likes you. I think this was a setup. Scratch that; I *know* it was a setup."

"What?" she screeched and smacked my arm. I'd forgotten she was a hitter when she got excited and rubbed my arm.

"Remind me to take a few steps back the next time I tell you something interesting."

"Erin!" Her eyes went wide, and she stomped her foot. "I'm serious! Tell me what you know right now."

I giggled again, happy to be home on a Saturday with new friends. "Van told me Reid likes you. I think if you showed some interest, he might ask you out."

She wiped her hands on her pants and glanced over her shoulder, then stepped closer to make sure no one would hear. "What do you think? I don't really know him that well."

"I don't either. I'm going by what Van said, but he's supposedly a good guy. I haven't heard of him starting anything at school." I thought back over the years since Van and Reid became friends, about when we started high school, and realized Reid had *never* said an unkind word to me. When all of Van's other friends teased me or made flippant comments in passing, he didn't. He'd offer this odd sort of guilty grin, but he never said anything.

"He's been kind of fun today, but do I have time for fun?"

I knew what she meant. Between activities, college applications, and the hectic workload of senior year, we didn't have a lot of free time. What time we did have was saved for studying or worrying over everything.

"I think we should make time for fun. Life will be hard enough once we're out on our own, right? Maybe we should fit in some fun?"

"Fit in fun?" she asked with a smirk. "I'm not sure Reid can be fit in. He's a big personality, but... am I crazy for wanting to explore that?" Her black hair curled in wisps around her face, breaking free from her ponytail.

"Why don't we take it slow? You get to know Reid while I get to know Van again? Maybe a double date or something?"

"Oh, that's a good idea! Besides, us dating best friends would be way less weird than you dating my brother, probably. Maybe we can do something tonight?"

"Maybe we can do what tonight?" Van asked, but that ever-present smirk said he'd heard more than I wanted him to hear.

Isabella's cheeks flushed. "We were discussing the possibility of us doing something fun tonight as a reward for our hard work."

"Us, as in the four of us?" Van pushed. Isabella narrowed her eyes and sighed. "Like, on a double date?"

Okay, that one made my stomach bottom out. Knowing Van was all-in with proving he'd changed somehow felt a whole lot different when he called us hanging out a *date*. Even so, I couldn't ignore the fluttery, happy feelings it gave me.

"You could call it that, sure, assuming your friend is brave enough to ask me out instead of chasing me with a garden hose like a child." Isabella unloaded the sass and waved her hand, then headed inside for lunch. There was no way I'd get caught alone with Van again, not after our fifteenth deep conversation in only a couple of days, so I followed her in.

Mom was talking Reid's ear off while he ate his sandwich, but he didn't seem to mind. If she kept feeding him, he'd probably sit there forever listening to her tell him about her travels with Dad when they were first married, long before my siblings came along. Thinking of them reminded me that I hadn't called my youngest sister, but I had a feeling it was no longer necessary.

"These are so good. How is a sandwich this good?" Reid asked, his eyes rolling.

"Mom's had a lot of practice," I said, then grabbed one of my own along with a pile of carrot sticks.

Reid pushed his plate toward Isabella, who helped herself to the other half of his sandwich. Van took the opportunity to encourage his friend. "So," he said, "Wouldn't it be fun to do something later, maybe a movie or something?"

Reid froze. I'd never seen anything like it before in my life. He just... *stopped*. No breathing, no chewing, no swallowing, not even a blink as he stared directly at the kitchen wall. Isabella blinked several times, then shifted her gaze to me. No one said anything, which only added to the oddness of the entire situation.

"Okay, and that is Reid's impression of a statue. Now, anyone up for a movie tonight?" Van asked, then nudged his friend under the table.

"Me!" Reid screamed, startling my mother.

Her hand flew to her chest, and she gasped.

"Goodness! Are you alright, Reid?"

"Um... yes?" he mumbled, but Mom wasn't convinced. In fact, she'd already figured out the situation, assessed it, weighed the results, and drawn her conclusion. It was why she was the best at her job, but it was also frustrating when you wanted to, say, spend all your allowance on an expensive pair of shoes you'd probably only wear a few times.

"Do you have a girlfriend, Reid?" Mom asked. He shook his head, hardly breaking his stare down with the wall. "No? A charming and polite young man like you doesn't have a girlfriend? How unfortunate." She picked up her dishrag and wiped down the counter, feigning absentminded cleaning. But I knew her. She was working on a plan, which basically made her a much better wing-woman than I could have been. Why? Because in a matter of seconds, she had accomplished what I hadn't—she gave Reid the confidence he needed to go for it.

“Seems to me like someone should snatch you up while she can, but I’m just an old woman. What do I know?” Mom reorganized her spices and put the dishes away, periodically saying things like, “You never know though, maybe you’ll find the right girl this year. I met Erin’s father senior year, and we had so much fun.”

Reid glanced at Isabella, who was peeling the crust from her sandwich one tiny piece at a time. Her blush had spread to her forehead and down her neck. Van sat beside me, watching my mother work her magic.

Finally, she turned and said, “Oh, I just had the best thought! Why don’t you take Isabella out tonight? She doesn’t have a boyfriend, and she’s a beautiful girl. Maybe you might get along?”

Isabella’s eyes bugged, but Reid found his courage. “Yeah, she... she is. Actually, I’ve been wondering all day if she might like to go out with me?”

Isabella eyed him, waiting for the other shoe to drop while he sat patiently, still holding his sandwich. “Really? Are... you asking me out?”

Reid put his sandwich down, wiped his mouth, and then shoved his plate aside. It was like my mother, Van, and I didn’t even exist anymore. He leaned closer to her and said, “Yeah. I’m asking if you’d like to go to a movie tonight. I’ve wanted to ask you for a while, but I wasn’t sure if you’d take me seriously or smack me in the face.”

“And now?”

And then it happened. Reid flashed her a million-dollar smile, one that almost made me swoon alongside her. I almost *heard* her heart leap right out of her chest.

“Now, I’m hoping I’m not reading you wrong, but I kind of got the feeling you might not smack me. The jury’s still out on whether you take me seriously.” His smile faded, and he chewed his lip, nerves settling back in.

Isabella shifted and remembered there were three other people in the room. “Oh. Um... I think... I think maybe if we did a double date, I’d be okay with that. I’d like to get to know you a little better.”

Mom smiled and clasped her hands together over her heart. “That, children, is how it’s done.” She bowed and waved as if she’d just accepted an award, forcing a laugh from Van.

“What just happened?” Isabella asked.

I swallowed my bite of carrot and shrugged. “You got mommed. That’s what happened.” I’d have to be blind not to notice the look on Van’s face—he wished it were that easy for us, that my mother would work her magic for him, and he wouldn’t have to suffer for it. But he said nothing, which earned him a few points. He was willing to put in the work, and that made all the difference.

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A knock on my door interrupted me from getting ready for my—gulp—*date* with Van. If Isabella and Reid weren’t going with us, I was sure I’d have already backed out.

“Come in!”

Mom pushed the door open and entered with a bright smile. “You look so beautiful. May I?” She pointed to my hairbrush. I nodded and handed it to her, so she got to work brushing and

styling for me. She had a new brightness to her, a glow that lightened her entire aura. She was happy again, and it spread through me like a ray of sunshine.

“Baby, I wanted to tell you something. I know things between you and Van have been strained for some time, and I want you to know that you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, locking with her green eyes in the mirror.

“I mean, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. Your father would understand if you’re not ready to forgive Van for the things he did. Everything that happens is entirely up to you. There is no pressure, not from me.”

“Why do I feel a ‘*but*’ coming on?”

“But if you *do* want to give him another chance, I also won’t stop you or interfere. I will support your choice in this no matter what. I needed you to hear that and understand it, so when I say this next part, you know I’m always on your side.”

“And what’s the next part?”

“Sometimes people change, sweetheart. I know how you feel—the worry he might be tricking you or just getting close to you because he feels guilty—but he may have changed. And sometimes, when faced with life-altering circumstances, what matters most is suddenly clear, and nothing else matters anymore.”

She finished my hair and put the brush down, then put her hands on my shoulders. “It’s a difficult position you’re in, baby, but I’m so proud of you, and I know your father would be, too, no matter what you choose.”

Adrenaline pushed through me like I was about to free fall into something I couldn’t escape, but with my mother there holding onto me, everything felt a little safer. “And do you think Van sees things a little clearer?”

“I think Van has realized his priorities have been wrong all along and that maybe he already had the best things in life. He only had to face losing them forever to see it.”

“It’s going to be so hard, losing his father.” I knew, and I also knew when Mr. St. Claire passed, it would rip open those old wounds for me, too.

“I wasn’t just talking about losing his father, baby. It’s senior year. Soon, you’ll go off to college. You won’t live right down the street anymore. I think it just occurred to him that he might lose you forever, too. Take from that what you will.” She squeezed my shoulders and kissed my forehead, then headed to her bedroom. “Don’t be out too late! Curfew is eleven!”

I stared into my mirror, seeing everything a little clearer myself. There was no way around it. I had officially been mommed.