

Chapter Two

“Why are you standing on my front porch?” I asked, desperate to avoid Van’s lingering gaze. It swept over me, taking in my sweatpants and sweatshirt, messy hair, and wrinkled pillow-face before reconnecting with my eyes. It wasn’t even six yet.

“I wanted to ask you to ride to school with me. I can tell you about my proposal, and we can practice our lines.”

“It’s... like 5:30, Van. I should still be snuggled in my bed asleep.”

He frowned. “I was up at 4:30. Couldn’t sleep. Sorry.” He shrugged and motioned inside of my house. “Can I come in, please? You can go get ready, and I’ll just... watch television or something.”

I stepped aside and let him in. “No television. It broke last month, but feel free to stare at the wall for an hour.”

“An hour? That’s how long it takes you to look like... *you?*” Of course, he already looked perfect. Designer clothing, not even a strand of hair out of place, and as refreshed looking as a newborn.

I narrowed my eyes and ground my teeth, working hard not to take his head off like a crazed hyena. “No, but I would like to eat breakfast before school. Is that okay with you?”

Van shrugged and fell onto the sofa. “We’ll stop for something on the way to school. Just go do whatever you need to do to *not* look like a cavewoman, and we’ll go.”

My heart raced. I didn’t *want* to grab something on the way. First, I didn’t want to be seen anywhere with him, least of all at one of his favorite joints where all his popular, rich kid friends would stare at me and judge me more than they already did. Second, I didn’t want to spend time with him at all. Not even a little, and I intended to tell him I’d drive myself to school. Third, I couldn’t *afford* to even buy a breakfast sandwich from his favorite place.

“Um... I... I can just drive myself to school. Go ahead and get breakfast, and I’ll meet you in the drama room as soon as I can. We can discuss your proposal that I am sure I’ll shoot down, then get a head start on our lines.” I tried not to fidget with the hem of my ratty sweatshirt, but it was the only way I could maintain eye contact with him and stop my voice from trembling.

His blue eyes raked over me again, and his lips parted. I braced myself for whatever comeback or zinger was up his sleeve, but instead, he said, “It’s my treat, Erin. Anything you want to eat, it’s on me.”

“I can buy my own food, Van,” I snapped, unintentionally releasing my frustration on him. It wasn’t *his* fault we didn’t have any money, but charity wasn’t... I just... didn’t want it.

“I know, but can’t I just do something nice?” He sat upright on the sofa, comfortable as if he’d been in my house a thousand times—he hadn’t been once in eight years—and smiled. “I want to. Please?”

I felt my lower lip tremble, and I knew if I spoke, I’d either cry, or my voice would crack. That would be worse than any joke or cruel comment his friends could throw at me, so I nodded and hurried to the bathroom to get ready for school. Just before I closed the door, I heard him answer his phone.

“Yeah, I think so. Just pray for me because if it doesn’t work, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

I closed the door and locked it, sure I didn't want to hear any of his conversation with whichever of his cronies had called him. A yawn worked its way up from the very depths of my soul, reminding me that he'd woken me up only two hours after my mother had popped in to tell me goodbye for the day. If she didn't stop going in so early and staying so late, she'd drop dead only six years before retirement.

As I stood under the scalding hot water, I formulated a plan. I'd call Sherri. She was my youngest sibling but still eighteen years older than me. Sherri always understood me even when my other siblings didn't, but more than anything, she still cared about our mother. I'd tell her about our financial situation, and maybe she could help. Mom refused to tell them—*I'm the parent, and parents don't take money from their children, Erin*—but if something happened to Mom, what would happen to me?

Fat tears slipped over my cheeks, and I sniffled. It wasn't Mom's fault Dad's life insurance didn't cover half of his medical bills. Cancer was expensive to treat, and funerals were outrageous. Dad wasn't the best with money anyway, and even worse with paperwork. The house had been in his name with no survivorship deed, so Mom and I either needed to move or refinance the house in her name—at a significantly higher interest rate.

I wasn't even supposed to know about any of that, but it was hard to miss all the bills in the mailbox with big, fat, red words warning us our power would be cut off, our water disconnected, or the house repossessed. Sherri might help, and I had to ask her even if it made Mom mad.

I turned off the water and toweled off, then remembered I had forgotten to grab clean clothes from my room. I cracked the door and listened—no way would I dart to my room with Van St. Claire in my house—but he was still in conversation with someone. I dashed and slammed my door, locked it, and breathed a sigh of relief.

I pulled on some jeans and a sweater, then braided my hair. I doubted I'd have time to dry it with Van waiting, which only made me wonder exactly when I'd decided to go along with his request. I furiously brushed my teeth and spread moisturizer over my face, skipped make-up because... *why?* No one paid attention to me anyway, so it was a waste of money.

When I emerged in the living room, Van glanced up from the sofa and stood.

"Gotta go." He shoved his phone in his pocket and stared at me.

"What?" I asked. I looked over myself, noted I had no shoes on, but everything else was in order.

"Um... nothing. Ready?"

"I need shoes, then I'm ready." I rummaged through the shoe basket near the door and pulled out my favorite boots. They were well worn and comfy and matched every winter outfit I had in my closet. Versatility was my middle name. Van snatched my coat from the hook and held it out for me, but when I reached for it, he pulled it back.

"I'm trying to hold it open for you to put it on," he said, shaking it. I blinked but turned around and let him slip it over my shoulders after I tucked my arms in. "So, what do you want for breakfast?"

"Uh, I'm not really sure what's open this early besides fast food."

He scrunched his nose and pushed my front door open. “I know a place. Sort of out of the way, but I think we have time. You up for it?”

“Will all your friends be there?” I asked, unable to hide my hesitation as he literally escorted me down my walkway. He linked his arm with mine and held my hand with his free one. “Also, what are you doing?”

“Practicing chivalry. What does it look like I’m doing, Error?”

I stomped my foot and stopped walking. “First, stop with the chivalry thing. You’re freaking me out. Second, stop—”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Old habits. I swear, I’m trying not to call you that anymore, especially after your father....”

His voice faded, but I knew what was on his mind. He didn’t want to ridicule me about being an accidental child after my father died. Of course, because he was such a stand-up guy, right? Please, give me a break. I licked my lips and yanked my arm away from his. I fished in my bag for my keys, determined not to let him ruin my day already. Once I found them, I headed to my car.

“Wait, Erin. I’m sorry, okay?” He chased me down the walkway, tripped, and fell face-first against the giant maple tree in my front yard.

I gasped, then choked back a chuckle.

“Not funny,” he mumbled while disconnecting himself from my mother’s rose bushes.

“Was from where I stand, jerk.” I was halfway to my car when he finally caught up to me. I knew, without a doubt, if I got in my car, he would just break into the passenger side again. I was too far gone to stop, so I kept going as if he couldn’t foil my plan to ignore him until the day he died—probably at my hands.

He jogged around me and stopped in the path in front of me. He hadn’t even scratched his face. Figures.

“Erin, I’m sorry. I *never* should have started calling you that anyway, okay?”

“It got you all kinds of popular though, didn’t it? So did everything you called me and still call me to this day. Do you even *care* how much it hurts?” Dang it. I hadn’t meant to say *anything*, let alone admit his teasing hurt my stupid, stupid feelings. Instinctively, my head lowered. The way his stare bored through me couldn’t hurt as much if I didn’t see it, so I played with my braid and tried to get around him.

“Erin... Erin, I don’t know what to say. I’m trying, though. I really want to... to... Please let me take you to breakfast, and we can talk. No friends, I promise.” He’d already steered me toward his truck, knowing I couldn’t escape my driveway without him moving it. Rather than answer, I just climbed into the monstrosity once he opened the passenger door. Maybe if I stared out the window the entire way, he’d give up.

Fortunately, he knew when to keep his mouth shut. That or my closed-off posture didn’t give him much to work with. I kept staring as the neighborhoods flashed by, then the shops on the connecting road to town. Eventually, he turned onto the main road... and kept going. I turned to see what he was doing, but he just shook his head and said, “It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

I sighed and continued watching the scenery pass until he pulled into a small shopping center. I'd been there once before with Hazel and Daniel just before they left for D. C. In the corner was Hazel's favorite place, Fire and Ice.

"Are you feeding me cake and ice cream for breakfast?"

Van laughed. "Not exactly. Not many people know this, but they have the best donuts on the planet. Coffee's not bad either." He turned off his truck and glanced at me. "You like donuts still, right?"

"More than anything, so I'll be the judge of their amazingness, thank you. If they are the best on the planet, I should have already known about them." I leaped from the truck and practically plowed him down to get to the door. For some reason only known to him, he insisted on opening it for me.

He chuckled again. "You're a totally different person when a circular cake is brought into the equation, did you know that?"

"Too bad you're not," I said, but he only rolled his eyes and stepped up to the counter. "Hey, Jeanine."

"Good morning, Van. Who's your friend?" The woman behind the counter wore a hair net that hardly contained her blond curls teased to death, but her ruby red lips and infectious smile improved my morning.

"I'm Erin. Nice to meet you, Jeanine."

"This one has manners. I like her. Let's keep her."

Van rolled his eyes again, then said, "I'll have my usual, and Erin likes anything with frosting, preferably white chocolate, nothing with peanuts. She's allergic. Something that pairs with the pumpkin spice tea."

"I have just the thing. Grab a seat, and I'll bring it to you."

Van ushered me to a corner booth and slid in.

"What just happened?" I asked. How did he know I was allergic to peanuts? Furthermore, how did he know I loved white chocolate frosting and pumpkin everything? That wasn't common knowledge, and it certainly wasn't a common thing I ate when we were kids.

He waved over my comment and slid further into the booth. "So, ready to hear my proposal?"

I flopped in the booth and groaned. "Would you stop calling it a proposal? You're not asking me to prom or to marry you. It's weird."

"Okay, fine. Are you ready to hear my idea?"

Jeanine plopped his usual—two plain donuts and black coffee—on the table in front of him with a grin, then sat mine before me. Pumpkin spiced tea which smelled heavenly, and a carrot cake donut with white chocolate frosting. *Holy moly.*

"Um, sure," I said and dove into the donut. My eyes rolled back as the full flavor of the donut hit me. Van sat back and ran a finger over his plate, just watching me devour the donut as if I'd never had one before. I remembered it was gross and bad manners to lick a plate clean, so I slowed down and sipped my tea.

He cleared his throat and leaned his elbows on the table. "So, I get why you wouldn't want to... you know, for that scene. Not with me, anyway, so I had two ideas."

“Hang on.” I held up a finger and took another long sip of my tea, letting the warmth and spice wash over me until I was fairly sure I was relaxed enough to hear whatever cockamamie ideas he had. “Okay, hit me.”

“Idea one, since you don’t want your first kiss to be with me or on stage, I propose—sorry, I *suggest*—we find someone you do want to kiss and get that first kiss thing out of the way. Is there someone you like? Someone you’ve got those eyes on?” He leaned forward *as if* I would share that information with him.

No way, no how. I would *never* tell him I was majorly crushing on his understudy, Deacon, and I wouldn’t tell him Isabella’s brother was interested in me. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about that, but it was none of his business, and I wouldn’t offer more details about my life for him to tease me over.

“No, no one.”

“No one? There must be someone, Erin. No one doesn’t like someone in high school.”

“Nope. Not right now, no one. What’s your other idea?”

His tilted head and arched eyebrows said he was dubious at best, but he didn’t push. Instead, he said, “Better get another sip of that tea before I tell you option two.”

I gulped it.

“We spend time together, repair our friendship, and get comfortable with one another. That way, you’ll *want* to kiss me,” he said. “Or, at least, be okay with it.”

I spit my tea all over the table. “I’m sorry, what?” I asked, wiping dribbles from my chin.

He frowned and handed me a napkin. “I figure if we get to know each other a little better, you know, like we used to, then maybe it won’t be so bad for you to kiss me for the play. I know it’s still not some spectacular first kiss to do it live in front of a bunch of people, but if we’re comfortable with each other, maybe it won’t be so bad... for... for you, I mean.”

I scoffed and wiped my mouth, then tossed the napkin on the table, trying to hide my frustration... or embarrassment... or *whatever* I felt. “Oh, no. I’m gonna hate you until death. Yours or mine, whichever comes first. Preferably yours. There’s no way us hanging out will change that, Van.”

“Okay, listen, I already asked Mrs. McAlister to change the scene. I knew you would have a problem with it, and I didn’t want to end up where we are right now. She said no, Erin.”

“What? She said... How can she *make* us kiss each other? We’re teenagers!”

“She said we could resign our positions or behave like actors should and accept the role as a whole. I can’t resign, Erin. I need the extra-curricular on my college applications, or it’s goodbye basketball scholarships.”

But that meant he *had* considered resigning, which only made me feel like a disgusting prickly pear *he* didn’t want to kiss. I’d never considered how he felt about it, but now that it was out in the open, my gut twisted. I licked my lips.

“I guess I can resign. I wouldn’t want us to be put in that situation.” I picked at the last bite of my donut, completely deflated. Van was silent for a while, but I didn’t dare look up to see the satisfied grin he probably wore like the snide, popular basketball champ he was. Why did he have

to be so... so... whatever he was. Perfect most would say, but I couldn't see past the things he'd done to me all in the name of reaching that popularity level.

I was two seconds from running to the bathroom to hide until I died when he settled his hand over mine. My eyes flew up, finding a frown rather than a grin.

"I don't want you to do that, Erin. You want this too much. We'll figure something out."

"It's pretty clear you don't want to kiss me either, Van. How can we figure it out? One of us should resign, and if it means you'll lose college scholarships, then it should be me. I don't have anything riding on this."

He flinched. An honest to goodness flinch like my words sliced him wide open. Then he shook his head and squeezed my hand. "It doesn't matter what you do or don't have to lose, Erin. You wanted Juliet, and you got it. You shouldn't have to resign either." He sucked in a small breath as if to say more but hesitated. He chewed the inside of his lip, then said, "And I never said I *didn't* want to kiss you. You're not a troll or something."

"Gee, thanks for that, I guess." I pulled my hand from under his and crossed my arms, effectively cutting him out of my personal space.

He huffed and dropped his head face-down to the table. His forehead thumped on the crumb-covered surface. "Anyone ever tell you, you're the hardest person to look in the eye?" he mumbled.

Yes. Everyone, but I didn't know why. "No, never."

He held up a finger then lifted his head. "I know that's a lie, but we'll dissect your incredibly freaky yet oddly endearing way of eviscerating someone with your eyes later and focus on the issue at hand. We have two choices here, and if we act like adults, one of them should work. Either tell me whoever it is you've got your eye on, or get used to this smiling face showing up on your doorstep every morning to take you to school."

Okay, he *was* cute. Sometimes. I could admit that much, but what he asked was a bigger deal than he knew. It was my first kiss. My *first kiss*. How could I just go on a date with someone and get it out of the way? Wasn't it something I was supposed to remember forever? Like, when I turned seventy and knitted my thousandth pair of socks, shouldn't that be one of the things I remembered?

"We need to head to school, but think about it, okay?"

I'd think about it, alright. I'd think about it on the way to school, all through drama class, the rest of the day, and up until cheer practice. What would I do? Cave and tell him I liked Deacon, then wait for utter humiliation after he tried and failed to set me up with him? Admit Isabella's brother was super-hot, and it wouldn't destroy me to go on a date with him, only to be embarrassed when Van teased me relentlessly for admitting it? Or... gulp... suffer through reacquainting myself with Van until I hated him just a little less?

During all my thinking, I'd forgotten one thing. Van's on-again, off-again girlfriend. Baily. Baily, *I'm going to eat you for a snack*, Fields.