

Chapter Nineteen

Of all the things to happen at school first thing in the morning, Bailey Fields abducting me outside of the girl's locker room was the last thing I'd expected. Sure, if she had shoved my head in a toilet and left me for dead, it wouldn't have been all that shocking. Her pulling me into a darkened corner to talk, well, *that* was surreal.

"Bailey, I said all I had to say yesterday. I swear, I will scream bloody murder if you don't let me go to class right now." I yanked my arm away from her vice grip.

"This isn't what you think. I haven't been able to stop thinking about what you said yesterday." She tucked a nonexistent strand of hair behind her ear and averted her gaze. This was not the Bailey I'd grown to despise. She was meek and timid, almost afraid.

"What is it then?"

Her face paled when she finally made eye contact, and I noticed her eyes were red-rimmed. "My cousin took her own life because she was bullied at school. She was only twelve, and I... I mean, I guess I never saw myself that way. Like... like a bully."

"Um..." How could she *not* see what she had done as bullying? Not just to me but to half the school. She was the walking, talking cliché of a bully. "I'm sorry that happened, but how can you not see that what you do is bullying? Do you know how many people you've reduced to tears? Bailey, one girl even transferred schools!"

She lowered her gaze and whispered, "I guess I learned from my father that you need to be ruthless to get ahead in the world. It's his thing. Fangs and claws out all the time. Make them bleed, Bailey. That's what he always says."

"Your father is a lunatic," I said, crossing my arms. "Who says that to their child?"

"My father. Mine, but it's how he managed to go from nothing to a millionaire. Sometimes I wonder if it's all worth it, but he doesn't leave me a lot of time to think about things on my own. My whole schedule is planned for me. I just show up, look pretty, and act as a vicious mini-version of him."

Shocked did not describe my condition, but it was a good start. That she was even talking to me was unheard of, which only fueled my suspicion that she was up to something devious. Even so, that small voice in my head told me to hear her out, if only to gain enough evidence against her if she *had* planned my untimely demise.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say, Bailey." I kept my arms crossed—more because I was afraid she might stab me in the chest than anything else.

"Nothing, I only wanted to ask you if Van is okay. I do actually care about him."

"He'd be a lot better if you hadn't made his life miserable the past few weeks, that's for sure, but he's... he's holding up okay, all things considered. If you care about him, maybe you should apologize and call off your dogs. They've done enough damage."

Her eyes went wide, and she stepped forward. "Oh, I've done that already. No one will bother him. They won't bother any of you, I promise."

“But they’ll move on to your next victim, Baily. Don’t you understand that? In this school, it’s either cater to you and your besties or get tossed in the trash. If anyone wants to be successful and have a social life around here, they have to kiss your butt or do your bidding.”

“Not anymore. At least, I’m trying. I know you won’t believe this, but what you said hit me really hard. I can’t stop thinking about my cousin and the boy who bullied her. She hid it for so long no one even knew it was happening until she was gone. I don’t want to be that person.”

“You already are that person, Bailey. It’s gonna take a lot to change that, but this is a good start. I want to believe you. I do. I’d like to believe you might change.”

“I won’t make false promises there, I won’t. But I *will* try. Would it be okay if I texted or called Van?”

I shrugged. “We’re not dating, so you can do whatever you want. Even if we were, I don’t own him. He can decide for himself how he responds to you.” I lowered my arms and adjusted my bag, then turned to leave before I was late.”

“Wait, you’re not back together?”

I scoffed and turned around. “No, why would you think we are?”

“I just assumed after we broke up, he’d run back to you.” She shrugged, but something about the way she said it made it seem like she actually *did* care.

“He humiliated me in public when he broke up with me and got back with you. That creates a little of a trust issue, don’t you think? Whatever his reasons were, he still went along with it.”

“But it was me, not him. Don’t punish him for something that was my fault, Erin. That’s not who you are. I’m sure he’s suffering enough losing his dad. Losing you would...” Bailey’s mouth opened and closed several times, almost as if she was debating whether to keep being honest and kind or to use her information against me. Eventually, she sighed and said, “He loves you, Erin. I came to terms with that, and that’s why I picked a fight with him at my parents’ party. Whatever he did stemmed from that love. Maybe it was wrong, maybe not, but he had good intentions.”

I crossed my arms again. This conversation just leaped over the boundary and fell smack in the middle of way too personal. “How would you know?”

She chuckled. “Just because I’m self-centered doesn’t mean I can’t tell when a guy isn’t into me. I did what I did, and I’m not proud of it. So, I’m standing here now telling you there’s nothing he wouldn’t do for you, and that didn’t just start a couple of months ago. I think he’s loved you all along, but he didn’t know how to get out of this.”

“This?”

“Yeah, this. This mess of popularity we’re stuck in that seems harder and harder to maintain every year. Do you think I’m ruthless? Just wait until you see the freshman coming up. They take me to a whole new level.”

I shivered. “That’s terrifying.”

“All I’m saying is, don’t punish him for this. Please.”

The warning bell rang, startling us both. “I’ll think about it.”

“Erin? I’m... sorry.” She almost choked on the words, but she meant them.

All I could do was nod and rush out the door to class. The rest of the day passed in an equally unusual way. Whatever Bailey had said to her friends kept them tight on their leashes, leaving the

rest of the school a chance to breathe. Later that afternoon, I was halfway through my science project when I was called to the main office.

I suspected Bailey had retracted her offer to play nice, and I would, no doubt, be accused of all manner of atrocities up to and including kidnapping the principal's children. I packed my things and found myself waiting in the lobby for fifteen minutes while Vice Principal Fredericks doled out punishments to other students. When it was my turn, my stomach did its usual flip-flop.

"Miss Carpenter, thank you for coming."

"I was under the impression I had no choice," I said.

"Well, I suppose you didn't, but all the same, I'd like to extend my apologies to you. I spoke with your instructors... all of them, and none are convinced you would cheat on a test. I was already reconsidering my punishment when Bailey Fields came forward. She admitted to setting you and Van up, and so I have decided to reinstate your original test grade. Mrs. McAlister will love to have you back as Juliet if you think you can prepare in time."

"Uh... wh... what?" I couldn't decide which part dumbfounded me more. It all came out of left field, and nothing computed properly in my malfunctioning, overworked brain.

She leaned forward and sighed. "I know what happens in high school, and I do my best to be fair and balanced, but sometimes I get it wrong. The evidence presented seemed legitimate, but I should have listened to you. I apologize to you, Erin. I was wrong."

"I'm... thanks. Thank you, Mrs. Fredericks. And I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you."

"You're free to go unless you would like to discuss it further?"

"No, ma'am. I'll talk with Mrs. Mc Alister and see what she thinks. Thank you."

She stood and opened the door. I didn't dare ask if she planned to punish Bailey and her accomplices. I had no doubt she wouldn't tell me, but she did smile as I exited. "Good luck with the play, Erin."

I rushed out, noting that school had ended ten minutes earlier. I had to meet Isa, Hannah, and Reid for our study group at the library, and I still had to exchange my books. I was already running late, and traffic out of the school parking lot was always a mess. At my locker, I discovered I'd also left my science book in the classroom, so I ran there, grabbed it, and tucked it under my arm to save time. Fortunately, my lab partner finished our project and cleaned up. I'd owe her one.

In the lot, most everyone was lined up to exit, but the dreaded stoplight only allowed about four or five cars out at a time. I fell into my car—the one with the still-broken door because I had no time to take it to get fixed—and turned my key in the ignition. Nothing. It didn't even click. It was deadlier than dead.

I let my head fall onto my steering wheel while I called my friends. I didn't spy any of them in the car line and assumed they had done what I usually did—run super fast to the lot and be one of the first in line. Isabella didn't answer, so I was on to Hannah when someone knocked on my window. I jumped then relaxed when I saw it was only Van carrying his basketball bag slung over his shoulder.

I tried to roll my window down, then remembered it wouldn't go with the battery dead. So, I shoved my door open with a little more aggression than necessary, eliciting a chuckle from Van.

“Did it finally drop dead?” I grumbled words unbecoming a lady, bringing on another laugh. “I can give you a ride if you want. Where you headed?”

“Home for the study group. At this rate, Reid will have our kitchen cleaned out.”

“You gave him free access to your *kitchen*? Is your mother insane? He eats like a starving teenage boy, Erin.” He ushered me toward his truck and tossed his bag in the back, then took mine and did the same.

“Don’t I know it? Good thing your mother pays mine well.” I climbed into the passenger seat and waited while he jogged around to his side and settled in.

“So, a weird thing happened today. I’m not sure you’d care, but... Well, Bailey apologized. I swear I thought the earth would break apart and swallow her, but it seemed sincere. Then VP Fredericks said she admitted to setting us up with the Calculus tests. Did she talk to you?”

“Yeah, both of them did. Bailey apologized to me, too, and she didn’t burst into flames. It was scary, though, I admit. I got my role back in the play if I want it.” We were close to our neighborhood, and I wondered if I should invite him to study with us. Was he ready for that much social interaction? He was back at school, but that didn’t mean he was up for more people.

“Do you want it back?” he asked and turned his baseball cap backward. Strands of his blonde hair slipped through the opening in the back. Grr. Why did he have to be adorable? Now I could hardly look at him without blushing.

“Maybe? I’m not sure. I’ve enjoyed the set design, and it feels mean to take the role from Nadia. She’s worked so hard, and she’s terrific.”

“I’m sure if you explain it to her, she’ll understand. Maybe she can do the rehearsal at school, and then you can do the main play at the theater?” he suggested as he turned onto our street.

“That’s actually a good compromise, but... I don’t know. I mean, Deacon has been super professional, but I’m not sure about kissing him.”

Van laughed so hard he almost choked on his spit, then he shoved my arm and said, “Are you really back to square one? You’re back to debating whether or not to kiss the Romeo lead?”

“Oh, shush. You know good, and well it’s not... I mean... it’s just weird, that’s all.”

He pulled into my drive and parked, then hopped out to grab my bag. I assumed all discussion about the play was over, but he motioned toward the porch once I got out and met him at the front of the truck.

“I’ll carry it for you. So, you said you liked Deacon for a while. This might be your chance to get him. Even today, I saw him watching you during drama class, and I heard how he helped you after the fight. I’m pretty sure he likes you, so this could be good. You already got your first kiss out of the way, so there’s that, right?”

I had been wrong about being dumbfounded earlier. Now, I was so stupefied I couldn’t even speak. Van was setting me up with another guy!

He sat my bag on the porch and asked, “Why are you looking at me like that? What did I say wrong?”

“Oh! Nothing, just, well, he already asked me out, but I told him I wasn’t ready to date again, not yet.”

“Well, there you go. Maybe go out with him and feel it out. If you still like him, then it won’t be so bad to kiss him in the play, right?” He opened his arms slightly as if asking for a hug, but not so wide that he couldn’t play it off as stretching if I didn’t fall into his embrace. I leaned in and accepted the hug, almost losing all thought processes as I inhaled his scent.

“Do you want to study with us?” I asked, unsure if I’d survive an afternoon with him if he said yes. If he loved me as much as everyone said he did, wouldn’t he insinuate that he wanted to be with me again? Wouldn’t he make some offer, ask me on a date, anything at all?

“I don’t want to interrupt or anything, but thanks for asking.” He released me.

“You won’t be interrupting. Besides, mom’s making lasagna for dinner. Your favorite still?”

“Your mom’s? Absolutely, but I should check on my mom first. Maybe I’ll come back later for dinner, and that way I’m not...” He paused and looked toward the house. “Erin, I’m just... not sure Reid really wants to see me.”

“He does, Van. He misses you. Go check on your mom, then come back and study with us. We’ll take it one step at a time, yeah?” I didn’t know what to do with my hands, so I just played with the ends of my hair, twirling them over my fingers in a furious display of nervous energy.

“If you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Come back, okay?”

He pulled his hat off long enough to mess up his hair more, then pulled it back on and grinned. It was his grin for me, that one that held all our secrets, all our memories, everything that made us Erin and Van, and I couldn’t stand it anymore. I had to know where we stood. Would we find our way back, or had we gone too far this time? As I watched him walk towards his truck, everything hit me again. The pain and sadness flowed over me, but it was the ache of lost love that stung the most. We *could* come back from it. We could, and I wanted to.

“Hey, Van?” I shouted before he opened his door. He turned with questioning eyes, one hand on the door handle. “Do you love me?”

He dropped his hand to his side and took two steps back toward the porch. “What?”

I took a deep breath and let it out, then stepped off the porch. “Do you love me? Do you want to take everything back and do this right, the way we would have if Bailey hadn’t done what she did? Do you want to be with me and never, ever leave again?”

Van’s hands trembled at his sides. “More than anything in the world, yes.”

“Then why are you all the way over there while I’m standing here waiting for you to kiss me?”

He hesitated for a second, then strode toward me. I ran towards him, and he caught me midair, then he kissed me like we’d never kissed before. It was our first kiss all over again, but more. We survived. We’d been beaten and bruised, practically destroyed my life, but we came out the other side a little stronger, a little braver, and a whole lot wiser. So, he kissed me and kissed me until I *knew* he loved me that much, enough to let me go so I would be happy.

I pushed away long enough to hug him. “I’m willing to give you a third chance, but if you mess it up, I’ll kill you.” I released him and stood on his feet. “I mean it, St. Claire. I’ll put you down.”

“I wouldn’t dare. I love you too much to ever let you go again, Erin.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” I said. “I believe we agreed on an adorable pet name already.”

Van kissed me again, then chuckled in my ear. “I love you, pretty girl.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” The front door slammed, and we turned to find Reid standing there with Isabella and Hannah. “I was scared to death I’d have to choose between the two of you, and I was literally losing sleep over it.”

“I’d never ask you to choose,” I said as Van said, “Why would we make you choose?”

Van wrapped an arm around my waist, but I pushed him toward Reid. “Go makeup with your best friend,” I said.

“Friends,” Isabella said. “Let’s not act like this group would hold itself together. You need me. I’m like the glue you never knew you needed until it covered you with sticky goodness and... okay, that made no sense, but you get my point.”

Hannah laughed and opened the front door. “Come on. I think there’s still a few cookies left, and I really need help with my Spanish homework.”

Van and Reid followed the girls inside, but Van looked over his shoulder. His gaze softened every time he looked at me, and this time was no different. “You coming, pretty girl?”

I grinned ear-to-ear, finally full of life and happiness again. “Yeah. I’m coming.” He met me at the door and kissed my forehead, then followed me in. I knew there were some long conversations in our future, and we would need to build our trust again, but we both wanted it. We were ready, and I knew whatever came to us after that we would tackle together. Forever.