

Chapter Seventeen

Nothing made me want to vomit harder than thinking about Van and Bailey spending New Year's Eve together, but her party was the talk of the school before break. Meanwhile, I spent half the break convincing Isa she and Reid didn't have to sit with me and pretend they didn't want to be out on a date by themselves. It wouldn't be the first New Year I rang in alone and likely wouldn't be the last.

Though my schedule had cleared significantly after losing cheer and my spot as Juliet, I found ways to fill my time that didn't involve thinking about Van all day, every day. Why couldn't I just stay mad at him? Why did I want to scream at him that he was an idiot every time I passed him in the halls? It would be futile to do such things and only bring more attention to my broken heart.

So, when my mother dropped three bags of chocolate on the coffee table at 11:00, I knew something was about to change. She flopped on the sofa beside me and patted my leg, then snuggled up with me on the blanket. She unwrapped one bar and started munching, working her way into her spiel.

"Corrine and I had a nice conversation today," she said. If I hadn't known her all my life, I wouldn't have picked up on the tone. It was a taunt, a test to see if I'd bite any chance for information on Van.

"Oh?" I asked and tore into a bar.

"Yeah. I need you to do me a favor." Mom stood and dragged me with her. She stopped at the window and pulled the drapes back, blowing dust on me. I sneezed, but she waved off her housekeeping skills and pointed down the street. "Down there is a house with a man inside who loves you as much as your father did. He's dying, Erin, and he wants to see you before he does."

I sighed. "He dropped out of my life after Van did."

"He did, and he feels awful about it. He thought it would be better not to pour salt in the wound, so he and your father shifted to a more discreet friendship, but he never stopped caring about you."

I licked my lips and stood on tiptoes to see if Van was home. His truck was gone.

"Van's not home. Go now and say goodbye, Erin. It won't be much longer."

I stepped back and gasped. "What? He's... that bad already?"

Mom's soft smile didn't meet her eyes, and she brushed her hand over my cheek. "Yeah, baby. It's that bad already. So, you see, if you're inclined to grant dying wishes, now is the time."

I nodded slowly, knowing I'd vomit before I even left the house. But I had to. I couldn't let him die without saying goodbye, seeing him smile one more time because I messed up a knock-knock joke. "I'll go now. I'll just... change." I looked over myself—pajamas, messy bun, and chocolate on my shirt.

"Let's doll you up. It's New Year's Eve, and he'll love to see you looking your best," Mom said. "I'll help you. Won't take long, and he'll be so happy to have that image of you in his heart when he passes, Erin."

My lower lip trembled, and my eyes stung, threatening me before I even got started.

“Oh, baby. It’s okay to cry.” Mom reached for me, her tears already flowing over her cheeks, dripping from her chin. “I miss your Daddy, too.”

I fell into my mother’s shoulder and released everything I’d held in for months. My father, Van’s father, the bullying, and Van... they all poured out into a sobbing mess only my mom could manage. She rubbed my back and soothed me like she always had and always would, no matter how old I was. And when we both spent our tears, she laughed and told me I was pretty like that, raw and open and emotional.

“I look insane,” I said as I wiped my face. “You’ll have to help me fix this.”

“It would be my honor. Come on. I’ve got something for you.” She led me to her bedroom and pulled out a deep golden dress that stopped just at my knees. It wasn’t too flashy, but just enough that it would illuminate my eyes. “Let’s get to work.”

“Mom, don’t you think this is overboard to visit—”

“Nope, not at all. It’ll make you feel better, too. Sometimes dressing up for no reason is therapeutic.”

She put soft waves in my hair and clipped it on one side, then spent ridiculous time crafting a masterpiece on my face. I had no idea my mother’s skills went beyond accounting, but she was a master with make-up. Before I knew it, I felt like Cinderella... with no ball to attend.

“There, now, you can take my car.” Mom checked her watch and shoved me out the door with a kiss on the cheek and a smile. I stood on the front porch with her keys in hand and a dumbfounded look on my face. I shook it off and headed to the driveway.

At Van’s house, only one light was on. I knocked softly, partly worried they were asleep, and I’d wake up Mr. St. Claire. But just as soon as I finished knocking, Corrine opened the door wide and ushered me in. I’d almost forgotten how much bigger their house was until I stepped into the foyer.

“Erin, what a pleasant surprise. Come in. David will want to see you.” She took my arm and led me to the living room, where he sat upright in a hospital bed. He was so thin, nothing like the man I remembered, and the oxygen line helping him breathe brought back so many memories. I choked back my tears and smiled when he looked over at me.

“Erin! My goodness, look at you. You look like a princess. Come, let me see you,” he said, lifting his head more.

“Hi, David,” I whispered.

His outstretched arms pulled me in and wrapped me in an embrace I hadn’t felt in so long, not since my father passed. It was a dad hug, and it pulled the plug on my composure. I cried onto his shoulder while he just held me tighter and tighter. Corrine stood beside us, her hand on my back while we reconnected without words.

Soon, though, he needed to speak, to say what he needed me to know before he was gone.

“I’m so sorry, Erin. I’m sorry I didn’t step up when your father died. You needed me, and I failed you. You’ll never know how much I regret not spending more time with you and encouraging Van to change who he’d become.”

I smoothed my dress and patted my eyes with a tissue. “It’s not your fault. Things were all messed up, and it was a confusing time.”

“No, Erin. There’s no excuse, but you’re sweet to offer me one. Come, sit and talk with me.”

I sat with them and told them about everything I’d done with my life since my father died, how things were, and how much Corrinne offering my mother a job had helped. Corrinne made us hot cocoa, and we watched the ball drop in Times Square on the television. Then Mr. St. Claire hugged me again, kissed my forehead, and squeezed my shoulders.

“Give him time, Erin. When I’m gone, he’ll spiral. Just know...” His voice faded, then he said, “Sometimes we do things all wrong with the best of intentions.”

He wasn’t the first person to say that to me, but the ball was in Van’s court. It had been for a long, long time, but he seemed content to live in misery with Bailey and his friends. He’d even let go of Reid, the other person he claimed to need in his life. But I wasn’t about to tell a dying man that his son was happy to be miserable, so instead, I smiled the widest, brightest smile I could—prompting Corrinne to photograph us—and hugged him back.

I was almost in my car when headlights flashed, and Van’s truck pulled into his driveway. I panicked and fumbled with the keys until they dropped to the ground. Of course, they did, so I couldn’t escape before he got out of his truck. I heard his door shut and wondered if I could just hide behind my mom’s car until he went inside, then slip away undetected.

“Erin?”

Of course, I couldn’t.

I cleared my throat and stood. “Uh... yeah, sorry, dropped the keys.”

His gaze raked over me top to bottom, then settled on my face again. “Did you just come from a party or something?”

My cheeks flamed when I remembered how much my mother had dolled me up. “No, just my mom and me having some fun. I’m just heading back home. Your dad wanted me to visit, so... I just... visited.” I pointed to his house, avoiding eye contact because it felt like a dagger to my chest.

“Ah... yeah, he mentioned that. I’m glad you came. It probably made him happy.” Van fidgeted with his keys. He was dressed in a suit, which I hadn’t expected, but I assumed Bailey’s parent’s party must have been a big deal. Why did he have to look amazing? Why did he have to smell so good? Darn him.

“Yeah, he... he seems happy.” I cleared my throat again and stepped toward my mother’s car. I unlocked the door and opened it before he moved again.

He took two steps toward me, then stopped again. “Erin, I...”

I paused, frozen in place. I closed my eyes, too afraid to hope the truth might escape those frowning lips. What was the truth? Did he even know? I tilted my head and made eye contact—blasted. He was beside me, just an arms-length away, standing there with his hands at his sides.

“I... just... uh, wanted to thank you again. He’s not going to last much longer.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I should head home, I guess.”

Van stepped back like I’d smacked him. “Oh, yeah. Past curfew, I guess. I’ll just... see you around, I guess.”

Driving away with that space between us gutted me, but what else could I do? I couldn’t stand there staring at him all night, and I certainly wouldn’t make the first move toward repairing a friendship—not after how he ended it. But the stupid image of him dressed in that suit, his hair

perfect, and those blue eyes glued to me burned into my brain until I couldn't see anything else. I hadn't even parked the car before my mother ran out of the house, pulling her shoes on. She pulled open the driver's side door and urged me into the passenger side.

"What... Mom? What's wrong?"

"Corrinne just called. Right after you left, David had an episode, and the ambulance will be there any minute."

I perked up in my seat. "What? No, he seemed fine! What happened?"

Mom backed out of the drive and headed back down the street. I didn't want to do this. How could I watch him die barely a year after my father? How could I help Van through it when I was still stuck grieving my dad?

"Erin, hang in there, baby. You can do this, okay? They need us." She glanced at me and took in my expression. "I can go myself if you can't."

My whole body shook fingers to toes, but one look at Van's truck parked in the driveway, and I knew I had to go. No matter the circumstances between Van and me, I couldn't let my mother do this without me.

"No, no, I'll go."

Mom parked along the curb and darted toward the house. I followed, hardly able to keep up with my high heels. Corrinne was a sobbing mess holding her husband's hand, but the paramedics arrived shortly after us and shoed us away from their patient. Everyone moved around David, shoving needles in him and hooking him up to monitors, and I didn't notice Van standing beside me until I felt his fingers brush against mine. It was so subtle, almost an accident, and when I looked at him, he shifted his weight to put space between us.

"Come on, I'll drive you both to the hospital." Mom ushered Van and me out the door while the paramedics loaded Van's father onto the ambulance. Corrinne rode with them, reminding me of when my father passed. Mom rode with him... but he never made it to the hospital. He was gone by the time I saw him again.

The waiting room was scarce, so it left plenty of room for Van to pace. Mom and I sat as patiently as possible, but Mom periodically requested updates. I didn't even realize I was crying until my face tickled, and I wiped away tears. My eyes were probably swollen at that point, and I was freezing in my little dress, but we were exactly where we needed to be.

Hours later, a nurse came to get Van. He followed her through double doors and was gone for another hour before he and his mother appeared again, haggard and beaten.

"Oh, no," Mom said and stood to meet Corrinne. She fell apart in my mother's arms, leaving Van and me staring at them.

Van whimpered, and then it all set free. He crumpled into a heap on the floor, his face in his hands as sobs racked his body. A year ago, that had been me. I had fallen, unable to stand the pain any longer, and there was no one to lift me up. There was no one to tell me I would keep living, that I would be fine, and eventually, my father's memory would make me smile and not cry. I didn't have Van through that... but he had me.

I kneeled in front of him and tugged his hands away from his face until he looked at me. "Come with me," I said and took my mother's keys. Van didn't question my process. He just took my hand

and let me lead him outside into the cold January morning. The first day of the new year... a new year without his father. We made it to the parking lot, and he still didn't speak or ask me what we were doing. I unlocked the car, got inside, started it, and turned up the heat. Van sat in the passenger seat and stared out the window, frozen in a state of suspended shock.

"Van... it's okay. Let go," I said.

His face twisted with pain, and he shifted in the seat before practically throwing himself onto me. I held him the way I'd wanted to be held. I said all the things I'd needed to hear. And I stayed with him until he couldn't cry any longer, couldn't curse fate for taking his parent, and had nothing left to give. And I held him a little longer.

He still smelled like he did when we'd met in his driveway, albeit with the faint scent of antiseptic. His suit was rumpled, his hair was a mess, and his face looked like a punching bag. But it didn't matter. None of it mattered. Nothing that had happened at school mattered, nothing with Bailey or cheer or the play. This was real life, not high school drama, and it sucked.

Eventually, he pulled away and wiped his face, straightened his clothes, and tried to be stronger. I wanted to cry again, but it didn't feel quite right, not then. So, I bit it back until I knew he was okay, at least, for now.

"Thank you for being here. I don't deserve this much kindness from you."

"Van, this has nothing to do with what happened between us. I loved your father, too. I wanted to be here for him and your mom and for you."

"I know in the grand scheme of things, this doesn't matter at all right now, but I need you to know I broke up with her. Permanently. She just didn't care about what I was going through, not if it interfered with her plans and what she wanted."

"That's why you were home early?"

"Yeah. She's not all that torn up about it, though, so she shouldn't mess with you. She's already on to someone else, which proved your theory that it was more about you than me." He ran his hands through his hair and groaned. "I should go back in and be with my mom."

"Yeah. I'll go back in with you." I reached for the door handle, but Van stopped me.

"Wait. I need to apologize to you. I never wanted to break up with you, Erin. I just thought if I did, then everyone would leave you alone. It was getting serious, and I was afraid... I was just afraid."

"You could have talked to me about it, Van. You never even said anything. You just dumped me in the hallway at school and—"

"She made me." He squeezed his temples with his thumb and forefinger.

"What?"

"Bailey said she would call off the hounds if I went back to her and broke up with you, but I had to do it publicly. She wanted to humiliate you, and I hated it. I didn't want to, but you'd already been to the hospital twice and lost your role. I didn't know what else to do, so I agreed."

"So, everything you did was because you wanted to protect me?" I knew I looked ridiculous in a sparkly dress at eight o'clock on a cold January morning, my make-up smeared all over, my hair a disaster—but the way he looked at me made me feel like a princess all over again.

"Yes, but it was stupid. Anyway... I'm... I'm sorry, Erin."

I didn't know what to say, so I just sat there staring at my hands in my lap until I heard his car door shut, then I got out and followed him back to the hospital, unsure where we stood. One thing I knew for sure—Bailey Fields was on my hit list, and I'd had just about enough of her running the school.