

## Chapter Six

“Erin, you have company!” Mom shouted up the stairs, excited for the day for the first time in a long while. Mrs. St. Claire had contacted her the night before and offered her a job paying nearly double what she’d been making at her old job. Van’s mother had also told my mom everything, which had been a topic of discussion late into the night, and why I was surprised that I had company. I never had company.

I bounded down the stairs, hair still wet. I braided it as I went, but halfway down, I smelled French toast. It had been ages since mom made it, but it wasn’t the heavenly aroma of cinnamon and sugar goodness that caught my attention. It was the voices, several of them, all in my kitchen. I turned the corner and entered the kitchen to find Van sitting at the table, stuffing his face with French toast. Reid sat beside him, periodically eyeing Van’s plate like a hungry tiger whose plate had already been licked clean. And Isabella shook her head while she watched my mother whip up another batch.

“Um... hi,” I said, fidgeting with the hem of my sweatshirt.

“Apple fritter!” Reid said, his arms spread wide. “We thought you’d never come down.”

“Don’t call her apple fritter,” Van said, sopping the syrup with the last piece of toast.

“You literally call her baked goods all the time. I don’t get it.” Reid narrowed his eyes, but the half-grin said he knew precisely why he shouldn’t call me anything but Erin. Van practically growled at his best friend, then climbed over him to get to the second batch of breakfast.

Isa swatted him and handed the plate to me. “Your mom was kind enough to show me how to make this. It’s so good,” she said, devouring a slice.

“Um... I’m confused. I thought I was supposed to come to your house today.” I’d considered canceling but hadn’t even had a chance to think about it before breakfast. Now there she was, cooking with my mother like she’d been to my house a thousand times.

“Yeah, but Van called and said you needed a little help getting things ready for winter. I love painting, so I volunteered. I hope that’s okay.” Isa’s warm brown eyes practically begged me to let her get her hands on our front porch, so I shrugged.

“I mean, I don’t mind, but you didn’t have to offer. I appreciate it, though.” I sat across from Van and tried to ignore how he stared at me. Things had done a complete one-eighty, and it sort of freaked me out.

“So, cinnamon twist, what—ow!” Reid squawked and rubbed his shin, scowling at Van. “You said I should be nice to her!” He covered his mouth while Van groaned.

“I said to be polite, not shout pastry names at her all morning, Reid.” I giggled, earning Van’s attention. He opened his mouth to speak again, but Reid stuffed a forkful of toast into it before darting from the chair. He tripped on the chair leg and stumbled, flailing, until he fell on Isa. While she struggled to get out from underneath the tree-sized flailing boy, my mother swatted him with her spatula.

“Ow! Sorry! I didn’t mean to squash her!” Reid rubbed his shoulder but grinned like a child who’d just gotten away with something sneaky. My mother chuckled and handed him more food. It was officially the most excitement our little house had seen in over a year. “I’m gonna go out

and see what needs doing.” He mumbled something else, but between his mouth full of food and the slamming front door, I didn’t quite catch it.

“I’ll go make sure he doesn’t do something stupid while we wait. You good with me helping, then?” Isa asked.

I swallowed and nodded. “Yeah, of course. I really, really appreciate it. You didn’t have to come.”

“I wanted to. You’re my friend.” Isa smiled and headed out the front. The second her feet hit the porch, she was already yelling at Reid, who was, evidently, a stupid boy.

Van chuckled. When I looked up, I saw my mother had abandoned me in the kitchen with Van, most likely on purpose. I tried to look busy with my breakfast, but it turned out he was content to sit and watch me eat. After a few more bites, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Are you going to say anything?” I asked, glancing up at him.

“I wasn’t planning on it. Why?”

“It’s weird having someone watch you eat,” I admitted.

He moved around the table to sit beside me. “We could talk about what happened last night if you want. What you said.”

I pushed the last few bites around, wishing I could leap into the syrup and drown. Last night... it was so much easier to talk to him when it was dark and raining, but now that the sun shined through my mother’s rooster-printed kitchen curtains, I couldn’t even look at him. I put another bite in my mouth to stall a little longer.

Van’s fingers brushed over mine, a faint touch that would have repulsed me literally three days earlier. But now... I tolerated it because I didn’t understand *what* I felt now. “I’ll do everything I can, Erin. I meant what I said. I’m diving in headfirst here, okay?” I nodded. “Good, and I hope you remember that and don’t kill me after I do this.”

He snatched the last bite of toast from my plate, scarfed it down, and ran. I was just about to chase him down when my phone rang. I sighed and swiped to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Hazel. Had to borrow my sister’s phone. Mine’s dead.”

“Hey, Hazel, how’s it going?” I was glad she called me. I remembered I needed to ask her advice about the tricks for regionals and nationals. Cheerleading was the last thing on my mind, but I still needed to give it my attention or risk losing my head to Bailey Fields. I was pretty sure I already had a target on my back where she was concerned.

“Good. Great, actually. We have a break soon, so Daniel and I are coming home to visit family. Do you remember my neighbors Darcy and Foster?”

“Um... she’s the one who does the crazy dares, right?” I asked, picturing the petite dark-haired girl I’d thought for sure would break every bone in her body before she was twenty-five.

“That’s her, though she’s calmed down a lot. Anyway, I thought maybe you’d like to join us for a girl’s night later this week? Like a late birthday thing.” Hazel hadn’t asked me to do anything outside of school since... *ever*. And after the Sarah thing, I was lucky she decided to be friends with me again. The fact that she remembered my birthday was astonishing.

“That would be great. I’d love to,” I said, freaking out a little on the inside. Hazel was someone I admired.

“Great. My sister will be there, too. My house, Tuesday night, so your mom can have you all day Monday. Will that work?” Hazel’s perkiness was endearing.

“Yeah, I think so. I’ll need to check with Van to make sure we aren’t practicing, but I think it’s fine.”

Silence filled the line for several breaths, then Hazel said, “Erin, is there something you want to tell me, or should I just assume you’ve gone crazy? Did you just say Van’s name without gagging on your own spit?”

I laughed, but I was so nervous, I wanted to purge the French toast I’d just eaten. “Um, see, it’s kind of complicated, and I literally have no idea what I’m doing, so yeah. Yeah, I’m going crazy, I think.”

“Hey, pretty girl, are you coming?” Van hollered through the open door.

“Was that Van?” Hazel asked—more of a squeal than anything else—then, “Did he just call you a pretty girl? What is happening right now?” I heard Daniel make a ridiculous comment in the background but ignored him and focused on my friend who was probably planning my wedding after picking up on the slightest change in my demeanor where Van was concerned. All the while, Van stared at me from the door, his eyes soft and appreciative.

“Um, yes. It was Van. I’ll... call you later, okay?”

“Wait, no! You have to—”

I ended the call before Van could hear Hazel begging for details. I was already embarrassed enough. I dropped my phone on the table and smiled. “Yeah, I’m coming. And watch your back. I’m coming for you after stealing my breakfast.”

“I was counting on it, pumpkin fritter.” He paused as I walked through the door, then shook his head. “Yeah, that one was a stretch. Give me time, and I’ll come up with some more. I’m out of practice.”

“I like pretty girl, actually.” I blushed and stepped onto the porch. I wanted to pull my sweatshirt over my face and die, but he took my hand before I could bury myself.

“Pretty girl it is, then.” He raised my hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, then dropped it and ran to leap off the end of my front porch like he always did when we were kids.

Isabella was already chasing Reid around the yard... then he turned the tables and chased her... with a garden hose. I rolled my eyes and hopped off the porch, a little confused about what the plan was. It appeared Van was ready to mow, and I knew Isa wanted to help paint, so I assumed Reid planned to help repair the boards on the porch. My guess was proven right when I turned the corner and found boards stacked against the house.

Van cleared his throat. “Uh, I hope it’s okay that I invited them. Reid works at his grandfather’s furniture shop on weekends and during the summer. He’ll have the porch fixed in no time, and Isa really wanted to come.”

I shrugged and pulled up my sleeves, ready to get to work. “I don’t mind. Thanks, Van.”

He pulled his jacket off so he could do yardwork in a short-sleeved shirt and tossed it over the shrubs. I hated that he was so attractive, and my stomach betrayed me when he ran his hand through his hair. When he looked back at me, I cleared my throat and pointed to the porch.

"I'll just go help Isa scrape the old paint off. Um, thanks again." My cheeks flamed.

He brushed fake dirt from my cheek, smiled, and said, "Thanks for letting me do it." He glanced over his shoulder to see where Reid and Isa were, then leaned in close. "So, Reid has liked Isa for a while, just in case you wanted to, you know, encourage her to give him a chance."

I chuckled and grabbed a scraper from the pile of supplies. "Oh? Am I his wing-girl or something now?"

Van leaned against the house, all relaxed and confident—darn him. "I mean, you could be. He's a good guy, way better than anyone else at our school, for sure."

"Better than you? Hmm, maybe I should just get that first kiss out of the way with him? You know, since he's the best option at our school." I could hardly hold back laughter, especially with the sour look on Van's face, but I managed to distract myself by rummaging through Reid's toolbox for another scraper for Isa.

"I think I just threw up a little in my mouth. Please, please do not kiss my best friend. I would completely understand why you wouldn't want to kiss me, but for the love of everything pumpkin, please do not kiss Reid."

"I don't know, Van. You made a good argument for him, and now I'm interested. He's hot, smart, a good guy, better than anyone else at school... I fail to see why I *shouldn't* go for him."

"He likes Isa?" Van offered, grasping at any thread he could find to pull me back in. I liked that he was nervous even though he had to know I would never do that. Isa was my friend, and if she liked Reid back, then there was no way I'd interfere. And despite his behavior, I also wouldn't go after Van's best friend—his new one, the one that *wasn't* me.

"I never heard how you two became friends."

"Subject change? Should I be worried?" he asked, pushing off the house.

I pretended to pick paint off the edge of the scraper so I would have something to focus on besides his face. "I told you last night I'd give you a chance. I meant it."

"So, no competition with Reid?" he asked, a slightly teasing tone to his voice. He was still unsure.

"No, no competition with Reid." I cleaned the chipped paint from my nails, still avoiding his gaze.

"Any competition I should know about?" He grazed his fingers over my face, tilting it up to face him.

I'd all but forgotten my crush on his understudy, but the truth was, Deacon had nothing on Van... at least, not the old Van. If things had never gone wrong between us, there was no reason to believe I wouldn't have turned into absolute mush when I'd gotten old enough to look at boys as something more than friends. Van would have stolen my heart the moment it was ready to go into the world. But something did happen, and I'd kept my heart so close, I wasn't so sure anyone could take it.

"I lied when I said I didn't like anyone just so we're honest from the beginning. I do... at least, I *did* like Deacon. A lot, actually, for about two years." I tried to look away from him, but he wouldn't let me. "And... and Isa said her brother liked me and wondered if I was still single."

"Oh." Van dropped his hand and slouched. "Deacon is... He's great, I guess. I didn't know Isa's brother that well, but I guess—"

"Van," I whispered, unable to keep his gaze once he moved his hand. I let it fall, staring at my own shoes. "I meant what I said. I told you that. I just didn't want to lie about that."

"So, you're saying... You're... you're choosing me?"

I had to look up then. He sounded like a child, someone so scared he might lose everything he didn't care how he sounded. He only wanted to hold on to whatever scrap he might have. I could almost smell the fear oozing from him, and that expression? I'd never seen anything like it before. It worried me. Was he only latching onto me because he was about to lose his father? Was that why things had turned around so fast?

"I'm saying, if you meant what you said last night, I'm willing to give you a second chance. So yes, if you prove to me that this isn't just you latching onto me because of your dad, and you do what you said you would do, I'm... I'm choosing you."

Relief flooded his entire body, easing him into a more relaxed posture. "You have no idea how much I want to kiss you right now." Something in my expression must have warned him not to dare it, so he laughed. "I won't. I know I need to earn it, but I want to. I really, really want to."

Ice cold water dumped over us seconds before Reid ran by with the hose. "Sorry!" he yelled over his shoulder as Isa chased him around the house again, cursing him in Spanish. For a guy who liked her, he sure knew how to push her buttons.

I glanced down at my clothing, soaked through. "I'm gonna go change. We should, you know...." I waved my hand toward Reid. "Maybe rein him in before the two of them destroy what's left of my house."

"You change. I'm gonna kill Reid." Van bolted to the back of the house, dripping wet. Just before I opened my front door, I heard Reid screaming for his life and Isa laughing. I smiled and sent up a prayer that this was real, that these people would stay, and my life would finally start looking up.