

## Chapter Sixteen

First thing in the morning, I received a text message from Van. For reasons he failed to mention, he would be late for school. He assured me everything was fine with his father, then said he'd ask Reid to pick me up if I wanted. It had been nice having a personal chauffeur, but I wasn't so self-centered that I'd pull my friend's boyfriend away from her just to give me a ride to school. I did have a car, however junky it was, so I drove myself.

I'd no sooner parked, and I noticed Van's truck in its usual spot. Maybe whatever he'd needed to do was over before he expected? I gathered everything and headed to my locker, glad he'd make it for drama. It was bad enough I no longer had Juliet, but if I'd had to go to that first class without him, it would've sucked more.

"Morning!" Isa called from across the courtyard. She joined me on the walk to Locker Row with a coffee and a cheerful attitude. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad if I stuck with my friends all day. Besides, Isa had gotten picked up for set design too, so I'd be working with her. Things could definitely be worse.

"I'm so tired. I'm not sure I can stand another morning of waking up half an hour earlier because it takes twice as long to dry my hair with a cast on," I said, juggling my backpack so I could drink coffee with my good arm.

"Yeah, well, if you need help, I can—"

"Oh, Erin." Bailey's grating voice echoed behind us. Every muscle in my body tensed as I turned the lock on my locker, unable to avoid her. "I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am that Van broke up with you, but I did try to warn you."

"He didn't break up with her. Go away, Bailey," Isabella said and rolled her eyes.

"Oh, but he did. It's not my fault she didn't get the memo. Van and I made up last night." Her voice, so sickeningly sweet I wasn't sure how she didn't fall into a diabetic coma, taunted me.

Reid had joined us, so I looked at him, and he looked like he'd sucked a lemon dry. "What do you mean you made up last night?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you either? Hmm, it must mean you're not as close as you used to be. Makes sense, really. You're dating Erin's new little friend, so the way I see it, you're officially beneath him."

"Why you—" I grabbed Isa before she literally ripped Bailey's throat out with her teeth.

"What's going on, Reid?" I asked. All the while, my heart raced to keep up with what my mind knew was true. Van had either perpetrated the cruelest joke on the planet, or he'd sacrificed himself to the wolves for me. Either way, I'd lost him, and there was probably no getting him back from Bailey Fields.

"I don't know. His truck is here, but I haven't seen him." Reid's sour face twisted into something more concerning—something like mine.

Bailey smiled, giggled, then strutted down the hall like a girl who'd just ripped my heart out and eaten it right in front of me. I spun on my heel and headed toward Van's locker with Isabella and Reid hot on my heels. There was no way I'd go to class until I figured out what was going on. I bit back the bile that rose to my throat and begged my heart to stop exploding before I passed out. It

couldn't be right. People who say they love you aren't supposed to leave, but they did. They just kept leaving, and I couldn't take it anymore.

Van was at his locker staring into it like a zombie.

"Van?" I stopped beside him, but he just closed his locker and pulled his bag over his shoulder. "You won't even talk to me right now? What's going on? Bailey said you two are back together, but I don't even remember us breaking up?"

I stopped in front of him, forcing him to stop and listen to me.

"Was this a big joke? Some prank to really screw me over?"

Van sighed and looked straight ahead, avoiding all eye contact with me. "No, it wasn't. I'm sorry, okay? This thing with us just isn't going to work out."

Isa gasped. "What? That's all you have to say?"

"Van?" Reid watched Van as if he'd never even seen his best friend before, like he was looking at an alien in a Van costume.

"Look, I know I messed up again, and you're mad, but you know we could never work out. It's better this way. Bailey and me, we're more alike, and it's less drama. You'll be fine in a few days." And just like that, Van brushed by me without another word. He didn't look back, didn't pause, didn't even slow down. He just walked away, leaving every wound he'd ever inflicted open and bleeding again.

"I'll talk to him. Something's not right." Reid left us behind and chased his friend down, but I was sure nothing was wrong deep down. This was the way it would always end, just like this.

I ran out the door with one thing in mind—get out of there as fast as I could. I don't know if Isa followed me or not, but by the time I reached my car, there was no stopping me. I had no idea where I'd go or what I'd do when I got there. I just couldn't face an entire school day after that. I could never walk into drama class like everything was fine, exist in the same room as him right after he stomped all over my heart, that still beating macerated chunk of muscle that had betrayed me.

I drove until I ended up back at my house, alone and destroyed. Why had I ever let him back in? Why did I give him a second chance to ruin me? I was fine. Fine. Just peachy until he waltzed into my life and made me *feel* things again. I would have been content to hate Van St. Claire until the end of time, but no. Nope. He drew me in, fool that I was, and broke everything all over again.

Slamming my car door was not nearly satisfying enough, so I opened it and slammed it again, then I slammed my front door and stomped up the stairs. I slammed my bedroom door, fell on my bed, and banshee screamed into my pillow. Why did it have to hurt so much? Why couldn't I just say no, I won't let this kill me and pick myself up, move on, and live my life? Why? Because I *wanted* him. I wanted my friend back, the kid who knew me better than anyone... and still did, even though it only made me hate him more.

Once my screaming was done, I went down to the kitchen. I needed chocolate. Only copious amounts would do, so I raided the pantry until my arms were filled with everything chocolate and sugary and bad for me. Then I fell onto the sofa and turned on the television, determined to find some woman in a romantic comedy gone wrong who was way, way dumber than me just so I could feel better about myself for an hour and a half.

And so, I did. I stuffed myself and yelled at the television until that afternoon when Isabella and Reid showed up. I was on my fifth movie and second box of pre-packaged cupcakes when Isa walked in without even knocking, followed by Reid, who fussed at her for *not* knocking.

I paused cramming a cupcake in my mouth long enough to look at her.

“Oh. So, this is where we are? We’re up to stuffing junk food down the gullet until we’re in a sugar coma?”

“What?” I mumbled around a mouthful of cupcake.

“Is... is this what girls do when idiot boys break up with them in a very public and humiliating way?” Reid asked.

Isa threw a cupcake at him and scowled. “Okay. Time to get up, gorgeous. Let’s go.” Isa tugged my arm until I slid off the sofa and landed on the floor, half sitting and half sprawled over the cushion that fell with me.

“Noo. Don’t wanna, and you can’t make me,” I whined and pulled the blanket around me.

“You dated for a week, Erin. I get it. He’s your childhood best friend, you loved him, and you thought this was finally it. You thought you’d get married, have kiddos, and grow old together. Well, sometimes what we want and what we get are different, and we have to make the best of it.” Isa dragged me along the floor while Reid watched.

“What? That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard anyone tell someone with a broken heart. Who raised you, Caligula?” Reid picked me up, rescued me from his girlfriend, and then tossed me on the sofa.

“No, I was not raised by a homicidal maniac, but my mother always says—”

“Your mother isn’t... how shall I say this nicely? She’s... a *hard* woman, and that’s not Erin, okay?” Reid pointed to me and leaned close to Isa as if describing a zoo animal. “This is an Erin. Erins need cuddling and love, a lot of sugar, and someone to tell them they’re pretty when their boyfriends go insane.”

Isa glanced at me, so I nodded my head. Reid was right. But Isa wouldn’t have it.

“I don’t care if that’s what she needs. We are not spiraling into a pit of despair over a stupid boy. Come on. Let’s go before the back-up gets here.

“The back-up?” I asked while burrowing deeper into my blanket cocoon. A car door slammed outside, perking my attention. “Who is that?”

“The back-up. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Hazel walked through the front door with Daniel trailing behind her. She took one look at me and frowned. “You were right. This is code red, but I can work with it. I’ve been there, done that, got the trophy boyfriend to go with it.”

“Hey, I’m not a... Wait, what’s a trophy boyfriend?” Daniel asked, scratching his head.

“Everybody out! Go! March, march... disappear!” Hazel clapped her hands, clearing my house of everyone except the two of us... and Daniel who chewed the inside of his cheek debating whether he should stay or go. When quiet fell upon us, she turned around and sighed. “Oh, Erin. I’m so sorry.”

"I'm so stupid," I whined and shoved a cookie in my mouth. "I believed him!" Crumbs flew everywhere, officially bringing me back down to the dumps, a place I hadn't been since the night my father died.

"That is not a good look on you," Daniel said, but Hazel pushed him out of the way and snuggled beside me.

"You are not stupid. It's never stupid to take a chance on someone. Van made a lot of mistakes, but you can come back from this. It'll take some time, but eventually, you will move on. Eventually, you'll find someone who will cherish your heart like I did. I promise you, it won't hurt forever."

"But—"

"No, but. Broken hearts suck, I know, but trust me on this. The faster you put him out of your mind, the faster you'll find the right guy. One who will love you and adore you like you're the center of his whole world. You'll be his everything, and then Van will become a distant memory."

I sighed. I didn't want to move on, not yet. He'd literally *just* broken up with me, and my friends—though well-meaning—were already attaching me to some other boy who probably didn't even exist.

Daniel scoffed.

"Are you kidding me? Peaches, I adore you but no. Just... no. Listen, Erin." Daniel sat on the coffee table in front of me to ensure he had my undivided attention. "Sometimes people have good intentions, and they do things because they think it's what's best for someone else even if it isn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, think back over the time you spent with him. Picture moments in your mind. Think about the expression on his face whenever he looked at you. Now put yourself in his shoes. What would you do if you were him?"

"What would I do if... what? I'm confused."

Daniel groaned and ran his hands over his face. "Close your eyes." When I complied, he said, "Okay, if you loved someone more than anything in the world, but being with them meant they were always getting hurt, what would you do? Picture him in your place—the allergic reaction, the peanuts in the locker, broken arm, cheating on the test, and constant harassment. You're him, so what do you do to stop that from happening to the person you adore?"

"Oh, I guess I would... oh... ohhhh..."

"Exactly. People make this love thing so hard when it doesn't need to be. If I had told Peaches how much I cared about her in the beginning, I wouldn't have gotten hit by a car. You feel me?"

I'd almost forgotten he'd literally gotten hit by a car saving Hazel. Was this Van's way of saving me? Everything he'd said flooded my mind and played on repeat. *Please remember that I love you. I'll always love you.*

"Oh, my gosh!" I squeaked in his face and stood. "He's an idiot!"

Daniel winced and rubbed his ear, then said, "Maybe so, but in his idiot brain, this was the one thing he could do to ensure they wouldn't hurt you anymore. He *is* the guy who cherishes you, and evidently, he loves you so much he's willing to date a sociopathic cheerleader to protect you

when all he really wants right now is to be with you during what is probably the worst time in his life.”

“What if you’re wrong, Daniel?” Hazel asked.

“Am I ever wrong, Peaches?” Daniel smirked and raised his hands, earning a glare.

“Yes. You were wrong about Rose wanting a puppy for her birthday, wrong about how long it would take to fill the swimming pool with sand, and wrong about how—”

“Okay, okay, I get it but am I ever wrong about matters of the heart?”

Hazel sighed. “Unfortunately, no. He’s probably right, Erin. Do with that what you will.”

What would I do with that information? Nothing. I would do nothing because Van was never alone for the next three weeks. Bailey was glued to his side like a malignant tumor he couldn’t shake, and when she wasn’t, then he was surrounded by gaggles of her adoring fans, no doubt keeping their eyes on him. He was miserable. All one had to do was look at him for a nanosecond to see he was in physical pain whenever Bailey touched him and probably in an emotional blackout he might never survive once his father died.

He went through the motions with the new Juliet in drama, but there was zero chemistry between them. Eventually, Mrs. McAlister released Van from the lead and let Deacon take over. Deacon spent his time trying to convince me everything would be okay, but I was pretty sure he was only encouraging me to move on with *him*. A month earlier, I would have leaped at the opportunity, but alas, someone else had stolen my heart and refused to return it.

I’d died inside after those three weeks, and by week five, I was numb to everything. Van hadn’t said a single word to me since we broke up, but I’d also been bully-free for just as long. Reid had vowed never to talk to him again because, quote, “If that’s the path he’s chosen, I can’t follow it with him.”

I was beginning to think Hazel might be right. Even if Van had broken up with me to protect me, it still hurt. I couldn’t pine over him forever, and so by the end of week six, I asked Reid to change up the artwork on my worn-out purple cast. He diligently crafted something new to cover the *Van loves Erin*, though I cried while he did it. I suppose I wasn’t *entirely* dead inside just yet, but it was a step in the right direction.

Christmas came and went, and the set designs were almost done. I’d found some stability with my friends and even a little laughter in unexpected places. I was even warming up to Deacon again, seriously considering his offer to go out sometime. I often wondered if Van would just show up on my porch one night, maybe brave the roof and knock on my window, or even send a message, but he never did. The best I got was an awkward glance in the hall and the one time he paused when he passed me.

On New Year’s Eve... everything changed.