

## Chapter One

"I'm sorry, what did you say? I thought you said you got the part," Hazel asked while I stared at my ceiling. Despite living in D. C. with her amazing boyfriend, she'd managed to find time to talk to me at least once a week—the loser friend still stuck in high school a year behind her. I didn't think she'd ever forgive me for voting her out as captain, but it turned out she was a lot more forgiving than most people.

"Oh, I got it, like I wanted." My stomach lurched again, barely containing my disgust.

"I fail to see the problem, Erin. It's the lead, which has been your dream since we talked about it your freshman year. It's why I let you miss so many practices. What's changed?"

I groaned as I rolled over. I wanted to quit cheerleading after Hazel graduated. It wasn't as much fun after she left for college, but it would have also left me with more time to focus on drama. But my mother—former cheerleader extraordinaire—wouldn't hear of it. Even so, after hours upon hours of practice, I'd finally scored the part of Juliet.

I sighed. "Nothing has changed about wanting the part, but I'm worried I might *actually* kill the guy who got Romeo."

"No. It's not—"

"Yep. Van St. Claire." My arch-nemesis, the thorn in my side, the guy who'd lived down the street from me since we were two years old. I thought back over the years—all the pranks, stunts, and cruel things he'd done to me all in the name of getting popular—and almost puked on my lacy bedspread.

"Oh, Erin. I'm so sorry. Can't you... I don't know... ask Mrs. McAlister to work something out?"

"I tried, honestly. Unfortunately, Van really was the best audition. I would have cast him, too, if I were her."

"I guess you'll have to make the best of it, then. I'm heading out to dinner with Daniel, but if you need to talk more, I can call you after."

I shook my head, then remembered she couldn't hear the jellybeans rattle in my skull. "It's okay. Game night," I said, reminding myself that not only was Van on the basketball team... and in more than half of my classes... but now also the lead opposite me in the senior play.

"I'm really sorry, Erin. Let me know if there's anything I can do." Hazel's tone slipped right into captain mode—firm but understanding. It meant she knew I could do this if I only put my mind to the task and stopped worrying about everything else. She was right. I'd done a lot harder things than tolerate Van St. Claire playing the role opposite—

I popped straight up on my bed and shrieked.

"What? What happened?" Hazel's voice rose and squeaked, but I hardly heard her over the screaming in my head. *Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh... nooo.*

"He's Romeo, Hazel! Romeo!"

"Yes, we established that he is Romeo. Why are you freaking out more?" she asked.

"Because she just remembered she has to kiss him," Daniel said in the background, then cackled like a big, fat meanie head.

“Oh, Erin.” Hazel’s whisper said it all. “Maybe you can ask Mrs. McAlister to edit that part. You are in high school, after all. It’s not fair for them to make you kiss someone you don’t want to kiss.”

“Um... I need to... I need to think. I’ll talk to you later, Hazel.” I hung up, forgetting to even say goodbye until I’d already done it. It would be ok. Hazel would understand, but there was a more pressing matter to worry about. I’d have to kiss—bleh—Van St. Claire.

Instead of thinking about what would be, no doubt, the most disgusting thing I’d ever have to do in my life, I blocked out all things remotely related to drama, Shakespeare, and my mortal enemy and got ready for the game. If I was lucky, he would *literally* break a leg on the field, and I’d get a great new partner for the play. I smiled, thinking of his understudy. Deacon James, now *he* would not turn my stomach upside down at the mere thought of kissing him.

But since my crush of two years wasn’t the lead, I also swiped that thought from my mind and pulled my hair into a ponytail. Only one more year screaming and shaking pom-poms, and I could forget about cheerleading and focus on acting. Of course, I’d have to tell my mom I didn’t want to major in business before that could happen, but I had a few months before I’d have to tell her I never applied to any of the colleges she recommended. And then she would kill me.

I grabbed my gym bag and keys, then headed out the door. Mom wouldn’t be home for another two hours, at least, but she’d have dinner on the table as soon as she did. Losing Dad had been hard on both of us, but we managed to get by. Even so, I knew it bothered her that she couldn’t give me the things other kids had. I’d tried telling her a million times I didn’t need a fancy car or private piano lessons or the latest fashions. All I wanted was more time with her, but she had to pick up overtime hours whenever they were available—almost every Friday night and Saturday.

Our little neighborhood was bustling as everyone else was getting home from work. The Fuller’s dog was running back and forth in their yard, barking at every car that passed, while Mrs. Fuller yelled at him to stop yapping or she’d feed him to her son’s snake. I chuckled as I passed their house and turned onto the main road. The entire drive back to school, I tried not to think about the play, but it was difficult since it had, as Hazel reminded me, been my dream for four years. And now, Van would screw it up just like he screwed up everything else.

I thought back to just last summer, the last day of junior year, when everyone happily wandered the halls for yearbook day. It was supposed to be fun, just free time to get our yearbooks signed by our friends, but no. No, Van had to go and make even that miserable. He stole my yearbook and ran across campus with it, then hid inside a storage closet and drew a mustache on my picture. Then he wrote *Erin loves Van* on almost every page. There was *no way* I’d let anyone see that, so my yearbook was woefully lacking signatures and heartfelt messages from my friends.

It was just one small thing in a series of annoying things he’d done over the years to ruin my life. Fortunately for him, most of his shenanigans got him a lot of attention and helped him climb the social ladder by leaps and bounds. Even being a cheerleader didn’t help me avoid the mocking from the cool kids, proving that my mother was all wrong—not all cheerleaders ruled the school.

A knot formed in my chest when I pulled into the parking lot and only grew as I followed the hall down to the girl’s locker room. Inside, the girls were already starting the meeting, which meant I was late. I checked my watch and groaned. Even *thinking* about Van ruined my life.

“Miss Carpenter, better late than never, but you owe me five laps next practice.” The coach was in a rare form already, so I nodded and kept my mouth shut.

Isabella offered me a shy smile, my only friend in the entire school since Hazel left, and adjusted her cheer skirt. Friend was using the term loosely, considering we only ate lunch together. We sat next to each other in the one class we shared, but we didn’t do anything other than that. Nope, it was just mom and me... and I was okay with that.

I followed the girls out onto the court, which was already filled for our first game of the season. The guys were warming up, taking turns with layups while their coach yelled at them from the sidelines. The second my sneaker made the first squeak on the high-polish gym floor, Van turned around and made eye contact with me. He grinned, pressed his lips to his fingers, and blew me a kiss.

I almost lost my lunch right there in front of the entire gymnasium full of people.

“He’s really messing with you a lot today,” Isabella said, craning her neck so she could whisper to me.

I shrugged. “He got Romeo in the play. Didn’t you hear?”

Isabella’s warm brown eyes widened, and her black eyebrows shot up. She muttered a stream of curse words in Spanish, then rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Heaven help you, Erin. You know you’ll have to kiss him, right?”

I pursed my lips. “Yes. Yes, I *know*, Captain Obvious. I have read Romeo and Juliet before. I wonder if I can get him to poison himself *before* the kissing scene?”

Erin snickered and got into formation with the rest of the girls. I noticed my shoelace had come untied, so I knelt to tie it before Coach gave me another five laps for being unprepared. I’d just put the bunny through the hole when a basketball rolled by, then an elephant ran over me. Said elephant was a boy who had about as much grace as a thundering *herd* of elephants, so he stepped on my fingers, tripped backward over me, and landed on his hip, then kicked me in the head trying to right himself.

I swatted his legs and feet but couldn’t avoid ending up under him as he twisted and squirmed to get back up. Half the gym erupted in laughter, while the other half gasped. I, on the other hand, was mortified. Grr... *Van*.

Every time I tried to get up, it only knocked him off balance. When he stood, he stepped on me. Finally, Isabella came to my rescue and pulled me out of the pile of teenage arms and legs, topped with a heaping helping of humiliation, sprinkled with a pinch of hate.

“Geez, Erin. You are the least graceful person I’ve ever met. How are you a cheerleader?” Van asked, earning a few snickers from his friends.

“That wasn’t my fault, you—”

“Erin, let’s go over here where you won’t say things that will get you more laps, shall we?” Isabella pulled me over to the sidelines, where the rest of the girls stood slack-jawed or grinning. Half of them wanted to date Van; the other half already had, which made them about a fifty-fifty split between adoring and hating him.

The entire game passed by in a whirlwind of high-flying, screaming, hot dogs, and glares from Van. The only time I wasn’t wholly aware of his heated glances was when the girls threw me head

over heels into the air, but the second I landed, my gaze always seemed to drift to him. Once, I even got chills and covered my shiver with a little pom-pom shaking, but I wasn't fooling Isabella. She kept glancing between Van and me, but she never said anything else about him.

Once the game was over—and Van did his victory lap around the gym, sideswiping me on purpose—I showered, changed, and tried to ignore everyone's snickers and stares. I knew they'd heard. I knew they wished I would just quit the team, but I was the only one small enough to do the tricks they'd need to get to regionals again, then nationals if we were lucky. Keeping up with Hazel's legacy was the only thing I was good for, it seemed.

Isabella, oddly, waited for me at the door. She smiled again and handed me my bag, then cleared her throat.

"Oh, boy. When my mom does that, it means she's going to say something that'll make me mad or sad. Which is it?"

"Maybe both." Isabella let her hair down and ran a hand through her soft waves. Her ebony hair was so shiny and pretty, it put my boring blonde hair to shame. "They want you to do Hazel's signature trick."

I stopped in my tracks. "*What?* Are you kidding me? Hazel could barely do that trick, and she was the best cheerleader this school has ever had, like *ever*."

"I am aware, but we need that or something better to even get to regionals, Erin. Can you talk to Hazel? See if she has any ideas that might not get you killed or put in a wheelchair forever?" She said it with a glint of humor in her eyes, but I knew deep down, she was concerned.

"Fine. Is that the part that'll make me mad or the part that'll make me sad?"

"Um... I'm not sure. Both things are pretty frustrating."

"Lay it on me."

"Word has it that Bailey's out for you. She thinks that weird tripping, falling, floundering thing between you and Van was flirting of some very strange, inconvenient sort."

It would have been funny if not for the ramifications of getting on Bailey Field's bad side.

"But I might have a solution for that problem." Isabella paused and adjusted the strap of her bag over her shoulder. She cleared her throat again, then said, "You know my brother, Zander, he kinda... Okay, he'd die if he knew I told you this, but he kind of likes you."

I blinked. Then I blinked again just to make sure I was awake. Then again, to make sure I didn't see things, and Isabella really was standing there telling me her brother, who'd graduated the year before, kind of liked me.

"Define, kind of. I mean, he doesn't even know me." *Does it matter, Erin? Does it really matter that an insanely attractive boy in college kind of likes you? Anything is better than Bailey eating your innards for breakfast over—bleh—Van.*

"You had that class with him last year. What was it?"

"Chemistry. Oh, he was in the tutoring group, too." I hadn't been his tutor, but we did goof around a lot during the study group, so there was a chance he got to know that side of me.

"Yeah, so he asked me if we were still friends and if you were still single. You want me to tell him you are, or... I mean, you don't *have* to go on a date with him. I won't be mad if you say no, obviously."

My brain ran away for half a second, then I reeled it back in so I could follow her rambling. “Um... can I think about it and let you know tomorrow?”

“Sure, no problem. And if you decide not to, it’s no big deal, okay?” Isabella smiled again—which I decided was as genuine and warm as any could be—and we headed out the doors to the parking lot.

We chatted for a little while, but I was soon distracted by a tall human being sprawled across the hood of my car. Isabella veered off to hers, leaving me to fend off the jerk on my own. Why the heck was Van not only sitting on my car but waving his hands around as if he were—oh, no.

The second he saw me approaching, he stood up on the roof and gestured toward me, his arm wide and high, while the other hand clutched his hoodie over his heart.

“Oh, Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” he screamed.

“That’s my line, jerk. And I wonder that myself.” I rolled my eyes and unlocked my car while he slid down the roof, shoes squeaking the whole way down.

“I was just making sure you knew how to do it. The audience really needs to feel how in love you are with me,” he said, smirking. “Also, I need a ride. Jace left without me, the idiot.”

“Just because you live down the street from me doesn’t mean you can demand rides from me. Go find someone else.” I slammed my door but forgot the passenger side door lock didn’t work anymore, not since the subject of my blazing glare accidentally hit it with his ATV. His father gave us the money to repair it, but it was one of those weeks we were a little short. It went toward groceries instead.

Van yanked the door open and slid into the passenger seat. “You know, this isn’t very safe. Why haven’t you gotten it fixed yet?”

I waved him off and turned on the radio, drowning him out. I couldn’t physically remove him from my car, and Mom wouldn’t be happy if I was rude, so I sighed and put the car in drive. I wasn’t even out of the parking lot before he turned the radio down and turned to face me. His stupid blonde hair stuck up everywhere, probably because he’d just showered and didn’t bother to comb it, and those giant blue eyes stared at me. Whatever was about to fall out of his mouth would either drive me crazy or make me want to bury my head in embarrassment.

“So, we should probably talk about that kiss.”

I gasped and swerved a little, then corrected and glued my eyes to the road. “Wh... What kiss?” I could have smacked myself. He knew I knew Shakespeare like the back of my own eyelids, but I couldn’t, *wouldn’t* talk about it with him.

“Come on, Error, we both know what I’m talking about.”

I frowned and narrowed my eyes, white knuckling the wheel. “Stop calling me that! I was not an accidental child!”

“That’s not what your mom told my mom,” he said, dumping a whole shaker of salt on the wound. I *was* an accidental child, but that didn’t mean my parents loved me any less. I couldn’t help that my siblings had already graduated college and had families of their own, now could I?

“Just stop calling me Error. And I’m going to ask Mrs. McAlister to change the scene or something. I don’t want to kiss you, and you don’t want to kiss me, so we shouldn’t have to do it.”

I glanced over at him, a big mistake. His stupid smirk said it all, but just in case there was any mistaking it, he said, "I get it. You don't want your first kiss to be for a play. I have a proposal if you'd like to hear it."

"Nope." I tightened my grip on the wheel and turned onto our street.

"Oh, come on. It's not that big a deal, Erin. So, you've never kissed anyone."

"I didn't say it was a big deal, but you'll forgive me if I don't want my first kiss to be with *you*."

I pulled into his driveway and parked, keeping my gaze straight. My headlights reflected off the back of his truck, reminding me that his family was also wealthier than mine. He had everything while I had... well, I had a lot, but he never ceased to rub in just how good he had it.

He was quiet. Too quiet, so I peered at him from the corner of my eye. He was also staring out the windshield, lost in thought.

"Um... this is your house, Van. Feel free to get out of my car." I licked my lips and bit my lower lip.

"See, I think my idea will work, but you're obviously not ready to hear it, so I'll tell you during practice tomorrow. Just... just do me a favor?"

I snickered. "Um, no."

"Erin, please. Just... just don't ask Mrs. McAlister to change anything yet. Hear me out, then if you still hate my idea, then we'll go to her together."

My brain took a vacation, so I nodded and said, "Yeah, sure. I'm kinda hungry, so..." I waved him away just as my stomach growled.

"Great. Cool. Okay, I'll see you at practice first thing." With that, Van pushed the door open, grabbed his bag, and jogged toward his house. Once he got to his front door, he turned around and waved, then disappeared inside.

I found myself blinking again, confused and worried. But I hated Van. I hated him, and that would never change no matter what ridiculous proposition he had. There was no way he wanted to kiss me, not when he had the likes of Bailey Fields hot on his trail, so whatever he had in mind might actually be okay. With that, I sighed and put my car in reverse.

"This better not be a prank, or I'm pretty sure I'll hate you to death, Van St. Claire."