

## Chapter Fifteen

After a lengthy discussion with Mrs. McAlister, she was convinced my arm would heal in time for the play. I'd have some physical therapy to do, but there was no reason to believe it would interfere with our production. Reid and Isa were back at school, and it seemed for a short while everyone was pleased that I'd learned my lesson and would no longer be on the cheer squad. I was replaced within a few hours.

I made it through the rest of the day, even a grueling math test I'd hardly had time to study for, thanks to two days spent in the hospital. I missed two days of instruction but did my best to work through the problems based on what little I did know and studied. All in all, I thought I at least passed the test.

But in my final class, things went downhill fast.

"Miss Carpenter, Vice Principal Fredericks would like to see you in her office, please," Mrs. Smith said the moment I passed into her classroom.

I shrugged at Isa, whose warm brown eyes stared at me with wary hesitation. I knew that look. It was probably plastered all over my face, too, but I hadn't done anything wrong. Most likely, my mother had terrified them, and they wanted to make sure I was okay. I turned around and headed toward the main office, praying my mother didn't cause such a scene that I'd end up with a personal bodyguard through school.

I pushed open the door and found Van also sitting in the office.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"No idea," he said while fidgeting with the rim of his hat. He bounced his knee and chewed the inside of his lip, making me wonder if I should be as nervous as he was. Had we done something wrong? Surely, they didn't think anything that had happened over the previous few days was my fault or his.

"Miss Carpenter, Mr. St. Claire?" Vice Principal Fredericks called us to her office, but her expression was anything but sympathetic. We were definitely in trouble, but for what?

I licked my lips and followed Van, who offered me a questioning gaze. I had no idea what awaited, but I knew it couldn't be good. Once inside the confines of her office, she closed the door and motioned for us to sit. She sat and crossed her hands on the desk in front of her, her back stiff and obvious annoyance lacing her features.

"It has come to my attention that the two of you cheated on your Calculus test this morning," she said.

Van and I both stared back at her, confused and dumbfounded for several minutes before I finally mustered up enough sanity to say, "I'm sorry, what?"

She pushed our tests in front of us along with the answer key. Both of us scored high—mine was perfect, while Van only got one wrong.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand. You assume we cheated because we scored well?" Van asked.

"No, but you were the only two who passed, and another student told your instructor that you used a cheat sheet. He saw you, and given the complexity of the test, it stands to reason—"

“Hold... hold on a minute,” I said, raising my hand. It was pretty rude to interrupt her, but she spoke nonsense, and I wasn’t about to sit there and take it. “First of all, I haven’t had time to think, let alone make a cheat sheet for a test I didn’t even have the answer key for. Furthermore, my grade in Calculus has always been an A.”

“Perhaps cheating is how you’ve maintained that grade, Miss Carpenter?” Mrs. Fredericks arched her perfectly manicured eyebrow and frowned.

“But... but I didn’t cheat!” I stared at my test then remembered who Mr. Alexander’s teacher’s aid was—Bailey Fields. “Wait, isn’t Bailey Fields his aid? And who offered this supposed information about the cheat sheet?”

“That’s confidential information,” she said.

“Oh, no. Not when it’s *my* reputation on the line. I did not cheat. I have *never* cheated, and you taking the word of someone who is probably one of Bailey’s friends over mine is, frankly, appalling, especially after everything that’s happened to me this week.”

For a moment, just a second, I thought she might believe me. Her expression softened, and she glanced at my arm, but then she hardened her features and snatched my test away. “I’m sorry for your incidents, Miss Carpenter, but I’m afraid the evidence is overwhelming.”

“What evidence?” Van yelled. “It’s some random person’s word against ours, and we’ve never cheated. We’ve never gotten into trouble, and you have to know about the drama surrounding us this past week. Can’t you see how this might be another set-up?”

“Unfortunately, my hands are tied. Given the complexity of the test, the student’s complaint, and—”

“This is ridiculous,” I said and fell back into the chair with my arms crossed.

“I don’t care much for your attitude, Miss Carpenter,” Mrs. Fredericks said.

“I don’t care much for your condescension and idiocy, but what can I do about it?” I said, immediately regretting my stupid mouth when Van gasped and covered his mouth. I’d gone and done it now. Whether I cheated or not was nothing compared to calling our vice principal an idiot. Her eyebrows knitted, and her frown turned into a scowl in a blink.

“Well, given the information presented, I’ve decided on a punishment. Miss Carpenter, you are relieved of your role as Juliet. You will work on set design.”

“What?” I leaped from the chair and practically lunged across her desk. “You can’t do that! I didn’t cheat, and you know it! What did Bailey offer you, huh? Why are you doing this?”

She smoothed the front of her shirt and held her chin high. “I do not accept bribes from students. Be happy you’re still in drama class and not spending the hour cleaning white boards in the classrooms. And Mr. St. Claire, you’ll sit out the next five games.”

“I... what?” Van stuttered and blinked, unable to form sensible sentences.

“That’s not fair!” I shouted.

“Keep talking, and I’ll make it ten games. I’m not kidding, Erin. I’m sorry for what’s happened to you, but that gives you no right to sit in my office and disrespect me. Take your things and head back to class.”

“But I... we... I’m not—” Van kept trying, but nothing logical came out.

“You’re dismissed,” Mrs. Fredericks said, then stood and opened her door.

I lumbered out with my backpack, dejected and infuriated. If I had been a nuisance student, one who always got into trouble and kept a reputation of disobedience, then I might have understood her dismissal. But I was always the good kid, the one teachers adored. How did this happen? Oh, right. Bailey Fields. It seemed even teachers and administrators were wrapped around her devious little finger.

"Come on," Van said. "There are only forty minutes left in school, and I'm not dealing with it. Let's go."

Normally, I might have fought with him about it and insisted we go back to class, but this time I was all in for disappearing from society for a while. When my mother found out what happened, she would either ground me for eternity or actually take my side and give the vice principal a piece of her mind. Unfortunately, neither would get my role back nor give Van his five games.

Van led me around the back of the school and to the side lot, avoiding the security guard. Once there, he showed me a little-known passage between the hedges that led to the main lot. Inside his truck, my anger faded, and losing my role really sank in, leaving me an empty shell of hopes and dreams gone wrong. My arm ached, but I managed to get my seatbelt fastened before Van drove out of the lot and straight toward Fire and Ice. At least there was donut goodness in my future.

"I can't believe they got away with that. Like... she had *no* proof whatsoever, and somehow we got punished?" Van white-knuckled his steering wheel, his jaw tense, and eyes narrowed. His face was beet-red, but when he glanced at me, everything shifted. It was puppy dog eyes and soft smiles. "I'm so sorry, Erin. If I'd known... I wish I had done this differently. Then maybe you wouldn't have lost your role."

"What could you have done? Aside from just keeping this a secret, there was nothing."

"Maybe we should have done that? Kept our relationship a secret?"

"And what? You would have kept calling me names and messing with me in front of your friends to keep up the ruse?"

"Uh, no. You're right. I couldn't have kept this a secret even if I wanted to. I guess I should have just never told you. If I hadn't been selfish with you, none of this would have happened."

That familiar lump settled in my throat, and I bit back the sting of tears. "Do you... *regret* being with me?"

"What? No! No, Erin. That's not what I meant, not at all. I just wish there had been another way to do this that wouldn't have brought us here. This is ridiculous, and it's not going to stop."

"What do we do, then?"

"Right now, we enjoy a snack and just sit in quiet for a while. I'm too mad to think of anything that doesn't involve homicide." Van smirked and glanced at me again.

I chuckled and lifted my arm. "I mean, they're not above physical harm, so maybe homicide is the way to go."

He laughed, and this time it stuck. Van pulled into the lot and parked, then leaned over and kissed my cheek. "You're kind of perfect, Erin Carpenter. And I love you."

Before I could respond, he slammed his door and jogged around to my side to help me down. I could get into his truck with little help, but I lost my balance trying to get out, so he picked me up

at my waist and stood me on his toes, then leaned in to kiss me again. For a little while, it was just Van and me, blocking out the rest of the world, a world that seemed determined to tear us apart because he was popular, and I wasn't. Because my people and his people didn't get along, a long-standing schoolhouse social feud that would probably never disappear.

When he released me, he pressed his forehead against mine. "Promise me, no matter what, you'll remember how much I love you? You won't forget even when it's hard to remember?"

I giggled and turned his ballcap backward so I could see his beautiful eyes. "I love you, too. We'll figure this out somehow."

We entered Fire and Ice, had a blast in the back with Jeanine while she taught us how she makes her ice cream cakes, then headed back to my house. As we passed his house, I had a sinking feeling. I still hadn't visited his father, and I knew I should before things got too bad. I wanted to see him, to tell him what his presence in my life had meant all those years ago, but the thought of seeing him the way I'd seen my father only opened old wounds.

As usual, Isa and Reid were waiting when we pulled into my driveway. Van had been quiet on the drive home, but in fairness, so had I. It was all fun and games to pretend our problems would solve themselves, but the truth was, we'd have to find a way to end the torture at school. Bringing in the police would be difficult with no hard evidence, and if the teachers were wrapped around Bailey's finger, it would be even harder to prove to them how devious she was.

Reid, it seemed, had spent his second day home from school working on the treehouse. He was already finished repairing the floor and had started on the walls. It made my heart happy to have such amazing friends, even if they were newly found.

Isa stepped off the porch and met me at the truck to help me down. "How are you feeling?"

"Not good, considering I've now been removed from my role, and Van got a five-game suspension under suspicion of cheating on our Calculus tests."

"What?" Reid asked, his face smudged with dirt and sawdust. "Can they do that for suspicion? Why do they think you cheated?"

"It's a long story. Uh... can we talk and work?" Van asked, nodding toward the treehouse. Reid shrugged and headed to the back with Van on his heels.

Something had changed from the time we left Fire and Ice, but I couldn't pinpoint what it was. I wrote it off as anger and frustration, but I knew Van well enough to know what those emotions looked like in him. This wasn't that, not exactly, but what else could it be? I decided it was probably best to let him brood for a while, give him space to work through his feelings while I figured out how I felt, then we could talk about it again later.

Meanwhile, Isa explained why she called Marybeth and quit the squad. "It's like I told her, if I can't trust them, I can't work with them. Melanie made you fall on purpose, and I won't cheer with someone who'd purposely hurt my best friend."

I paused midway through making mugs of hot cocoa, slowly turned, and gaped at her. "Did you say... did you call me... your *best friend*?"

Taken aback, Isabella put her hands on her hips and flinched. "Uh, yes. Where have you been? Have you seen me talking to anyone else? Haven't I been at your house practically every day since we started working on it?"

“Well, yeah, but—”

“But nothing. Let’s not make this a thing, okay? You’re my best friend, and we both know I’m yours, so let’s just pretend we don’t need that awkward moment of officiating this and just go with it, okay?”

I handed her a mug with extra marshmallows—her favorite—and realized she was probably right. We just worked, and when something works out as well as our friendship, you don’t question it. You just enjoy it, revel in the fact that it worked out so easily, and let it live out how it’s supposed to. Isabella and I were instantly closer, and I had a good feeling we would be for a long time.

Van, however, closed himself off so not even Reid could get in. For the rest of the evening, he was a grumbly bear with zero social skills and a frown that would give him wrinkles before his nineteenth birthday.

I didn’t *want* to worry about it, but I found it was the center of my attention for much of the night, including after everyone had gone and my mother was still going on about how infuriating the entire situation was. She had sided with me, but there wasn’t much she could do. I headed to bed with a heavy heart, a massive headache, and a lot to worry about the next day. Would it truly never end? Or would Bailey and her friends eventually tire of torturing us?

I changed and fell into bed with that on my mind when Van messaged me. I sighed and read the text, praying he had an idea.

*Sorry I was grumpy. I’m still mad, but not at you. You’re right. We’ll figure something out. Just please remember that I love you. I’ll always love you.*

More ominous words had never been texted to a teenage girl, but I was too tired to read between the lines. Van had always been a nuclear option sort of person, almost as go big or go home as Hazel, but it never crossed my mind that whatever he might plan would have deeper ramifications than doing nothing at all. All I could think about was how much my life had changed, and despite everything that had happened, how happy I was with him.

I felt like me again... me *with* a broken arm but still me. I was more comfortable in my own skin than I had been in a very long time, and that was thanks to Van, Isabella, and Reid, who had, for whatever reason, decided I was the person they wanted to gravitate toward. Things would settle. I knew they would... but not before they got a whole lot worse.