

Chapter One

Erin Robinson glanced at her phone for the fifth time in five minutes. Unfortunately, the minutes hadn't gone backwards and no texts had arrived, which only meant one thing—she'd been stood up. There was no other way to explain her blind date being over thirty minutes late and not bothering with some sort of reassuring *something* to let her know he wasn't dead in a ditch somewhere. It might be snowing outside, but any citizen in the Wellingford area worth their salt had prepared for the harsh winter months ago. This guy apparently grew up the next town over. If he hadn't put studs on his truck and sandbags in the bed, he was an idiot.

Kind of like I'm an idiot for agreeing to this date in the first place.

She'd only done it to get her mother off her back for a little while. Erin had figured the worst that would happen was that the guy would be an insufferable dick, and she'd spent enough time with guys like that over the years to know how to deal with them.

Being stood up never entered into her realm of possibilities.

She glanced around Chilly's, hoping she didn't see anyone she knew. That would just be the icing on the humiliation cake she'd been eating for the last month. After she'd turned nineteen and blown out of here with both middle fingers up to move to New York, she'd never once considered that she'd be back here nine six years later with her tail between her legs, jobless and forced to move back in with her parents. The Wellingford rumor mill hadn't quite figured that out yet, though. *Thank God*. She'd threatened both her parents with a lifetime of therapy bills if they told anyone that she was back for anything other than visiting over the holidays between shows.

Visiting permanently.

Shame stuck in her throat. She should have kept her mouth shut last month when Randy,

AKA Director Douche, started spouting about her performance as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. Everyone knew he was a dick, and she *had* the part. For the first time, she wasn't an understudy or relegated to the background. It was going to be her big break.

But then he'd made Maggie cry. The girl was tough as nails, even if she was only twelve, and he'd stripped all that confidence away with a few sharp words. And that Erin couldn't deal with silently.

Well, she'd paid for her attitude by getting fired, and then the universe decided to stomp on her while she was down in the form of her landlord kicking her ass to the curb. Apparently he was tired of waiting "just one more month" for her to catch up on rent.

So, here she was, occupying a stool in Chilly's, the one bar worth mentioning in the one-stop town she grew up in. The place where everyone knew everyone else's name—and could recite their family tree back half a dozen generations. The past was never the past here.

"Hey stranger."

Erin stared at her beer, wondering if the bartender, Gena, had slipped her a little something extra, because there was no other explanation to be hearing *that* voice in her ear. *Spend too much time thinking about the past and it'll creep up on you. Next thing I know, I'll be as bad as my parents, constantly living in the glory days.* She took another drink of her beer to buy herself time before she had to turn around and face the fact that either she was hallucinating in a truly magical fashion or, even worse, that Warren Davis was standing right behind her.

Hearing his voice was all it took for her imagination to kick into high gear. She didn't have to look at him to *feel* him at her back, probably wearing that self-satisfied smirk he always seemed to have on his face. Unfortunately, it didn't make him any less attractive. If she concentrated, she could almost catch a whiff of the expensive cologne he favored.

Nothing for it. She had to face the music. She took a fortifying breath and spun on her stool, her heart jumping into her throat in a seriously annoying way. Some things never changed, and apparently her reaction to this particular man was one of them.

It didn't help that he looked... Hell, he looked *really* good. His hair was shorn close to his head in the traditional Marine style, but it was all too easy to picture the way it curled when he let too long go between haircuts. Every time she went back to New York after visiting home, she'd half convinced herself that his dark brown eyes couldn't possibly be as soulful as she remembered—and every time she was wrong. And his mouth...

Erin flushed and reached for her beer again. She had firsthand knowledge of just how devastating that mouth could be—both in and out of the bedroom.

Stop it. Stop it right now.

The last thing she had the energy to do was dredge up the attitude necessary to deal with Warren, but she tried anyways. “Hey, yourself.”

“Nice comeback.” He dropped onto the stool next to her.

That was another thing she almost always managed to forget—how damn aggravating the man could be. Five seconds in his presence and she was transported back to when she was a hotheaded nineteen-year-old with more hormones than sense, and the one wild summer they'd spent together. Erin glared. “Find another seat. This one is taken.”

“By your imaginary friend?” He nodded at Gena. “You've been sitting alone for half an hour with no one in sight. If he's not here by now, he's not coming.”

He'd been here the entire time, watching her? *How did I miss him?* Her face went hot enough to scald. It was bad enough knowing she'd been stood up—it was a thousand times worse to know that *he* had witnessed it. “You're unbelievable. I'm waiting for Marcy.”

“Liar. She and Aaron are out of town until tomorrow.” He rubbed a hand over his mouth, his dark eyes shining with amusement. “Which is a damn good thing, because your brother still hasn’t gotten over his love of giving me speeding tickets after my granddad set us up awhile back.”

Erin looked away, fighting the urge to smile. Marcy had told her about that, and she’d be lying if she said it didn’t make her day a little bit brighter to know that her brother went out of his way to shit on Warren’s day when he could. “You should consider yourself lucky. If he knew half of the stuff you pulled with me when we first met, he’d kill you.” But her brother didn’t know. No one knew—not even her best friend, Marcy. The forbidden and secret aspect of their relationship—if it could be called that—had been part of the attraction back then.

Now it just felt stupid.

“No, he wouldn’t.” He accepted the beer Gena set in front of him with a smile. “He might whoop your ass for getting involved with me, but Aaron is too honorable to stoop to something like murder for his rebellious mini me.”

Mini me. One of the many hated nicknames that she’d never been able to escape because of her parent’s questionable taste in naming *both* their son and daughter versions of the same damn name. There was no excuse for that kind of lunacy. The best she could tell, her mother had insisted they name their second child Erin out of sheer stubbornness. Pregnancy-related hormones did weird things to the brain—she’d seen that well enough when Marcy was knocked up—and her mother had never met a mistake she was willing to admit to. So despite her father’s pleading, she’d refused to change the initial name on the birth certificate.

Which is how Aaron and Erin came to be.

The town took it in stride like they did most of the locals’ quirks, and everyone and their dog

had taken to fondly calling Erin some variation of “mini me.” As if she wasn’t her own entity. She’d half thought that it would change after Aaron graduated and went off to join the Army.

She should have known better.

Just like she should have known that engaging Warren in any type of conversation was a mistake. It only ended one of two ways, neither of which she had the wherewithal to deal with.

Erin finished off her beer. “As fun as this has been, I’m leaving.” She carefully counted out her last few five dollar bills and set them on the counter next to her beer. *I am so broke, it’s not even funny. Thought I might at least get a free meal out of this damn date, and here I am, paying for my own drinks.* It was time to get out of here. The longer she stayed in Warren’s presence, the closer she came to losing what little self-control she had. Right now she was leaning towards snarking that smug expression right off his Marine face, but she knew herself well enough to know that could flip like a switch. And the *last* thing she needed was to make the mistake of falling back into bed with Warren Davis. With her current luck, it would be the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back.

It didn’t matter how many times she’d told herself the same thing over the years and then promptly ignored her own advice. She always woke up the next morning in a pit of self-loathing and angst—which was why she’d taken to avoiding him over the last year. When the hurt started outweighing the pleasure, it was time to kick the habit.

She pushed to her feet, trying to ignore the way he did the same. “I mean it, Warren.”

“When did you become a coward?”

“I’m not a goddamn coward.” She froze. *How does he always manage to do that?* A few words and he was under her skin, poking at things she thought she was too mature to be riled by. She turned around to face him and—surprise, surprise—he wearing that little smirk that made

her breathing pick up. *Not this time, Erin. You know better, remember?* “Knowing a losing battle when I see it isn’t cowardly. It’s smart.”

Warren searched her face and, for a second, she thought he’d drop the smartass act, but then the corner of his mouth quirked up. “So who was the poor shmuck you scared away? Anyone I know?”

Irritation got the best of her—again—and she spoke without thinking, “And why is it always my fault? I didn’t do a damn thing to the guy.” She hadn’t done more than respond to his texts. Yeah, she might have been a little short with him, and maybe she corrected his atrocious grammar once or twice, but how was she supposed to take this guy seriously when he used emoticons and shortened all his words to their letter counterparts? It was like texting with a teenager.

“Maybe he was intimidated.”

She glared. “You know damn well that’s not the case.” She *wished* she could be intimidating. Her life would have gone a whole lot differently if that was something she could pull off, but with her shoulder-length curly brown hair, freckles and wide hazel eyes, she’d grown up with comments about how delicate and breakable she looked. It just made her more fiercely determined to prove everyone wrong.

“I don’t know, Freckles.” He grinned suddenly. “You’ve got me shaking in my boots.”

Hearing his pet name for her on his lips was a jolt she needed like another hole in the head. Erin looked him up and down, keeping her expression unimpressed despite the way the man filled out a thermal shirt. And those jeans... *Get a hold of yourself.* “You’re not wearing boots.” She turned back for the door.

“What are you doing back in town?”

Nope. No way was she doing this. She motioned to the Christmas lights strung up over every available beam in the room. “That’s a stupid question. It’s Christmas in two days.”

Now that she mentioned it, that explained what Warren was doing back in town. He liked to come home around during the holidays to visit his grandfather, Old Joe. It was part of the reason she’d made excuses last year to come in for the minimum time necessary to meet her familial obligations—this was the one time of year she was guaranteed to see the man if she wasn’t careful.

“See you around.” *But hopefully not too much.* Erin kept her head high as she pushed through the door and out into the frozen night. Though it was exactly what she wanted, she couldn’t help feeling a smidgen of disappointment when she realized he wasn’t following her.