

Chapter 1

Elena

If there was anything Elena despised about moving to a new town, it was navigating the little things—like trying to figure out where her new grocery store stocked the maple syrup.

She glanced down at the list in her hands and sighed. She'd been grocery shopping a million times, but it suddenly felt like her first time in a store. It didn't help that it was the busiest grocery store she'd ever seen, either. She felt like she was standing in the middle of the freeway.

"Maple syrup, pancake mix, bacon," she muttered under her breath, scanning the signs above the aisles for direction. "Can't be too hard."

Balancing the plastic basket on her arm, Elena made her way toward one of the aisles, scanning the shelves up and down until she found the first item on her list. The maple syrup in question was high up on a shelf, so she was forced to climb up on the bottom shelf to reach it. She grinned triumphantly as she dropped it into the basket, but the grin wiped clean off her face when she turned to see an employee staring at her disapprovingly. She felt her cheeks turn hot as she mumbled an apology, then scurried out of the way, far from the employee's scathing glare.

What kind of grocery store doesn't keep maple syrup next to pancake mix? she thought to herself.

She finally found the pancake mix after going down a few wrong aisles. Relieved to be one stop away from getting out of here, she moved a bit too quickly, effectively ignoring the *wet floor* sign in front of her. A yelp crawled up in her throat when she felt her feet lifting off the floor, threatening to send her plummeting backward.

Just as she was preparing herself for a moment of utter humiliation, a solid presence swooped in from her right, placing an arm around her back and grabbing hold of her wrist. She was able to steady herself—though her racing heart would beg to differ—just as a deep voice said, "Are you okay?"

Elena swallowed and took a step back. "I'm fine. Thank you for—"

The words died on her lips when she saw the man in front of her retracting his arms back into his own space. He looked like every man her dad had warned teenage Elena to stay away from: sleeves of intricate tattoos covering his muscular arms, a black T-shirt stretched over his broad

chest, a leather jacket slung over his arm, and styled, dark hair gently swooped over his forehead, like those old-school Greasers her mom always drooled over.

It was no wonder her dad told her to stay away from men like that.

“Cat got your tongue?” he grinned.

Elena’s face burned with embarrassment. She hadn’t realized she’d been staring at him.

She cleared her throat and adjusted the basket on her arm. “Thanks for your help. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.” He watched her for a second, neither of them making any effort to walk away. “Are pumpkin pancakes any good?”

She frowned. “I, uh, wouldn’t know. I’m allergic to pumpkin.”

“So why are you buying pumpkin pancake mix?”

Her frown deepened as she looked down at the box in her basket. It was, in fact, pumpkin pancake mix. She muttered a curse under her breath, making him laugh, and returned the box to the shelf. The box she really wanted was—yet again—too high for her 5’3 frame to reach. She hoped he wasn’t watching her struggle as she lifted herself up on her toes, her fingers barely grazing the box she had her eye on.

A right hand bearing a silver ring on the index finger snatched it effortlessly. Elena huffed and whirled around to face the man, scowling at him. He only grinned at her in a way that both aggravated her and made her stomach do somersaults.

“That was getting painful to watch,” he teased as he handed her the box. “Here.”

“Nobody was forcing you to stay for the show,” she snapped back.

“A simple ‘thank you’ would suffice.”

She blew a strand of her blonde hair out of her eyes. “Thanks, I guess.”

He *tsked* her with his tongue and shook his head. “You can do better than that.”

As she glared at him, pouring every ounce of loathing she could muster into the stare, she noticed how interesting his eyes were—dark blue, almost navy, with a ring of green around his pupils. She'd never seen eyes like his before. They were captivating; so was he...

"Thanks again, but I have to get going," she said, walking past him.

"At least tell me your name before you go."

She stopped, sighed, and turned to face him. "Why do you care what my name is?"

He shrugged, grinning that infuriating grin once again, and shoved his hands in his pockets. "So I can find you at school. You seem like someone I'd want to have around."

"What are you talking about?"

"You go to LSU." He gestured to his chest, prompting her to look down at her own, where her school I.D. hung from a lanyard around her neck. "So do I. Marketing and comm."

"Culinary arts," she found herself replying.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "A culinary student who doesn't make her own pancake batter? That's worrying. It's the easiest thing to make from scratch."

Anger flared through her. "It's faster with the boxed stuff."

"Uh-huh." He was still smiling, and God—if he wasn't annoying her so badly, she would've lost her mind over that smile. "You still haven't told me your name."

"Elena," she said with a bite.

"Eric. Nice to meet you." He reached out his hand, and despite herself, she shook it. His firm grip tightened as he leaned in closer to her and lowered his voice. "I hope we see each other around."

She ripped her hand from his grasp. "We'll see."

Elena turned and disappeared around the corner as quickly as she could, feeling his eyes on her until she was out of his sight, and tried to shake off the goosebumps that had formed on her skin. She found herself looking around for him as she made her way to the register, not understanding why, and only after she was alone in her car did she realize she forgot the bacon.

Jane, her roommate, would forgive her when she heard what distracted her.

Chapter 2

Eric

She had no idea who he was.

Eric first saw her during orientation on their first day of school. She was taking notes the entire time, always paying attention, never goofing off like everyone else. They were put into different orientation groups after that first mass meeting with all the freshmen, but after he saw her for the first time, he found himself searching for her everywhere he went. He never sought her out—just hoped that they’d cross paths every now and then, and maybe, just maybe, she’d notice him.

But she never did. It always seemed like she was in her own world, minding her own business, too invested in whatever was in that head of hers to notice anything around her.

There she was, this beautiful girl with big brown eyes and bouncy blonde curls that left him forgetting his name whenever he saw her, and he never mustered up the courage to talk to her. He didn’t know her name, either. She was always there, though, taking up space in his thoughts despite how often he tried to think of something—anything—else.

He was on his way back to campus after his part-time job at the mechanic shop when he decided to stop at the grocery store for an energy drink. He needed it if he was going to finish his paper by the deadline at midnight. He was already on thin ice in school, and if he flunked out, he was sure his parents would be true to their word and kick him out of the house.

Oh, well. It wasn’t like he cared much about school, anyway.

Eric was taking off his helmet when he saw something he’d recognize anywhere: a head of blonde curls unlike any he’d ever seen. She walked through the automatic doors while counting off on her fingers—likely trying to remember her shopping list—and he knew immediately that this was the girl. *His* girl, if he played his cards right.

He bolted into that store so fast that he almost took down a few old women hobbling out of the doors. The store was so busy, it was disorienting. He lost sight of her immediately. Already forgetting why he'd come to the store in the first place, he set out in search of her, wiping any residual motor oil on his hands onto his dark jeans and then running a hand through his hair to make it look a little less like he'd just spent four hours under a car.

He was about ready to give up—having been bumped into by shopping carts one too many times—when he saw her in the middle of an aisle, reaching for a box of pancake mix. He strode over to her, cool and casual despite his racing heart, and when he was just close enough that he could strike up a conversation, she started moving. Fast. Only then did he notice the *wet floor* sign in her path, and the warning was just forming on his lips when her shoes slipped on the tiles.

Eric was there in a flash, holding her upright before she could fall backward. His heart skipped a beat when he caught a whiff of her hair: something that smelled like vanilla but wasn't. He stepped away from her after he knew she was stable, knowing any prolonged touch would make his heart burst, and after asking if she was okay, he noticed her staring at him—no, *ogling* him. The look on her face when she saw him struck him like a punch to the gut. After all this time, she was finally noticing him; and better yet, she was looking at him the same way he looked at her before she knew he existed.

He had to tease her for it. Had to. He still hadn't gotten over that preteen boy tactic of teasing a girl he liked. It hadn't worked on Sophia Olson in the sixth grade, but maybe it'd work on the girl with the blonde curls and the brown doe eyes.

Elena. That was her name. She wasn't keen on sharing it with him at first, but he got it out of her, and something threatened to burst within him as soon as he heard it. She had a name now, this mysterious girl who plagued his thoughts, and that only made him yearn for her even more.

After they parted ways, he left the store—all thoughts of the energy drink having disappeared—and rushed back to campus. Knowing what he had to do. He'd been too nervous to speak to her for over a year, but now that she'd noticed him, too, he felt like he had a real chance with the girl who never seemed to notice *anyone*.

Dormer Building, Room 206. This was it. This was where she lived.

Eric ran a hand through his hair, choosing to ignore that one strand that kept falling over his forehead, and took a deep breath before raising his fist to knock. His stomach did backflips as he listened to the music and girls' laughter on the other side of the door. A few seconds later, a redheaded girl with a septum piercing answered, and his heart sank.

She raised an annoyed eyebrow. "Can I help you?"

Eric inwardly cursed himself. "Sorry. I think I have the wrong room. I'm looking for Elena. Max Campbell told me she lived here."

The girl didn't look any less annoyed. "She lives here. What's it to you?"

"Who is it?" a melodic voice called out from behind.

Eric leaned forward to peer into the room at the same time she emerged from the back corner. She was drying her hair with a towel, wearing matching pink pajamas, and she had some sort of strip practically cemented onto her nose. On the desk behind her, Eric just barely noticed the box of pancake mix and bottle of maple syrup poking out from a plastic grocery bag.

"Oh." Her face pinked slightly as recognition flashed across her eyes. "It's you."

She didn't say it like she was disappointed to see him. She said it almost like she'd been expecting him—like that *we'll see* nonsense she'd said at the grocery store was all just an act.

It was exactly as he'd hoped.

Eric grinned. "Hey."

She kept staring at him for a minute as if trying to decide between telling him off and telling him to come in. He recognized the calculation on her face: it was the same way Sophie Olson had looked when she figured out Eric teasing her meant he'd had a crush on her.

Sophie hadn't wanted to entertain him when she found out— now, only the next few minutes would determine if Eric's game was as bad as it was ten years ago, or if the way Elena looked at him in the grocery store, despite her clear annoyance at him teasing her, had meant something.

She strode closer, making Eric's breath hitch, and took her roommate's place at the door. She didn't seem to remember that she had some sort of paste over her nose or that her hair was soaking through her shirt. She just looked at him the same way she had hours earlier when she first saw him, making his hands clam up so badly that he had to wipe them on his jeans.

Elena's thoughtful expression morphed into a smile. "We're having breakfast for dinner. Pancakes." She wiggled her eyebrows, getting a good laugh out of him. "Do you want to join us?"

Eric's heart skipped a beat. "I'd love to."