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## Chapter 1

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**E**liana's phone beeped as she pushed it under a stack of heavy textbooks. There was only one person who could be texting her at this time of night, and it wasn't one of her loopy family members.

Raphael Trelore was Eli's best friend; in fact, he had been for most of her life. Their friendship went all the way back to preschool days, when Rafe had walked up to her in kindergarten and asked her if he could share her colouring station. From that day forward, Eli and Rafe were inseparable.

Now, as her phone beeped again, she considered muting the device. Yet another message popped up on her small screen and she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Eli had been agonising over this decision for some weeks now, but finally, she had found the courage to place some distance between herself and her hot-as-fuck best friend.

When her phone started to ring, she smothered a frustrated groan. Why couldn't Rafe just take the hint and leave her alone? Determinedly ignoring his call, she focused her attention on her studies. Scribbling down the next two lines of her variable equation, Eli drew her brows in concentration. The level of mathe-

mathematical skill she needed to complete the complex equation had her adrenaline stirring. She flipped through the pages of her notebook, finding the value of quantity and direction that would make her imaginary rocket machine go boom.

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Raphael ground his teeth together, staring down at his phone. Why wasn't Eli answering him?

He wasn't fooled; he knew his little brainiac was sitting at home buried in her textbooks and working on her rocket science. She was probably sitting at her kitchen counter right now, studying one of those massive workbooks while she searched for the solution to the next space race.

"Rafe, honey, why don't you put your phone down and come join the party?" Sheila murmured, her large breasts pressing against his back while she slid her hands around his waist.

"Just give me a minute, babe," Rafe replied, his voice distracted as he kept his eyes trained on the home screen.

"You know, most men would die for a chance to be with me," Sheila snapped, dropping the sex kitten act when she noticed his distraction.

"Then why don't you go find one of them?" Rafe suggested, turning away from the sultry blonde to raise his phone back to his ear.

This time, when Eli's voicemail kicked in, Rafe didn't hold back.

"Eli, pick up the damned phone. I know you're sitting at your kitchen table right now, working on the world's hardest mathematical problem, but we haven't spoken in almost four days, and I need to talk to you." Rafe pressed the end button and waited for a few minutes, giving Eli time to listen to his message and respond.

"Ah, Rafe, are you planning on joining this party anytime soon?"

Rafe turned, to find his teammate William standing behind him.

"I'll be there soon; I'm just trying to get in touch with my best friend."

William threw his hands up in a gesture of defeat, his voice playful as he teased, "I'd tell you not to bother, but then who wouldn't want to talk to that super-hot nerdy chick you're always hanging out with?"

Rafe could feel the anger rising in his gut, that same possessive instinct taking hold of him. "Keep talking about Eli like that, and I will happily punch you in the face," Rafe said, his expression menacing.

"Come on, man, you know I'm just teasing you. Your obsession with the nerd is too cute," William said, his voice gravelly from his deep southern drawl.

Rafe glanced past William to the party below, eyeing the attendees without interest. "I need to make sure everything's okay with Eli first, then I'll join."

William grinned and turned back to the group. A crowd was now forming in the converted warehouse where the sponsored event was being held.

Finding an open door leading out to a small balcony, Rafe exited the warehouse, lifting his phone to his ear. He made his call and was not surprised when it reached her voicemail for a second time.

"Eli, you know who this is. I don't know why you're avoiding my calls, but if you don't answer me, I will be forced to ring your mother and ask her to contact you herself."

Rafe ended the call before pulling his black beanie down over his ears. He knew he had stooped pretty low this time by involving her mother, but he was basically out of options. If Eli

was going to ignore him, then Rafe would use every weapon in his arsenal to make sure she responded to him.

When his phone immediately rang, he grinned slowly, releasing the indrawn breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. "So, you're finally calling me back?" Rafe asked after answering his phone.

"Please tell me you haven't called my mother?" Eli replied, her panic causing Rafe's grin to widen.

"I don't know, brainiac, you had me pretty worried there for a while, what with you not answering and all," Rafe said, deciding to torture Eli a little.

There was a weighty pause while Rafe pictured the cogs turning in Eli's oversized brain, his mind clearly picturing her grinding her teeth in ladylike frustration. He let her sweat for a bit longer before saying, "No, I haven't called your mother yet, but I came pretty close."

He heard Eli's relieved breath, his own lips curling into another cheeky grin while he waited for her to speak.

"Fine, I'm sorry I haven't been answering your calls. I've just been busy," she excused, but Rafe could hear the tremor in her voice. His little brainiac was lying.

"What's going on?" Rafe demanded, all thought of teasing gone. "Why haven't you answered your phone, and don't give me that line about being too busy. We both know you're lying."

He heard her deep sigh as her words came out forced. "Rafe, it's not anything to do with you, believe me. I haven't been answering your calls because..."

Rafe's hand tightened on the phone, his knuckles going white while he waited for her answer.

"I need some space," she finally said, the words coming out in a rush.

"Space?" Rafe replied inanely, trying to process the meaning behind her words.

"Yes, space," she repeated, her voice soft.

"From me?" he asked, realising he sounded like an idiot. But why would Eli need space from him?

"You know how much I value our friendship and—"

"I'm not even in Australia, Eli, how much more space do you need?"

"Rafe, this isn't about actual distance, it's about being left alone for a while," Eli persisted, her tone pleading. "I just need some time away from you to stand on my own two feet."

"Who is he?" Rafe barked, a red haze dotting his vision.

"He, who?" Eli countered, her voice becoming a high-pitched squeak.

"The guy you're ditching me for," Rafe answered coldly, his vision blurring with rage. If he'd known leaving Eli alone to travel overseas and compete in this gaming competition would have her dropping him for some random guy, he would never have left Australia.

"Rafe, I haven't... that is, there is no man," Eli blurted out, but her response did nothing to suppress Rafe's fury.

"Eli, I know what it's like to get caught up in an affair, but no guy you meet is worth pushing away your best friend—"

"Rafe, I'm not seeing anyone," Eli insisted, her tone rising.

He paused to consider her words, his breathing heavy as he fought to regain control. Ever since they were kids, Rafe had kept Eli firmly by his side, possessively manipulating her attention. He'd basically adopted her family as his own, and his instincts have always been to fight anyone who comes between himself and his best friend.

"So if you're not seeing anyone, then why do you want space from me?" he demanded, afraid of what she was going to say.

"I need you to stop contacting me, Rafe," she replied in a gentle tone, even as she drove the knife deeper. Rafe could feel his shoulder roll in, his gut constricting painfully.

"You want to break up our friendship?" he asked sadly, hearing how pathetic he sounded.

"Not break up, just distance ourselves a little. Rafe, I'm pretty sure it's unhealthy for a twenty-four-year-old man to spend all of his time with his female best friend."

"If you want me to stop calling you, I can do that. We can text, or I can email you—"

"You aren't listening to me, Rafe. I just want us to have some time apart. Please stop contacting me," she added, her tone desperate.

"Okay, Eli, if it's space you want, then it's space you'll get," Rafe replied, his anger flaring once again. "I'll stop contacting you, then we'll see how long it takes before you cave and come crawling back."

With that, Rafe ended the call, his chest rising with shallow breaths as he stared at the phone still clutched desperately in his hand.

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Eli threw herself into her studies over the following week, avoiding all connections to the media that might inadvertently lead her back to Rafe. University proved to be a good distraction, although each new lecture had her questioning her career choice in aeronautical engineering.

"You look exhausted," Sarah said, as she and Eli attended Professor Lyons' lesson in quantum mechanics.

"I haven't been getting much sleep," Eli admitted as they collected their reading material.

"Been missing that hot best friend of yours too much?" Sarah teased, her easy smile inviting Eli to share the joke. Instead, Eli pushed forward, ignoring the little voice in her head that screamed, *yes, I am missing Rafe Trelore.*

"Eli, wait up, what's going on?" Sarah asked, her voice concerned.

Eli puffed out a breath, finding a table close to a window before turning back to face her friend. It was midday, and Eli's tummy was rumbling, her hunger completely at odds with her low mood.

"I told Rafe I needed space," Eli finally admitted as she and Sarah sat together in the large hall.

"You did what?" Sarah asked, doing a double take that Eli found almost comical.

"I told Rafe to leave me alone for a while, that I needed time to stand on my own two feet," Eli replied, mimicking her conversation from Friday night.

"And he agreed to just leave you alone?" Sarah asked, astonished.

"Yes and no; we may have had a fight," Eli conceded, her mood plummeting lower.

Sarah sat back in her seat, considering Eli thoughtfully.

Eli watched Sarah pensively, hating the indecision in her soft brown eyes. "If you're going to say something, Sarah, you may as well just come out and say it," Eli demanded, dropping her head into her hands.

"I think you're underestimating Rafe's feelings toward you," Sarah said, surprising Eli.

Glancing up quickly, she shook her head, her expression unreadable. "Sarah, you don't understand—"

"You're in love with him," Sarah interrupted, her matter-of-fact statement stunning Eli into silence. "You forget, I know you, Eli, and I've seen the way you look at Rafe. The only time you ever truly come out of your shell is when he is around."

Eli groaned, returning her head into her hands. If she was that obvious to her Uni friend, then how long would it take for the rest of their group to find out?

"Eli, it's not the end of the world," Sarah assured her, patting her lightly on the head. "Like I said, I think you're underestimating Rafe's feelings toward you."

"Rafe doesn't love me, not like that," Eli said, her voice miserable.

"I don't know, Eli, the guy can barely control his anger whenever someone shows an interest in you," Sarah answered, her face twisting with wry humour.

"I know what it looks like, but Rafe is just overprotective. He pretty much grew up in my house, and now he thinks he's like my honorary brother or something," Eli admitted, her face flushing.

"And you want him to be more than that?" Sarah asked, her voice kind.

"God, I've been wishing that for over ten years," Eli revealed, remembering the first time she had realised how much she cared for Rafe.

"Eli, if you feel this way, then why don't you just tell him?" Sarah demanded, her cool logic touching on the one problem Eli had never been able to figure out.

"I can't," Eli stated, her own voice breaking. "If I was the only one involved, then I'd tell him in a heartbeat and deal with the consequences," she said, her expression twisting with sadness. "But my family treats Rafe like a second son, and if I was to cause a rift between them, then I would never be able to forgive myself."

"You think if things don't work out, he'd lose his second family?" Sarah asked, her voice gentle.

Nodding miserably, Eli watched as the other students filed into the main dining hall, their happy laughter echoing around the halls.

"I just can't do that to him," Eli said, hearing how very despondent she sounded.

"And you think that by pushing him away, you aren't going to cause the same problem?" Sarah asked, but Eli shook her head, having already considered this outcome.

"No, because this way, we will be able to stay friends, just less



dependent on each other. Rafe will still be able to attend our family gatherings, and he won't have to feel weird around me."

Sarah eyed her friend thoughtfully, her expression neutral. "You know, there's one eventuality you haven't considered," she said. "If you tell Rafe how you feel and things work out between you, then you'll be able to attend your family gatherings as boyfriend and girlfriend."

Eli shook her head again, her mind already closed off to that suggestion. "I have considered every possible variable, Sarah, and us being together has such a low success rate that it can't even be calculated." Eli replied, lifting her hand to count off her fingers. "One, Rafe has never kissed me; two, Rafe never told me he cares about me, and three, Rafe has only ever treated me as a friend. That, and in all of the time we've known each other, Rafe has had at least three serious girlfriends."

Sarah giggled, her response to Eli's statement so unexpected that Eli's jaw dropped. "I'm sorry, Eli, it's just that you can't calculate something as complex as love," she said in her kind voice. "There's a reason people say you can't think with your heart."

Eli wanted to argue, but deep down she knew Sarah was right. If her brain were in charge of this particular situation, Eli would never have fallen in love with Rafe to begin with.

"I just don't think it's a risk I'm willing to take," Eli repeated, wishing the ground to open up and swallow her.

"Don't worry, Eli, I'm sure everything will work out. And besides, this time apart may be just what the two of you need. You never know, Rafe might finally realise that he sees you as more than a best friend."

Eli looked at Sarah sceptically but decided not to press the issue and dropped her head back into her hands.

Rafe lifted his black beanie to run a hand through his unruly brown curls. The flight he had booked had been delayed for almost two hours, and now the flight clerk was staring at him with a worried expression.

"Please don't tell me there's a problem with my flight; I really need to get on this plane," Rafe said, while flashing his perfect white teeth in a smile that usually got him what he wants.

"Well, Mr. Trelore," the woman began as a dark flush spread over her cheekbones. "I'm afraid when you booked your ticket, all of the first-class seats were already filled."

Rafe shrugged his shoulders, his smile firmly in place. "Is there anywhere else you can put me?" he asked, not caring where he sat, as long as he could get home.

"I'm afraid the only place we have left is in coach," she explained, her expression apologetic as she glanced at him.

"That will be fine," he replied, his smile never faltering. He'd fly home in the storage compartment if it meant getting back to Eli.

The woman smiled at him again then typed into her keyboard, her fingers flying over the keys.

"I've refunded the balance for you, Mr. Trelore, and booked you a seat in coach," she told him, her voice businesslike. "I've reserved your seat in aisle twenty-four. You can make your way onto the plane now with the other passengers if you like."

Rafe inclined his head and let out a relieved breath. Shouldering his duffle bag, he collected his ticket.

The flight attendant shot him another apologetic look. "I really am sorry, Mr. Trelore, I hope you have a nice flight."

"No problem, thanks for your help," Rafe called out, his mind already on the flight ahead.

"Eliana Marie Pearson," Eli's mother's voice barked into the phone, making her jump. "Is there a reason I haven't seen my favourite daughter in over five weeks?"

Eli didn't bother to remind her mother that she was also her only daughter, since logic didn't seem to be a strong point with most of her family.

"Mum, you saw me three weeks ago, when I visited for Sunday dinner."

"Almost a month since you visited, and yet you haven't even bothered to contact me," her mother declared, her flare for the dramatic making its presence known.

Eli rolled her eyes, wondering where her own logic and reasonability came from. "I'm sorry, Mum. I've been super busy with my studies, but I promise I'll visit you soon."

"And what about my boy?" Susan Pearson demanded, barely drawing breath. Eli rolled her eyes again, knowing full well her mother meant Rafe. At least Eli had the excuse that he was overseas and not able to be pestered by the older woman.

"He's fine, Mum, still travelling overseas with his gaming friends," Eli answered, her voice completely neutral.

Eli was amazed at how successful Rafe's professional gaming career had become. Who would have thought that all of those nights spent playing computer games in her basement would result in him becoming one of the world's top professional gamers?

"We're all so proud of him," her mother gushed, and Eli had to clench her jaw to avoid saying something.

"Tell him to come see us when he gets home," her mother added, her mood improving. "I can't wait to have all of my babies together under one roof again."

Eli murmured noncommittally before saying her goodbyes. It wasn't her family's fault she had done something stupid, like fall in love with her best friend.

Eli sighed, collecting her cup of tea and sitting on the couch,

before pulling a rug over her knees and collecting her Netflix remote. As she scrolled through the list of movies, she decided that getting herself back into a normal routine was the best way for her to deal with missing Rafe.

After an hour of staring sightlessly at the television, Eli huffed out a breath. She found it impossible to focus on the movie, with her mind continuously wandering back to the day she'd realised her feelings for Rafe had changed...

*Eli had been walking down the school corridor, her large textbooks carefully held in her hands. She had been a tiny thing back then, her strawberry-blonde locks pulled into a severe bun while her large pink glasses dominated her face. Most of the students considered Eli a nerd, since she cared more about her studies than she ever had her appearance.*

*"Hey, Einstein," one of the girls had called out, bouncing over to stand in front of Eli and blocking her way.*

*Jennifer Rawlings had been the school captain as well as Rafe's long-term girlfriend, that was until Rafe had dumped her during the spring break. It was no secret that Jennifer blamed Eli for her breakup with Rafe, but for the life of her, Eli couldn't imagine why.*

*Eli rolled her eyes, trying to skirt the other girl and enter her class. Side-stepping quickly, Jennifer moved herself in front of Eli, her arm going up to stop her from entering the classroom.*

*"What do you want, Jennifer?" Eli asked, unable to mask her exasperation in the other female.*

*"When are you going to give up the act and admit what a conniving bitch you are?" Jennifer demanded, her pretty features twisting into an ugly expression.*

*Eli merely stared at the girl while other students gathered around to witness the altercation. Eli wasn't afraid to stand up for herself, but she knew that the group gathering were mostly Jennifer's friends. Still, Eli refused to back down, eyeing Jennifer coldly.*

*"Why don't you get out of my way and I won't tell everyone how Rafe*

*dropped you because you were stalking him like a maniac?" Eli replied sweetly, her brows drawn together.*

*"Bitch!" Jennifer yelled, surging forward to push Eli's shoulders hard.*

*Eli stumbled back, her precious books launching in the air while her glasses fell from her nose and slid across the polished floor. She scrambled to save her books, ignoring the crowd's laughter as she gathered her treasured texts.*

*"What the hell is going on here?" Rafe roared beside her, appearing out of nowhere to come to Eli's defence. Eli had glanced up, trying to focus, her gaze level with Rafe's solid legs and eye-catching bulge, visible beneath his tightly fitting jeans. For a moment, Eli froze, her mouth going completely dry as she'd stared at the mesmerising sight.*

*"Rafe, we were just—"*

*"Get the fuck away from my best friend," Rafe roared, his voice so menacing that Jennifer had taken several steps back.*

*"Eli?" Rafe asked gently, the concern in his voice making her flush. Ducking her head, she collected her books then returned to her feet, glad that the rest of the group had already wandered off when she turned to face him.*

*"I-I'm fine," she stammered, wrapping her arms around her textbooks in an attempt to distract herself.*

*Instead of responding, Rafe bent to collect her glasses before placing them gently back onto her face.*

*"Hey, brainiac," he teased, chucking her under the chin while she continued to stare up at him. "Don't let those jealous girls get to you; they just wish they were as smart as you are."*

*Eli didn't know how to respond, her body doing crazy things while Rafe smiled at her in that brotherly way.*

*"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked her, and she quickly nodded, unable to speak past the strange constriction in her throat.*

*Rafe looked so sceptical that Eli forced herself to smile, her gaze returning to his. The golden flecks in his sea green eyes had Eli breathing a little harder, a profound sense of emotion shifting somewhere deep inside her.*

*"Why don't I walk you to your next class?" Rafe offered, his deep voice running over her nerves in a way that made her chest ache.*

*"I, no, you don't have to do that," she responded, adding quickly, "I mean, this is my classroom."*

*Rafe relaxed then, pulling her close for a tight hug.*

*Keeping her books between them as a shield, Eli eventually pulled away before shifting her gaze. "I, Rafe I... thank you," she mumbled, realising that her world had completely changed, even though Rafe remained exactly the same toward her.*

*"No problem, Eli," Rafe replied easily, his soft green gaze following her into the classroom.*

"Fuck my life," Eli mumbled now, her head tilted back on the soft cream couch. She regretted all of the choices that had brought her to this very point. Her life was now meaningless without her best friend.