Galaxies colliding
by scalira

Summary

When two galaxies collide, it sends shock waves through our universe. This is exactly what happens when Richie Tozier and Mike Wheeler meet.

OR the parent trap AU nobody asked for but you're getting anyway.

Notes

I know the Stranger Things kids would be older than the Losers Club, but I run this town now and in my town they're all the same age.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The way out of Hawkins

Chapter Summary

But summer… Summer means the Byers family going on a roadtrip together. It means Max going on holiday with Lucas and his family. It means Jane spending the summer in Florida with Hopper and his parents and Dustin going to drama camp. Summer means Mike being all alone, with no friends and no excuse to stay away from home as much as he can.

When the bell rings on the last day of school, it brings with it a sense of liberation and excitement, but also a weird sense of nostalgia.

Mike already misses his early schooldays at the start of the year. He misses the shared groans and the sound of dragging feet to classrooms, sunkissed faces and summer freckles. He misses the smell of new books in old libraries, the noise of a packed cafeteria filled with kids telling summer stories. He misses the tired looks in his teachers’ eyes when they walked in on a classroom full of hyper young adults, all already yearning for the next break.

School meant eating lunch with his friends every day. It meant doing group projects and betting on who would get the highest grades in Science. It meant doing homework at Will’s place, all six of them spread on the living room floor with snacks being passed between them. It meant Joyce cooking enough dinner for all of them just in case they wanted to stay. School meant having excuses to not be home a lot - after school activities, homework at Will’s, group projects at Dustin’s, sleepovers to cram for a test at Lucas’s. The less Mike had to hear his father’s emotionless, monotone voice the better.

But summer… Summer means the Byers family going on a roadtrip together. It means Max going on holiday with Lucas and his family. It means Jane spending the summer in Florida with Hopper and his parents and Dustin going to drama camp. Summer means Mike being all alone, with no friends and no excuse to stay away from home as much as he can.

That’s why, as soon as he figured out nobody would be around for the better part of summer break, Mike immediately signed up for a summer camp far away enough from Hawkins that he wouldn’t come across anyone he knew from school but not too far that his parents wouldn’t allow him to go. It wasn’t the ideal solution, but it sure as hell was better than spending the entire summer alone.

Will comes around his place to help him pack. Mike could easily do it by himself, but he enjoys having Will to himself every once in a while. They’re constantly hanging out with the others and though Mike loves them all a ton, he still wants to hang out with Will alone too sometimes. He seems to get Mike like none of the others do - always has. In many ways, Mike feels like he and Will are kindred spirits.

There’s soft music playing in Mike’s room as they pack in comfortable silence. Will is really into soft rock, so Mike purchased several tapes of artists he thought Will might enjoy and plays them on the rare occasion Will hangs out at Mike’s alone. The music always puts a smile on Will’s face, and that’s honestly enough reason for Mike to spend his allowance on more mixtapes for him.

“I didn’t know you listened to The Magic Lanterns,” Will says, breaking the silence. Anyone else
would have startled Mike, but Will’s voice is almost as soft as the song currently playing.

“What?” Mike asks, confused.

Will nods to Mike’s tape player. “The song. It’s by *The Magic Lanterns*.”

“Oh.” Mike can feel a blush set high on his cheeks almost immediately. This feels a lot like being caught in the middle of a lie. “I don’t. Not really. I bought it because I thought you might like it.”

He looks at Will and expects an awkward fake smile or a frown, but instead, Will bites his lip and showcases a blush of his own.

“I do. Like it, I mean. Thank you, Mike.”

The atmosphere in Mike’s room seems to change to something more… *intimate. Private.* Both boys have stopped rummaging through Mike’s drawers to find appropriate clothes and are just looking at each other now. Despite Will finally having gotten his growth spurt when they were fourteen, he’s still shorter than Mike. If Mike were to move forward until he was touching Will, his lips would perfectly line up to Will’s forehead. Will would have to stand on his toes to kiss Mike on the lips.

Mike bans the thought out of his mind and forces himself to start taking out clothes again. It’s easier to talk when he isn’t gazing in Will’s green eyes.

“You can keep it if you want,” he says, voice trembling ever so slightly from all the secrets he’s locked behind his lips for so long. “Take it with you on your roadtrip.” He looks back to Will, who’s still standing there looking at Mike. “It’ll make you think of me on your epic adventure.” Mike’s tone is teasing, but his body still tenses with fear that Will will pick up on the underlying meaning of his words. *Think about me. Miss me like I will miss you.*

Fortunately for him, Will visibly relaxes and smiles.

“How epic of an adventure can a roadtrip with my mom be?” He says. “She probably won’t even let me drive.”

“Well, in her defense, you’re a really shitty driver,” Mike grins.

Will throws a shirt in Mike’s face.

“Shut up, Wheeler.”

“What, am I lying? You ran over Mrs. McGorry’s mailbox the first day you got your license.”

Will makes a face at the memory. Mike’s heart leaps in his throat at the sight of Will scrunching up his nose like that, but he ignores it.

“She made me pay for the damage.”

“And the emotional distress,” Mike adds.

“I smelled like hamburgers the entire summer because I had to find a job to pay her back,” Will says.

“So in conclusion, maybe you should leave the driving to Jonathan and your mom. I’d like to have a *whole* Will back at the end of the summer, not one that’s missing a limb or has brain damage.” Mike taps on Will’s forehead and Will slaps his hand away, but he can’t contain the chuckle escaping him. Then he sighs.
“I’m really gonna miss you, Mike.” His voice is back to being soft and gentle.

“I’m gonna miss you too. But I’m not dying or anything, you can send me letters or postcards. Call, maybe. I mean, if you find the time on your epic roadtrip to call a loser at summer camp.”

Wil nudges him in the ribs.

“Of course I will. And you better not find a new best friend at camp, or I’ll come over there myself and kick your ass.”

Mike wiggles his eyebrows. “Is that a promise or a threat?”

Will full on hits him this time. “You’re the worst, you know that?”

Mike laughs and throws his arm around Will’s shoulders. “Yeah, but you still like me, so I must be doing something right.”

Will rolls his eyes and steps out of Mike’s grip, but he doesn’t deny it. Which Mike takes as a win.

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The entire gang gathers at Mike’s house the next Monday to wave him off. Mike gives all of them the address and number of camp New Horizons so they can write or call and quickly says goodbye, not wanting to drag it out any longer than necessary. He works through the line, starting with Jane and ending with Will. Once he’s at the end, Will holds up a paper bag.

“What’s this?” Mike asks as he takes it from him.

“It’s one of my sweaters,” Will explains. “You know, the one that’s too big on me and I stopped wearing because it made me look even shorter than I am?”

“You’re not short,” Mike replies automatically. He doesn’t want Will to feel self-conscious about anything ever and he’s dying to tell him how cute and attractive he actually is, but of course he can’t do that.

Will rolls his eyes. “Not the point. The point is that I want you to have it, so that you will have something of mine to think about me too. You know, like the mixtape.”

Mike vaguely hears Jane snort from where she’s standing, and his shoulders tense. She’s the only one who explicitly knows about Mike’s feelings for Will - though the others can probably guess by this point since it’s becoming harder and harder to keep his interactions with Will purely platonic - and Will giving Mike his sweater to wear doesn’t really scream Big Ol’ Heterosexual. Mike is sure she’ll insist on talking to him about the gesture when he comes home from camp, but for now he’s glad he doesn’t have to face her knowing eyes yet.

“Michael, we have to go now if you want to sign in on time,” his mom says from behind them. Mike is grateful for the excuse to leave.

“Thanks,” Mike tells Will, offering him an intimate smile. Will returns it almost immediately and Mike suddenly wants to stay and confess everything and pull him into the privacy of his bedroom and kiss him senseless, but then his father honks and ruins the moment.

Mike groans and turns around, stomping to the car.

“I’m coming, jeez,” he says. He slides into the backseat and waves to his friends one more time.
before his dad drives off the driveway and onto the road.

He watches his friends until they’re little dots in the distance, and then turns around in his seat with a sigh.

Hopefully he made the right decision with this.
The forced exit out of Derry

Chapter Summary

“You’re going to summer camp,” she announces on the second night of summer break, when Richie is forced to eat at home because the others are busy. He’d already found it suspicious to see that his mother had cooked for him but was ready to give her the benefit of the doubt. Of course she didn’t want to better herself as a mother. Of course not.

“No, I’m not,” Richie says.

“Yes, you are. You’re leaving this Monday.”

“Again, no, I’m not.”

Chapter Notes

Chapter dedicated to Brianna because I was supposed to write her something for her birthday but I wrote this instead so please accept this as your birthday present :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer means three things to Richie and three things only: hanging out with his friends, mischief and staying away from home as much as possible.

Mrs. Denbrough started setting an extra plate at the dinner table a year ago, when Richie was getting worryingly thin. She’d asked him about it one night, voice thick with motherly worry (a kind of worry he had never heard from his own mother) and Richie’s plan to straight up lie to her face vanished when he saw the concern in her eyes. So he had confessed, cheeks hot and tears stinging in his eyes, that his mother had stopped cooking for him. He occasionally made himself something, but he mostly lived off cereal and potato chips. Mrs. Denbrough didn’t ask him to stay for dinner that night - no, she demanded it.

After that night, Richie avoided his house as much as possible. He mostly still slept there, but if any of the losers offered to let him stay with them for a night, he never declined.

Summer always makes it easier to avoid his mother. The losers often dig up old tents and sleeping bags and spend entire days at the Barrens, setting up camp at the edge of the woods. Most of them don’t really want to be around their parents during the summer either, so they all work together to come up with as many things to do so they don't have to be home a lot.

It’s honestly Richie’s favorite time of the year. Nobody is busy with stupid school work or extracurriculars, they can all just be lazy all day and not feel guilty about it and Beverly always shares her weed with the others. Summer is untouchable. Richie feels invincible during those months that never really seem to last long enough.
Unfortunately, Maggie Tozier finds a way to ruin it like she ruins everything remotely fun in Richie’s life.

“You’re going to summer camp,” she announces on the second night of summer break, when Richie is forced to eat at home because the others are busy. He’d already found it suspicious to see that his mother had cooked for him but was ready to give her the benefit of the doubt. Of course she didn’t want to better herself as a mother. Of course not.

“No, I’m not,” Richie says.

“Yes, you are. You’re leaving this Monday.”

“Again, no, I’m not.”

Maggie puts down her knife and fork and wipes her mouth with her napkin. All of her moves are cold and calculated. His mother never gets angry - she just gets icy.

“I signed you up last April. I already paid for it, so you’re going.”

Richie puts down his fork too, trying to mimic the coldness in his mother’s movements. But Richie could never be that cold, that emotionless. His hands are shaking.

“Why?” He asks.

Maggie shrugs. As if this was a decision on whether to buy the three layered toilet paper or not.

“They ought to teach you some damn manners over there. Teach you respect and discipline.”

Richie narrows his eyes. “Are you sending me to summer camp or enlisting me for the army?”

Maggie smiles. Her lips are thin and pale, and Richie is filled with disgust at the thought that he might start looking like her in the following years.

“You’re not old enough to get into the army,” she says. “But I went to summer camp every summer when I was a kid and it taught me to be a good person, to be polite and to respect my elderly.”

Richie snorts. A good person? She stopped feeding her only child because she didn’t feel like it anymore.

“Whatever,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest in defiance. “You can’t force me.”

“I knew you were gonna say that,” his mother says, a hint of pride shining through her voice. Proud that she knows her child well enough to know he wouldn’t go down without a fight. Mother of the year right there. “I didn’t want to do this, Richard, but if you don’t go to summer camp, I’m taking away your meds.”

“Wh - ” Richie isn’t sure if he heard correctly. Surely she wouldn’t. She can’t. “What?”

Maggie leans backwards, as if to create some distance between them.

“I’m taking away your anxiety medication if you refuse to go to camp New Horizons,” she says coolly. She doesn't raise her voice. She doesn't get angry. She’s just completely indifferent. As if having his meds taken away wouldn't literally ruin Richie’s life.

“You can’t do that! I need those meds!”
“And I need you to go to that camp and learn how to be a decent fucking human being,” Maggie says. “Because I don’t know what else to do with you anymore, Richard. You constantly get in trouble in school, you disappear for entire days, and those friends -”

“What about my friends?” Richie snaps. Maggie can sit here the entire night insulting Richie all she wants, but he draws the line at his friends.

“They’re weird! It’s like you’re involved in a little cult. And I’m sure at least half of them are queer.”

Richie barks a humorless laugh. If only she knew that her own goddamn son was one of those scary, dirty queers. If only she knew not half but all of the losers club were queer. She would have a heart attack. Richie briefly considers telling her just for that, but that would make him an orphan and he would be placed in foster care, where he wouldn’t have a third of the freedom he has now.

“Anyway,” Maggie continues, “I think it’ll do you good to make some new friends. Maybe you can be pen pals!”

“Oh golly gosh, wouldn’t that just be marvellous!” Richie cheers, sarcasm dripping from each vowel.

“See, that tone is exactly what I mean. You have behavior issues, Richard!”

“Yeah, and whose fault is that?” Richie yells, pushing himself off the table to stand. “You don’t even fucking cook for me anymore! You wouldn’t care if I ended up dead in a ditch, so why are you doing this to me? Just stay out of my fucking life and make us both happy!”

He storms out of the kitchen and out of his house, his heart racing and head spinning.

“You’re going to that camp!” His mother yells after him, but Richie has already mounted his bike and taken off.

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“Fucking summer camp,” Beverly says a couple of hours later, when all the losers are gathered in Bill’s basement. She passes her joint to Richie, who takes a long drag to relax his muscles.

“I know, right? I don’t know what’s gotten into her to start ‘caring’ about me.”

“Are you gonna go?” Stan asks. He’s sitting next to Richie, their thighs touching. He always finds a way to touch Richie when he’s upset.

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Richie shakes his head. “If she takes away my meds, it’s over for me. That’s it. I might as well be dead.”

“That bad?” Mike asks.

“You weren’t there when I wasn’t on anxiety meds yet. I had panic attacks almost every day. I woke up in the middle of the night with my heart racing so fast I thought I was gonna die. If I have to go through that again, I’m genuinely gonna kill myself.”

Bill gives him a stern look. Richie was in a dark place a couple of years ago, thinking a lot about death and dying and how to make that happen, and Bill had pulled him through it. He’s been watching him like a hawk ever since in case Richie ever relapses, so he doesn’t take suicide jokes lightly.

“Sorry,” Richie mutters.
“Maybe it won’t be that bad,” Ben says gently. “I used to go to summer camp. It was always a lot of fun.”

Richie shrugs. “Maybe. It’s just not how I pictured my summer to go.”

“You’ll be back in August, won’t you?” Eddie asks.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“That’s only a month. You can handle a month,” Bill says.

Richie hufs. “It’s almost as if you guys want me gone.”

“It’s not that,” Stan says, gently knocking his shoulder against Richie’s. “It’s just better to do what your mom wants and make sure she doesn’t take away your meds. Don’t take any needless risks.”

Richie smiles at him.

“Aw, Stanley. You care about me.”

“Don’t make me regret it,” Stan says.

“And besides, it’s not like you wouldn’t hear from us for an entire month,” Beverly continues. “We’ll write and call until you get sick of us, and then when you get back you won’t be allowed to go anywhere without us. We’ll all be conjoined by the hips.”

Richie raises his joint at that.

“That’s a slightly creepy but also nice thing to look forward to,” he says.

“So you’re gonna go?” Bill asks.

“I’m gonna go,” Richie replies.

Chapter End Notes

Uhhhh both of their parents are trash in this so they’re not gonna try to set them up like in the OG Parent Trap!
The arrival at New Horizons

Chapter Summary

“Have fun!” Maggie says cheerfully as Richie takes his bag out of the backseat. He flips her off and slams the door shut.

Chapter Notes

Hey, everyone! Thank you all for the massive support you've already shown me. Your comments honestly mean the world to me and I'm so happy this work is being well received so far.
I will try to update at least every Friday and maybe twice a week if I'm able to, but please keep in mind that I'm a full time college student trying to juggle internships, deadlines, classes and approaching exams while also writing this. I have terrible timing when it comes to starting long term projects, but I promise I will eventually finish this. You'll just have to be a bit patient and understanding if I'm not able to update as frequently as possible. I hope you understand!
Besides that, again thank you for the support and kind comments. You reading this really means the world to me, and I hope you will continue to do so as this progresses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Camp New Horizons lies deeply in the woods, at the edge of a big lake. Richie fears for his life as Maggie speeds over the narrow roads leading there, taking sharp turns at a speed way too fast to be safe. His mother is a horrible driver and usually either goes everywhere in Derry by foot or bribes Richie into driving her, but she was scared he'd just drive them in the opposite direction of New Horizons if she let him drive here. So she got behind the wheel herself, and though Richie jokes about death sometimes, he doesn't actually want to die.

Richie clings onto his seatbelt the entire ride, occasionally yelling at his mother to slow down. They eventually make it to the camp in one piece, and when they do, Richie immediately jumps out of the car.

“Have fun!” Maggie says cheerfully as Richie takes his bag out of the backseat. He flips her off and slams the door shut.

She waits for him to actually walk into the camp and be greeted by a camp counselor before taking off. Richie watches her go and secretly wishes she gets into an accident. Not a fatal one, just something that’ll injure her for a while. Make her as miserable as Richie.

“Sign ups are that way,” the camp counselor who greeted him points. Richie looks him up and down. He looks like he’s only a couple years older than Richie, maybe nineteen, and he’s kind of cute. Maybe he could have some fun with him while he’s here.

Richie almost laughs to himself. He can pretend to sleep around with everyone all he wants, but he knows damn well he can't be with somebody unless he's known them for literal years. His therapist
says it has something to do with abandonment issues. Richie just likes to believe he's picky.

He briefly touches the thinly braided leather bracelet around his left wrist. Bill had made it for him when they were twelve and had given it with his cheeks bright red, assuring him that he didn't have to wear it if he didn't want to and that it was just a stupid thing he wanted to give him. Richie had, of course, taken it and has worn it ever since.

“Hey, kid, did you hear me?” The counselor snaps him out of his thought. “Sign ups are at cabin 1.”

Richie looks at his name tag. Jay.

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you, Jay. Don't sweat it,” Richie says with a dismissive hand gesture. He swings his bag over his shoulder and walks over to cabin 1, where a table is set on the grass. There are only a handful of kids around since it's pretty early in the morning, and Richie sighs. Not only did Maggie want him to go to summer camp, she also insisted she’d drive him first thing in the morning.

Richie doesn't have to wait his turn at the sign up table. He’s greeted by a cheery blonde wearing a blindingly pink hat.

“Good morning!” She greets. Richie swallows his groan and puts on a fake smile.

“Morning,” he says.

The blonde opens her register and clicks her pen.

“I'm Becca,” the girl says. “One of the counselors at camp New Horizons. Name, please?”

“Richie Tozier.”

Becca lets her pen hover over the names in the register until she eventually finds Richie’s name. She marks his name and gives him a key.

“You’re in cabin 4. Your cabin buddies will be arriving shortly, so you get first pick on which bed you want!”

“Yay,” Richie deadpans, taking the key from her. Becca’s smile doesn't falter and Richie almost feels bad for being in a bad mood, but moping around is the only thing he really has left to do.

He saunters to his cabin and throws his bag on a random bed once he gets there. He doesn’t really care where he sleeps, much like he doesn't really care about anything here. His mom can force him to be here, but she can't force him to do anything else.

Richie sits down at the lonely desk pushed against the far wall of the cabin and takes a piece of paper from the pile the counselors put there. He uncaps his pen and starts writing his first letter to his friends.

**Hey, assholes,** he starts, trying to write as neatly as he can. **Camp New Horizons is disappointing so far. I looked at the horizon when I got here and it looks exactly the same as the one in Derry. How dare they lie to me like this? What kind of false advertisement!**

Anyway, I haven't seen a lot of people yet. Maggie dropped me off at the crack of day because she couldn't get rid off me soon enough. I didn't even get my morning nut yet.

**There’s a lake here. It's bigger than the one at the quarry, but it somehow looks smaller. Maybe**
because you guys aren’t here to play chicken with or for me to flash my dick at. I haven’t seen any cute girls yet, but I’ll keep you updated, Beverly.

And yes, Bill, I brought my meds and already took my first dose this morning. And yeah, Stan, I brought enough clean underwear. Sometimes I feel like you two are my parents, which would actually be preferable. Maybe you can consider adopting me when I get back.

Ben, you would love it here. There’s lots of nature and flowers and shit like that. I’m pretty sure the counselors will wake us up in the morning to all go greet the sun or whatever. Hopefully I can score some weed from one of the stoners that are bound to be here to survive this place.

Mike, I wish you were here, dude. You’d find a way to cheer me up and stay positive about everything. You’d probably find a stray dog and hide it in our cabin, which would be amazing. Not to be gay or anything but send me a polaroid of your smile I can put above my bed so I won’t kill myself xoxoxoxoxo (sorry, Bill).

And Eds, every time I eat spaghetti here I’ll lovingly think about you :) xoxoxoxoxo (I’m sending you a separate letter, my love. Don’t be upset.)

So far my first observations of New Horizons. If my letters get more depressed as the summer continues, please plan a rescue mission.

Smell ya laters, you dicks!!! Love ya!

Richie signs the letter with his name and then starts writing Eddie the separate letter he promised him. He wasn’t originally planning on writing him his own letter, but he doesn’t want the other losers to read his private thoughts to Eddie. Some things he can only share with certain people; his depression with Bill, the realization that he was queer with Beverly and other stuff with Eddie.

He’s more honest in his letter to Eddie. He tells him how much he hates it that his own mother would force him to go to summer camp when she knows the only thing that really makes him happy are his friends. He tells him how anxious he is to meet new people and to spend an entire month with them. People tend to dislike Richie when they first meet him, and it always takes them at least a couple of months to warm up to him. He’s scared that he’ll have nobody to talk to here, even if he doesn’t really want to talk to anyone anyway.

He tells Eddie how much he misses all of them already.

You’d hate it here, he writes with a smile, thinking about how Eddie would stomp through the woods trying to avoid any plants touching him. But you being here would make this a lot more bearable for me. We could be in a bad mood together.

Richie thinks about what else he could write, but the words stop coming. So he signs the letter as Trashmouth, puts a lot of kisses at the bottom and puts both letters in their own envelope, writing Bill’s and Eddie’s addresses on them.

Once he’s done that, he kicks off his shoes and crawls into bed. If he’s gonna have to wait for his ‘cabin buddies’ to arrive, he might as well get some more sleep.

Chapter End Notes
A rather short chapter but I need to have both of them settled at camp before things can start to get juicy for our two boys!
Since I’m still writing and planning mostly everything about this and I only ever really write one chapter ahead of posting, you can always request certain interactions between characters on my tumblr (gaywarstars). The losers and party will eventually meet, so if you want to see specific characters interact, feel free to let me know!
Chapter Summary

Silence has been a constant in the Wheeler household for years, but it still makes Mike squirm. Silence means thinking. Silence means Mike’s own voice getting the opportunity to plague his mind and poison his thoughts.

Chapter Notes

Yay, a mid-week update! I’ve been kind of sad and drained lately so again, nice comments would mean a lot. Love you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Karen and Theodore Wheeler are people of few words.

Well, mostly Ted is. Mike remembers a time when his mother would still try to talk to him, still asked him questions on family roadtrips and still asked him about his childhood even after he had told her the same story six times already. She tried to ask him about his day during dinner and sighed loud enough for him to have an opening to ask her about hers, but Ted usually gave her a fingernail when she asked for his hand. He hummed or grunted, offered short sentences at best.

Mike watched the light in his mother’s eyes flicker and die as the years went on and Ted became more and more disinterested in anything that happened at home. Her word well eventually ran dry, and now most rides, dinners and family nights happen in silence.

The drive to New Horizons isn’t any different. Silence has been a constant in the Wheeler household for years, but it still makes Mike squirm. Silence means thinking. Silence means Mike’s own voice getting the opportunity to plague his mind and poison his thoughts.

It’s easy to convince himself his friends will forget about him while he’s away. They probably won't even miss him - if anything, they’re probably glad he’s gone.

Mike has always been… a lot. His mother used to tell him his emotions were always overflowing, like he was bursting at the seams. He could never really hide what he was feeling, and he was always feeling too much all the time.

It got easier to hide most of his emotions as he got older. He didn't break down crying for no reason anymore, his tantrums got rare and even his sudden bursts of extreme and destructive euphoria lessened. He still had a lot of emotions; he just found a way to control the way other people perceived them.

But his head is never quiet. Mike imagines all his emotions as different colors, and the inside of his skull is constantly painted in all the colors you can possibly imagine. Some colors mix together and make completely new emotions, and others turn into ugly, brown-grey things that make Mike feel like he would be better off not feeling anything anymore. Those brown-grey emotions are usually the
most prominent ones when he’s alone. They’re the color of his own voice telling him he’s not good enough and that everyone around him would be better off without him. That his friends are glad to get rid off the kid who feels so much sometimes he can’t even function anymore.

Mike digs his nails into the palms of his hands. He needs to pull himself out of this before he spirals. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, trying to link a color to each of his friends to distract his mind.

Jane would be yellow. She wore yellow the first day he met her when they were twelve, right after she had ran away from her last foster home. She had immediately stood out in bleak Hawkins, drained of all color during the harsh winter months. Yellow is a happy emotion. Mike feels yellow when he’s with all of his friends and they’re all crying with laughter over something Dustin said. He feels yellow on warm days, when his skin is buzzing and his eyelids are heavy from the sun.

Lucas would be green. Green is a comforting color, a safe color. It’s the color of the woods Lucas and Mike used to play in as kids, when Mike would feel like he could take on the world with a stick as his weapon and Lucas by his side.

Dustin is purple. Mike always feels purple when he’s in a good mood, when everything makes him laugh. Purple is the color of Dustin’s jokes, of the fading bruises he and Dustin would have from falling out of trees because they were laughing so hard.

Max is red. Not just for the obvious reason but also because of her bloody knees and palms from falling off her skateboard. Red like the colors of her cheeks when Lucas does something unsuspected and sweet for her. Red is passion, loud and raw. Red is on the verge of dangerous but not quite there yet. Red is powerful. Red is unapologetic.

And Will… Will is indigo. Mike feels indigo when he feels safe and content. Indigo is being sleepy and wrapped up in warm blankets in a welcoming home. Indigo is the stars in the sky. It’s is the stars in Will’s eyes.

His brown-grey emotions subside as he thinks about the color of his friends. Finally, his mind starts turning white and peaceful. The emotions lose some of their blinding brightness until Mike has them under control again, and he lets out a relieved breath as he regains control over his mind.

Karen looks over her shoulder when she hears Mike sigh.

“Everything alright, honey?” She asks. Her voice is loud in the quiet car.

“Yeah,” Mike smiles, his hands relaxing in his lap as he thinks about happiness and comfort and safety and bravery. “Yeah, everything is fine.”

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There are a lot of people at New Horizons when they arrive. Mike’s mind explodes into color again, anticipation mixing with anxiety and excitement and dread and nervousness. He keeps his friends in mind, borrows strength from their colors, and says goodbye to his parents.

Though Mike’s bond with his parents (but mostly his father) was never strong, he still feels kind of sad as he watches them leave. He panics for a brief moment, old abandonment issues resurfacing as he watches the car drive away, but he manages to push the black, all consuming panic down and turns around to face the camp instead of the road.

There are kids running around like ants all over the place. Some are chasing each other, others are dragging their bags behind them as they look for their cabin. Mike’s grip on his own bag tightens. He
takes a deep breath, waiting for his mind to turn white again, and then goes looking for Registration.

It’s easy to find. There’s a redhead sitting at the table, hair almost as bright as Max’s. She smiles when she sees Mike.

“Hi, there! Are you here to sign in for summer camp?”

“I am,” Mike nods. He’s suddenly painfully aware that there are very few kids his own age here. Maybe he didn’t really think this through.

“Okay, cool! I’m Mabel, one of the counselors at camp New Horizons. Can you give me your name?”

“Michael Wheeler,” Mike says, flinching at his full name. He never liked that name, mostly because of the way his father would say it when he was disappointed in him. Full of disdain and something close to regret. As if he regretted not wearing a condom the night Mike was conceived.

Mabel marks Mike’s name in the register and hands him a key.

“You’re in cabin 32,” she says, pointing to a hill to their right. “The boys you’ll be sharing with are already all settled and we’re starting the first activities at 2pm, so you better hurry!”

Mike nods again and takes the key from her with a soft thank you. He walks up the hill until he finds cabin 32, anxiety settling on his chest when he hears voices coming from inside. Mike has always been a kind of loner and the only reason he really has friends now is because he was brave enough in kindergarten to befriend Will. They were always less shy when they were together and it was easier for the both of them to make friends, but when separated they were both just shy geeks.

Mike wishes Will was here. He wishes he would’ve ditched his mom and brother and had come here with Mike so that he wouldn’t feel so awkward and alone.

But then again, if Will hadn’t gone on his roadtrip, then Mike wouldn’t even be here. He would be back in Hawkins, spending every day at Will’s house trying to make food without burning down the kitchen and playing video games and just chilling.

Mike smiles at the thought. Will would probably want to start a big project he would bribe Mike into helping with. They would take all the paint out of the shed and lay rolls of wallpaper on the grass outside, painting a universe they came up with. Will would paint the details, the stuff you had to be good at to do, but Mike would be perfectly content painting the night sky with big, careless strokes and hearing Will giggle at how bad he was at painting.

He stores that image away for when his mind turns grey-brown again and promises himself to make that project happen when he gets back to Hawkins. That prospect gives him enough strength to open the door and greet whoever is on the other side.

There are three boys in the cabin when Mike walks in. One of them is strumming a guitar while the other two are unpacking their bags. They all look up when they hear Mike enter.

“Holy shit, you’re tall!” One of the boys unpacking their bags exclaims. His blond hair is long and held together in a messy ponytail. He looks about fifteen.

“Uh,” Mike says, not really knowing how to answer that. The blond guy abandons his bag and walks up to Mike to greet him.

“I’m Cameron,” he says, shaking Mike’s hand.
“Mike.”

“Nice to meet you, dude. That other guy over there is Jayden.” He points at the other kid unpacking. His skin is dark like Lucas’s and he sports a big afro.

“And I’m Chris,” the guy with the guitar waves. His hair is light brown and his eyes bright green. He reminds Mike a bit of Will.

“Cool. Nice to meet you all,” Mike smiles. “I guess all the good bunks are already taken?”

Chapter End Notes

Mike and Richie will be meeting each other next chapter!
The boy in the cafeteria

Chapter Summary

But then he remembers the paralyzing fear, the nightmares that would shake him to his core every night. The panic attacks so violent Richie often thought he was going to die. His anxiety meds literally saved his life when he finally got diagnosed. Not being able to take them each day, to feel the comforting weight of the smooth pill in the palm of his hand, would send him over the edge he’s been flirting with for almost his entire adolescence.

Chapter Notes

RIP I feel like people are already losing interest in this fic but I'm gonna continue it because I'm excited for the chapters with the losers and party. Hope you will stick around too!

The great thing about camp New Horizons is that none of the activities are obligatory.

Richie hasn’t done any of the things the counselors planned for them. He hasn’t participated in capture the flag, he hasn't gone swimming with the other kids, he hasn't shown up for arts and crafts and he certainly hasn't come sit around the bonfire at night to sing songs together. The only thing he’s done so far is sneak off into the woods for the entire day and smoke pot with the other older kids who were forced to come here.

They mostly chill on the cliff at the lake, overlooking the other campers and sometimes making fun of them but never jumping off. Jumping off would mean being seen by the counselors, and being seen by the counselors would mean having to explain why their eyes are so red and why they can’t stop giggling, and that would mean being sent home for drug use and having to face his mother, who would without a doubt take away his meds as a punishment for disobeying her.

Richie has considered it a couple of times; misbehaving so badly the counselors see no other solution than to send him home.

He knows his mother wouldn't change her mind about the meds - would probably even enjoy watching Richie turn back into the anxious mess he once was - but maybe it wouldn't be that bad this time around. Maybe his friends could help him deal with the panic attacks like they helped him deal with his depression. And maybe getting high all the time wouldn't give his brain the chance to make him anxious. Maybe he could make it work.

But then he remembers the paralyzing fear, the nightmares that would shake him to his core every night. The panic attacks so violent Richie often thought he was going to die. His anxiety meds literally saved his life when he finally got diagnosed. Not being able to take them each day, to feel the comforting weight of the smooth pill in the palm of his hand, would send him over the edge he’s been flirting with for almost his entire adolescence.
So he tries to stay low profile. He doesn't participate, but he also doesn't get in trouble. The counselors obviously don't like how passive Richie is about everything, but they can't exactly send him home for it.

The clique he hangs out with on the cliff is tougher than he's used to. He likes to think he’s a rebel, maybe even an outcast, but he’s a goody-two shoes compared to these guys. They were all sent here by a judge as some kind of alternative punishment; it was summer camp or juvi. They’re all supposed to actively participate and earn credits, but the camp counselors are too intimidated by them to say anything about their lack of interest.

Their leader is a short girl named Kali. She has dark skin and even darker hair, and despite the obvious differences, Richie sees a bit of Beverly in her. They both have everyone's undivided attention when they speak, both speak in the same, mesmerising way. Their smiles are equally mysterious, equally dangerous.

Richie thinks Kali and Bev would either be best friends or slit each other’s throats within the the first few minutes of meeting each other.

The others aren’t that easy to compare to the losers. Richie tends to do that; compare new people to his friends. It’s easier for him to figure out what role he’s supposed to play when he knows the dynamics of a group he’s new to, and comparing them to his friends is the easiest way to do that.

He guesses Mick could be like Stan. They’re both the most rational ones in the group, though Mick’s rationality limits itself to telling the others doing cocaine is probably not a good idea.

Funshine is the closest to Bill. He has the same kind of quiet leadership over him; though Kali is their obvious leader, the others still glance at Funshine for his approval before agreeing with her.

Axel and Dottie are nothing like Richie’s seen before. For starters, Axel is a huge prick. He’s constantly making offensive jokes about women, queers and other minorities and Richie suspects he only listens to Kali because she managed to sneak a knife into camp. The dude is completely off the rails. Nothing ties him to a life out of the shadows anymore, so he just went all in. His entire being screams decay, drug addiction and a certain early death.

Dottie is equally messed up, but more in the manic doll way. Her laugh is always too sharp, always on the edge of insanity. Her eyes are always shooting from left to right as if she keeps seeing things nobody else can see. Sometimes she’ll just randomly giggle to herself or mutter something under her breath. The others don't seem to find it weird, but it kind of freaks Richie out.

Even though Kali’s gang is way more messed up and dangerous than the people Richie usually hangs out with, they get along just fine. They all think Richie is pretty funny, especially when they’re high, and Richie can’t be picky when it comes to people liking him. It’s pretty rare for him to make friends so easily, even if they’re screwed up in the head, so he’ll take what he can get.

It’s been a week at New Horizons when Axel walks up to their usual spot on the cliff and holds up three bottles of vodka. Richie’s stomach clenches.

“Guess what, fuckers!” Axel proclaims proudly as he plants the bottles on the ground. “I managed to break into Mr. Brown’s personal booze cabinet and found these beauties.”

“Sick!” Dottie says, taking a bottle to inspect it.

“Isn’t he gonna find out his vodka is gone?” Mick asks.

Axel shrugs.
“Yeah, but the evidence will be gone by then and he’ll have no proof we took it.”

Mick’s eyes dart to Funshine, who shrugs ever so slightly. Mick shrugs too and opens a bottle.

They pass the bottle around their little group. Richie’s hands get so clammy he almost drops it once Kali hands it to him, and he quickly hands it to Mick.

“Come on, Tozier,” Axel says. “Take a sip!”

“Pass,” Richie says.

“Come on, pretty boy,” Dottie insists. She flutters her eyelashes at him and offers him the bottle again.

“No, seriously. I’m good.”

“Aw, don’t be a pussy!” Axel yells. “You're gonna ruin the entire mood if you don't drink.”

Richie’s heart is starting to race and his vision is turning blurry around the edges. He recognises the early signs of a panic attack.

“I said no,” he snaps, harsher than he intended. Axel holds up his hands in surrender, but Dottie isn't ready to give up just yet.

She rises from her spot around their little bonfire and walks over to Richie, hips swaying. She takes another sip before promptly straddling Richie’s lap and moving her hand up his arm to his shoulder.

“Just a little sip, baby,” she purrs. She holds up the bottle and puts it against Richie’s lips, and the strong scent of alcohol snaps him out of his panic induced daze.

“Get off me!” He says, pushing Dottie off his lap as he stands.

“You’re being such a little bitch,” Axel groans.

“Fuck you,” Richie bites. He flips him off and turns away from the group, grabbing his jacket before walking away. Dottie calls after him, giggling something incoherent, but Richie is too flustered to try to make sense out of it.

He’s too upset to go back to his cabin just yet, so he decides to make a stop in the kitchen first to get something to eat. Maybe the smell of peanut butter and jam will chase away the pungent smell of alcohol.

Richie hates alcohol. He has seen what it can do to people, has been on the receiving end of alcohol induced violence, so he swore to himself never to touch a single drop of it. He usually doesn't mind seeing his friends drink as long as they don't get completely wasted, but being peer pressured into drinking makes him so anxious he could throw up.

He tries to shake off the panic settling on his shoulders and chest as he makes his way to the cafeteria cabin. It’s closed between 9pm and 7am, but Richie is pretty good at picking locks if he focuses enough.

He’s thinking about the quickest way to pick the cafeteria’s lock when he realizes the door is already open. He frowns to himself, figuring Jay must’ve forgotten to lock up earlier, and walks in.

The first thing Richie notices is that there’s a boy sitting at one of the tables. The boy looks up when he hears Richie enter, and Richie’s breath catches in his throat.
“Holy fucking shit,” he breathes as he meets the boy’s eyes and sees himself staring right back at him.

Chapter End Notes

How 'bout that cliffhanger, huh!
The weirdo in the hawaiian shirt

Chapter Summary

“I must be high,” the boy says, reaching for Mike’s sandwich. Mike pulls back his plate and glares at him.

“You’re not high,” he assures him.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I’m not high and I can see you too.”

Chapter Notes

Tbh I just want to get the camp chapters over with so I can start writing about the losers and party but shit is finally about to start getting juicy with this chapter!! The boys finally meet and talk and their dynamics are explored a tiny bit, but they’ll definitely be explored more in upcoming chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The day already starts off shitty.

Jay wakes Mike up at 6am that morning to bring him to the main cabin, where someone is waiting to talk to him on the phone. Jay tells him he doesn’t know who called on their short walk there, which already pisses Mike off. He doesn’t like surprises, especially not so early in the morning.

Mike’s bad mood lifts briefly when he hears Will’s excited voice on the other end of the line. He greets him cheerfully, voice hoarse with laughter and exhaustion. It immediately puts a smile on Mike’s face.

“New York, huh?” Mike smiles into the phone. He turns away from Jay to try to get some privacy; even over the phone, his conversations with Will feel too intimate to share with anyone else.

“Yeah, it’s great! Jonathan took some sick pictures and we bought mom a beautiful dress and everything is so big, Mike! And there’s art, like, everywhere! It’s so amazing. You would love it here.”

“I’m sure I would.” Mike would love it anywhere as long as Will was by his side. “But why are you calling so early? Aren’t you supposed to sleep in when you’re on holiday?”

Will chuckles sheepishly. Mike can imagine the blush creeping up his neck and cheeks.

“Yeah, but I couldn't sleep.” He’s quiet for a moment and Mike thinks that’s it, already thinking about what to ask Will next, when Will adds, “I kept thinking about you. How great it would be if you were here.”
Mike’s own cheeks flush at the words. He turns away from Jay’s watching eyes even more and pulls his knees to his chest, resting his chin on top of them as he tries to find his voice. A deep aching settles in his chest, hollowing his heart until there’s a big void that only Will’s presence could fill. He’s overwhelmed with how much he suddenly misses his best friend.

“I keep thinking about you too,” Mike says softly. He looks over his shoulder to see if Jay is listening, but he’s leaning against the doorframe inspecting his nails for dirt. “Camp would be so much better if you were here too.”

“That bad?” Will asks.

“It’s not bad. The boys in my cabin are cool and there are some fun activities to do, but, you know. I miss you.” Then, when he gets scared he’s being too vulnerable, he quickly adds, “all of you.”

Will laughs softly. Mike’s stomach clenches.

“Yeah, I miss all of you too. We’re meeting up with Hopper and Jane in Florida, though. So that’s something to look forward to.”

“Why are you meeting up with them?”

“Mom says it’s the nice thing to do, but I think she just wants to spend some time with Hopper. I don’t mind. I’ll get to hang out with Jane for a while before being put in a small car with Mom and Jonathan again.”

Mike chuckles. Will is trying really hard to sound annoyed, but Mike knows him well enough to know he’s enjoying every last second of this roadtrip.

“Well, say hi to Jane from me.”

“I will. We’ll call you when we meet up so she can say hi back.”

“That would be nice, yeah.”

“Okay, well, I gotta go now! I have to call Dustin at drama camp too.”

“At least wait until it’s 8am over there, asshole,” Mike tuts. “Sleeping in is for the weak!” Will counters. The passion in his voice makes Mike laugh.

“Okay, fine. Say hi from me to him too!”

“Yeah, yeah, you know I will. Bye, Mike.”

Mike presses the phone harder against his ear, almost to keep Will as close as he can before having to let go.

“Bye, Will.”

The click on the other end of the line indicating that Will hung up brings back Mike’s bad mood. Hearing Will’s voice made him miss him even more than he already did, and the missing turns his mood absolutely foul.

“So, was that your girlfriend or something?” Jay asks when Mike puts the phone down and stands.

“None of your business,” Mike snaps. Jay holds up his hands in surrender.
“Woah, dude, damn. I was just curious, that’s all. You sounded pretty smitten over the phone.”

Mike eyes him up and down, not sure what to tell him. Surely he had said Will’s name out loud at least once during their short conversation. Surely Jay must’ve realized he was talking to a boy.

Mike’s hands get clammy just from thinking about the possibility of Jay knowing he’d sounded that smitten over a boy. Maybe the question is a test to see how Mike will react. Maybe he’s setting out a trap for him to fall into.

But Mike isn’t stupid. He’s been hiding his feelings for Will for the past five years, so he’s grown quite accustomed to lying.

“No, not my girlfriend. Just… a girl.” The lie almost hurts leaving his lips. The words leave a nasty aftertaste, but Mike swallows it down and pushes past Jay to get out of the cabin. His already bad mood combined with the fear and shame that come with loving a boy is enough to completely ruin Mike’s day.

“Breakfast is in two hours!” Jay calls after him. Mike gives him a thumbs up, but he already knows he won’t show up to the cafeteria later. His stomach ties itself into knots and his mind explodes into more colors with each step he takes, and by the time he has reached his cabin, he has fully spiraled into a bad episode.

He doesn’t show up for breakfast, lunch or dinner that day.

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Mike finally manages to free himself from his own mind around midnight, when Cameron, Jayden and Chris are all sound asleep. He sits up in bed, realizing he’s absolutely starving, and quickly gets dressed before walking out.

You’re not supposed to be out of your cabin after curfew, but Mike isn’t really intimidated by the counselors. He’s almost as old and taller than all of them, so their threats about punishment for those who get caught out of their cabin at night mostly sound empty in his ears. He doesn’t even really sneak around as he makes his way to the cafeteria, only makes sure he doesn’t make any unnecessary noise. Though he isn’t afraid of the consequences if he gets caught, he’d rather manage to break into the kitchen and get a snack before that happens.

Max taught him how to pick locks when they were thirteen. Nancy had taken some of Mike’s money (which was, to be fair, technically her money she was just stealing back but Mike needed that money so he had to steal back the stolen money that he stole) and Max had shown him how to pick a lock with a bobby pin. She didn’t even wear bobby pins, she just always carried one just in case. Mike didn’t know what the hell Max could get up to that would require lockpicking, but he started carrying a bobby pin around too.

The thing comes in quite handy now. He breaks in with ease, beelining to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. He makes himself a PBJ, his go-to comfort food, and finds himself a nice spot in the cafeteria to eat it in peace.

He get a full two minutes of wonderful, undisturbed silence before someone opens the door and steps inside. Mike’s head snaps up, having heard the person too late to run and not be caught, but he immediately sees it’s not one of the counselors. In fact, the boy that stepped foot in the cafeteria looks like… he looks like…

“Holy fucking shit,” the boy says when their eyes meet, and Mike himself can feel his jaw drop. If
he didn’t know any better he would say he and the boy were... identical.

“What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck,” the boy mutters as he walks over to where Mike is sitting and promptly sits down across from him. Up close, Mike sees some differences between the two of them; for example, the other boy is wearing glasses whereas Mike has perfect eyesight. Their fashion sense is something else that appears to be completely different; the other boy is wearing an ugly green hawaiian shirt underneath an oversized, ripped denim jacket, while Mike has opted for Will’s sweater he gave him the day he left for camp. The other boy’s hair also isn’t as curly as Mike’s and his freckles are more prominent, but other than that it’s like looking into a mirror.

“I must be high,” the boy says, reaching for Mike’s sandwich. Mike pulls back his plate and glares at him.

“You’re not high,” he assures him.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I’m not high and I can see you too.”

The other boy sucks in his bottom lip in thought and lets his eyes drift over the cafeteria.

“Then we must be high on gas or something. This -” He pokes Mike’s cheek “- is just too freaky.”

Mike slaps his hand away and sits back a little to try and create some distance between the two of them.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation for this,” he says, mind going a hundred miles a second trying to actually come up with a logical explanation for this.

“Oh yeah, like what?” The other boy asks. He reaches out for Mike’s sandwich again and manages to snatch it away this time. He takes a thoughtful bite and snaps his fingers.

“Maybe we’re each other’s doppelgänger,” he says. “Oh, or you’re me from a different dimension! Are you here to warn me about one of my bad choices? Because I’m just warning you you’re gonna have to be really specific. I make a lot of bad choices.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mike groans. Jesus Christ, his clone is a fucking idiot. Just his luck. “Studies have shown that there are at least seven people in the world who look exactly like you. This must be what this is.”

The other boy takes another bite of Mike’s sandwich, chewing for at least a full minute before saying something again.

“I think we should look into studies about doppelgängers.”

“Dude, doppelgängers don’t exist.”

“How can you say that when we’re literally identical?”

“Not completely,” Mike points out, gesturing at the boy’s glasses.

“Okay, so I have bad eyesight. No solid proof.”

Mike rolls his eyes.

“Whatever,” he sighs. “I’m Mike. What’s your name?”
The other boy grins and offers Mike his hand to shake. It’s sticky with jam.

“Richie Tozier.”

He doesn’t know why, maybe it’s because of his cocky attitude or the fact that he stole his sandwich, but Mike instantly dislikes Richie Tozier.

Chapter End Notes

Is everyone still having a good time with this?
The identical boys

Chapter Summary

“I didn’t say it wasn’t weird. There’s just nothing to talk about. Like I said; there are seven people in this world who look exactly like you. They just usually don’t meet each other.”

“Well, I think that’s bullshit.”

“I don’t care what you think,” Mike scoffs.

“You’re really mean, has anyone ever told you that?” Richie snaps.

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys! Sorry for not updating last Friday, but I was really tired and a bit sick so I didn't want to write something I wasn't happy with just to be able to post something.

This chapter is a bit longer than usual so I hope that makes up for me missing an update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He doesn’t know why, maybe it’s because of his snarky remarks or the fact that he let him steal his sandwich, but Richie instantly likes Mike Wheeler.

He isn’t stupid, though. Richie knows damn well Mike doesn’t like him - has had enough people dislike him to know the signs. Mike obviously doesn’t want to be around him and looks like he’d be happy avoiding Richie for the remaining weeks at camp, but once Richie has decided he wants to befriend someone, he’ll move heaven and earth to achieve just that. He once messed with the seating chart in Maths so that he would be seated next to Stan for the entire school year, and by the end of November the two of them had become inseparable (though Stan still denies that to this day). People take a while to warm up to Richie and his loud personality, but once they do, they usually become his friend.

Plus, how many chances in life do you get to befriend your very own doppelgänger?

Richie calls Ben right after he meets Mike Wheeler. He has to break into the main cabin to get to a phone, but he really can’t wait till the next day to talk to his own personal conspiracy theorist. Ben could write books about the fake moon landing or secret lizard people, and he certainly isn’t unfamiliar with doppelgängers.

“ What happened? Are you okay? Did you get into trouble? Oh my god, Richie, which authority figure did you punch this time?” Ben asks as soon as he picks up the phone. Richie sighs loudly, but can’t help but smile at the concern in his friend’s voice.

“Nothing happened, jeez,” he says. “Can’t I be calling you to have a little chat, my dearest Benjamin?”
“It’s 2am, Richard.”

“I was missing you! Sue me!”

“Richie…” Ben says, voice low. Though Ben is actually the youngest out of all the losers, he always mothers everyone. He’s always making sure they all get enough sleep, helps them with their assignments and homework, sets up study afternoons with healthy snacks. It’s fucked up that Richie’s friends look after him more than his own mother, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t grateful.

“Okay, fine. Something happened, and I need to talk to you about it,” Richie confesses. Ben hums, indicating that Richie may continue, but suddenly a lump forms in Richie’s throat. Suddenly he isn’t so sure he should tell Ben about meeting Mike Wheeler. He suddenly feels like this should be kept a secret until he gets a chance to get to know Mike a bit more.


“Oh,” Ben says, and even in that little word Richie can hear the softness and love Ben has for every loser. “We miss you too, Richie. It’s real quiet. And Mike is constantly in a bad mood.”

“Really?” Richie asks, trying to keep the smugness out of his voice but failing.

Ben laughs at his tone. “Really. To be honest, Mike being in a bad mood just means he doesn’t say goodmorning when he sees you, but I think he misses you the most. Bill is a close second, though. It’s pissing Stan off.”

Richie snorts. Stan isn’t the jealous type, but Richie does always manage to piss him off by being too clingy with Bill. Stan never says anything about it because Richie and Bill have been friends longer than Stan and Bill have been dating, but Richie can still tell he doesn’t like it when Richie starts being physical with Bill. Good to know even now, far away from Derry, Stan still manages to be pissed off at him.

“Tell him I’m coming for his man when I’m back,” he says, though he isn’t completely joking. He’s thought about dating Bill a couple of times. It never seemed like the right time, especially because Stan didn’t appear to appreciate the whole ‘open relationship’ thing, but he’s come around in the last year. He still gets jealous when Richie gives Bill more attention, but he also doesn’t mind it as long as Richie gives him attention too.

“Oh, you know I will,” Ben laughs. “He won’t like it, though.”

“That’s the point,” Ben laughs. Then, after a heartbeat, “I should let you go back to sleep.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be tomorrow,” Ben says. Richie can almost hear his beautiful, encouraging smile over the phone and he falls a little bit more in love with him right then and there. He really can’t wait to get back and take Ben on the best date of his life. It’ll be hard to beat Mike and his perfect dates, but it’s worth the shot.

“Okay, well, if you insist,” Richie says. He makes himself comfortable behind the desk, pulling up his knees to his chest, and starts telling Ben about camp New Horizons. He tells him about Kali’s gang, about Axel trying to peer-pressure him into drinking. Ben sucks in an angry breath when Richie tells him, but Richie quickly calms him down. Then he continues telling him about the lame camp counselors and about all the activities he hasn’t gone to yet. Ben scolds him for that, like the parental figure he is, and Richie finds himself promising he’ll try to participate. He tells Ben about
the beautiful nature, about the lake that reminds him of the one back in Derry, about how quiet it gets here at night. He tells him about everything, except Mike Wheeler.

Mike Wheeler is a secret Richie wants to keep a little longer.

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Now that Richie knows about Mike’s existence, it’s easy to find him at camp. He can’t believe they hadn’t run into each other sooner, but then he remembers he barely set foot in camp on the first day before deciding he wouldn’t spend a second too long with all the happy little campers here. If he hadn’t run off with Kali’s gang and hidden in the woods for a big part of camp, he might’ve met Mike sooner and he would’ve gotten more time to befriend him, but now he’ll have to do with the two and a half weeks they have left at New Horizons.

He finds Mike the next day during breakfast. It’s the first time Richie actually comes to breakfast instead of sleeping till noon and stealing something from the kitchen, and a lot of heads turn as he walks to Mike’s table. He realizes this must be the first time for a lot of campers seeing Richie and Mike in the same place together. Hell, the majority might’ve not even known there were two boys so identical at camp, given that Richie hasn’t shown his face to a lot of people yet.

The three boys at Mike’s table all have different reactions to Richie’s appearance. The blond guy choke on his eggs and slams his fists on the table in an attempt to draw attention to himself, the black kid gapes at Richie for approximately three seconds before gaping at Mike for another three, then slaps the blond kid between his shoulder blades until he coughs up a piece of egg, and the boy with the green eyes looks like he’s having a bad trip. Richie feels like it’s all a bit of an overreaction, briefly forgetting his own reaction when he saw Mike last night. He puts down his plate and jerks his chin to the spot across from Mike.

“This seat taken?” He asks.

Mike looks him up and down, brown eyes scanning his face and body. Richie knows he’s looking for the differences, the reminder that they’re actually two separate people. Richie knows Mike is a bit taller and has fewer freckles, but that’s all he knows about him.

“I guess not,” Mike replies. He doesn’t look like he’ll ask Richie what his plans are, so Richie just tells him.

“So… what are you doing today?” Richie asks, trying to spark up a conversation.

Mike looks at him over his pancakes, frown tugging at his eyebrows. Richie wonders if he looks like that too when he frowns and then instantly realizes he does. Looking at Mike is like carrying a mirror around everywhere and having to stare at your own face the whole time. Richie can tell this is gonna get annoying real soon, but for now he tries to ignore it.

“I signed up for Art later today,” Mike replies. He doesn’t look like he’ll ask Richie what his plans are, so Richie just tells him.

“Cool. I think I’m gonna check out the music class. Is it any good?”

“Don’t know,” Mike says. He lets his eyes drift from Richie to a point over his shoulder, trying to shut him out of the conversation by not engaging in eye contact. Richie balls his hands into fists. Isn’t
Mike at least *a little bit* curious about him? Doesn’t he at least want to know why they look so identical? It’s one thing if Mike (wrongly) doesn’t believe in doppelgängers, but does he not have any other theories regarding their similarities? Richie can’t imagine *not* being curious about the person that looks just like you when you meet them.

“Music is pretty cool,” the boy with the green eyes replies instead. He looks a lot friendlier than Mike does, and in any other scenario Richie would’ve jumped with joy at the sight of a friendly face, but the green-eyed boy isn’t the one who looks just like him. Besides, Richie was always drawn to people who seemed emotionally unavailable - yet another one of Richie’s weird quirks caused by emotional neglect.

“Yeah,” the black kid jumps in. “It’s given by this old dude with a beard and thick glasses. He looks like any average librarian, but he’s pretty hardcore. He even has a sleeve of tattoos running up his left arm.”

“Woah, dude, sick!” The blond guy chimes in. “Maybe I should come too. I suck at playing instruments but seeing an old dude with a bunch of tattoos is literally on my bucket list.”

“Damn, you have a boring bucket list,” Mr. Green Eyes grins. Blondie flips him off and the three of them start bickering, so Richie turns his attention back to Mike.

“You know we need to talk,” he starts.

“We really don’t,” Mike says, meeting Richie’s eyes with something almost close to *hatred* in his gaze. Damn, Richie knows he isn’t easy to like, but not a lot of people actively *hate* him. Especially not without knowing him.

“So you genuinely don’t think any of this is weird?” Richie gestures between the two of them. “Half of camp almost had a fucking aneurysm when I walked in. Your buddy over there literally choked on his eggs.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t weird. There’s just nothing to talk about. Like I said; there are seven people in this world who look exactly like you. They just usually don’t meet each other.”

“Well, I think that’s bullshit.”

“I don’t care what you think,” Mike scoffs.

“You’re really mean, has anyone ever told you that?” Richie snaps.

Mike blinks at him, seemingly processing what Richie just said. He takes another bite of his pancake, chews it thoughtfully and then says, “Sorry. I’m… I have trouble controlling my emotions. I didn’t mean to be a jerk.”

Richie shrugs. “It’s fine.” It’s not like he isn’t used to people using him as their emotional punching bag anyway.

Mike nods and looks away, but more out of embarrassment than out of anger now. Richie takes it as a good sign; if Mike is embarrassed about his behavior towards him, then maybe he’ll eventually be open to some sort of friendship. This battle isn’t lost yet.

“So,” Richie tries carefully, “you wanna hang out later? You know, so we can talk.”

Mike bites his lip. Richie is taken aback by the gesture since he knows he does that too whenever he’s nervous, but he pushes away the sudden weird feeling in his guts and patiently waits for a reply.
“I don’t know, Richie. I don’t really think that’s a good idea.”

“Well not? Come on, what’s the worst that can happen?” Richie grins at Mike from across the table. “Scared you’ll get sick of looking at your own ugly face?”

Mike rolls his eyes. “We’re literally identical looking. You can’t call me ugly without calling yourself ugly.”

Richie shrugs cheerfully. “Never said I was handsome.”

That gets a small chuckle out of Mike. He sighs deeply, runs a hand through his curls and rolls up the sleeves of his red sweater - the same one he was wearing last night.

“Fine,” he eventually say. “Meet me at noon by the lake. We can talk there.”

“Sweet!” Richie says, almost pumping his fist in the air in victory. He gets up from the table, nods goodbye to the (still bickering) trio next to him and makes his way out of the cafeteria. All the way back to his cabin, he can’t stop grinning.

Chapter End Notes

You'll find out why Mike is being so distant towards Richie in the next chapter so please don't be mad at him for being mean in this chapter, my boy is trying his best.
The lost twin

Chapter Summary

Mike really doesn’t want to see Richie again. Seeing him means having to think about the reason why they look so identical, and that means having to think about all the equally fucked up explanations he came up with last night. He wished they could just exist parallel with each other, their paths never crossing again after their brief meeting in the cafeteria last night, but Richie seems to want something else entirely.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update, I haven't forgotten about my boys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mike doesn’t want to admit it, but meeting Richie Tozier scares him. Studies do suggest there are at least seven people on earth who look like you, but none of those studies say those people are identical to you. Not like siblings. Not like twins.

Once the thought has made a home in Mike’s mind, he can’t stop thinking about it anymore. It plagues his thoughts for the entire night, allowing very little sleep as Mike tosses and turns and tries to do the maths, tries to see the logic in this.

It’s a well known fact that Theodore Wheeler is a piece of shit who cares about very little but himself. Mike has never known a time where his father was a pleasure to be around; he has the talent of sucking all the life and joy out of you just by being in the same room as you. The man has the charisma of a wet rag and the warmth of a broken light bulb.

Mike had seen him drain his mother of her happiness, had seen Nancy wither under his bored gaze like a flower without sunlight. He had hated Ted for his indifference, for his carelessness, for the distance he put between himself and his children. But he never had to hate him for cheating.

He isn’t so sure about that anymore now. Would Mike really put it past Ted to cheat on Karen? He had ruined her in every other way, so why not finish it off like that? Why not bite himself into a new woman to suck the life out of her like the parasite he is?

But considering this thought, accepting the fact that Ted would be capable of cheating on Karen and knock another woman up, also means Mike has to consider that he could be the result of adultery. That he could be some random woman’s son, with Richie as his brother, and that his mother isn’t actually his mother. That he was raised on lies.

The other possibility, of course, is that Ted and Karen had twins after Nancy and decided to give one of them up for adoption, though that seems very unlikely. Karen Wheeler loves children, and they certainly have the resources to feed and care for twins. She would never voluntarily give up one of her children.
Which brings Mike to a third option: Ted forced her to give up Richie. But Mike can’t imagine him being *that* cruel, *that* heartless. And what would be his motive? But then again, what would be his motive to leave Richie and their biological mother and bring Mike back home with him to be raised as Karen’s son? It doesn’t make sense. None of it makes any sense.

All the different possibilities keep him up all night, and by the time dawn rolls around, Mike doesn’t see any preferable outcome except the doppelegänger one. Maybe, with a bit of luck, Richie was sent here from a parallel universe to kill him. That would honestly be preferable right about now.

Mike really doesn’t want to see Richie again. Seeing him means having to think about the reason why they look so identical, and that means having to think about all the equally fucked up explanations he came up with last night. He wished they could just exist parallel with each other, their paths never crossing again after their brief meeting in the cafeteria last night, but Richie seems to want something else entirely.

He finds him the next morning during breakfast. Mike groans internally when he sees him approaching, wearing a different but equally ugly shirt and his messy hair uncombed. Richie’s eyes scan the room until he finds Mike’s table and then he marches over there, determination in his eyes. Mike wishes he could disappear as more and more people notice the identical boys and stare at them while Richie walks over.

Richie immediately acts like he owns the table when he puts down his plate and sits across from Mike, trying to engage him in a conversation he doesn’t want to be a part of. He hopes that, if he just keeps his answers to a minimum, Richie will eventually give up and leave him alone. They can go back to just coincidentally looking a lot alike, Mike can force the memory and all its implications out of his head and he can pretend nothing ever happened. It’s not the ideal situation, but it’s better than having to deal with things he doesn’t want to even think about.

But then Richie tells Mike he’s being mean, and he’s immediately taken back to the fall of ’84, when Max had moved to Hawkins. Mike hadn’t liked her at first, didn’t like how Dustin and Lucas drooled over her. But after a few weeks, she has finally snapped and had called Mike a ‘mean, tactless asshole’. The others, even Will, had agreed, and that really made Mike think about his behavior.

His therapist taught him to reflect on his words and actions from an outsider’s perspective. Would he like to hear those words when they were spoken to him? When he realizes he wouldn’t like the way he’s treating Richie, his own personal motives for it don’t even matter anymore.

Richie shrugs his apology for his behavior away. It reminds Mike of the way Will would shrug away Lonnie’s apologies for the way he used to treat him - like he was used to it by now. Like it was easier to just shrug than it was to accept the apology because he knew it would happen again anyway.

Mike feels bad for treating him like he did. After all, it wouldn’t be his fault if Ted ended up being a cheater and they were a result of his shenanigans. So, when Richie asks to hang out so they can talk, he ends up agreeing.

***

“So, where are you from?” Richie tries that afternoon. They’re at the lake, far enough towards the woods that they won’t be bothered by curious campers. Mike is sitting on a log, but Richie seems to be incapable of sitting still for more than ten seconds. He’s balancing on another log, arms spread wide as he puts one foot before the other trying to get to the other side.
“Hawkins, Indiana,” Mike says. He’d been cracking his skull during the hours between breakfast and now about what he could tell Richie and what not. Maybe Richie’s mom had spoken of a man in Hawkins, maybe Richie would make a connection Mike isn’t ready to make. But not telling Richie at least where he’s from would be suspicious and would probably even fuel Richie’s doppelgänger theory.

“Never heard of it,” Richie says, and Mike is almost relieved to hear that.

“It’s a small town,” Mike explains.

“Ah,” Richie says, jumping off the log to pick up a pebble and fling it into the lake. “I’m from a small town too. Nothing ever happens there.”

Mike nods. Nothing happens in Hawkins either. The biggest recent scandal was Jane showing up in town after she had run away from her latest foster family, and that was four years ago.

“So why did you come to New Horizons?” Richie continues. He seems to be determined to get to know Mike as best as he can.

“I don’t know, boredom, I guess,” Mike shrugs. He rips a blade of grass into tiny little pieces and scatters them over the ground. “My friends were all busy so I’d have to spend the majority of summer alone.”

“Don’t like being alone?”

Mike shrugs again.

“Yeah, me neither,” Richie sighs. He finally sits down next to Mike and stares at the lake. It’s weird seeing Richie’s face in profile, considering it’s identical to Mike’s and Mike has never seen his face in profile before. Is his nose really that sharp? and does he have the same dark bags under his eyes?

Damn, his are probably worse considering the fact he barely slept. Richie was right: it’s already getting annoying having to look at his own face all the time.

“I was forced by my mother,” Richie continues. The word mother sounds like a cuss instead of a regular term. “She said I had to be taught respect and apparently summer camp is the best thing for that.”

“What, she didn’t enlist you into the army?”

Richie shoves him lightly. “That’s what I said! I’m too young, apparently. It’s nice knowing she’s waiting with that till I turn eighteen.”

“You don’t sound like you like her.”

Richie scoffs.

“That’s putting it lightly. She’s like, the most horrible person in the world.”

Mike thinks about his father.

“I beg to differ,” he says.

“Aw, look at us bonding over shitty people in our lives. Who is it, also your mom?”

“My dad,” Mike says. He doesn’t even know why he says it - normally it’s none of other people’s business what happens behind closed doors in the Wheeler household. His friends all know Mike
doesn’t have the healthiest relationship with his dad, but that’s only because they’ve known him for their entire lives. Jane and Max didn’t find out the Wheeler household was far from perfect till they were accidentally caught in the middle of a fight between Ted and Karen when they were all hanging out in the basement one night. And yet, with Richie it doesn’t feel like Mike is exposing himself too much. He almost finds it comforting that they both hate one of the key figures in their lives. It makes him dislike Richie a little less and sympathize with him a little more.

“My dad isn’t even in the picture.”

Mike’s heart leaps into his throat. This is it, the perfect opportunity to try to get any information Richie might possibly have about his biological father without raising too much suspicion. He tries to sound casual as he asks, “What happened to him?”

“The usual shit, I guess. He knocked up my mom, decided he didn’t want to stick around to raise a kid, packed up all his stuff and vanished. He sent some money the first months of my life and a birthday card when I turned one, but that’s it.”

“And you never tried to track him down?”

Richie scoffs. “Why would I? He obviously never cared about me and never wanted me in the first place. I have better things to do than looking for a man who doesn’t want me in his life.”

“So you know nothing about him?”

“Not even his fucking name. My mom refused to tell me when I was younger and eventually I just stopped asking.”

Mike exhales. He doesn’t know whether not knowing anything about Richie’s father is a good or a bad thing. It could very easily be a total stranger who just passed genes and mixed them with Richie’s mother and made him look weirdly like Mike. It’s unlikely, but not impossible. But it could still very easily be Theodore Wheeler. Not caring about his children does sound a lot like him.

Mike’s mind starts to drift off, starts to drift to a more dangerous place where he and Richie are the result of adultery and Mike’s connection to Karen Wheeler, the parent he actually cares about, is solely based on lies and cover-ups, but Richie pokes him in the ribs before he can spiral into another episode. Mike looks at Richie, who squints at him.

“But, uh, why are you so curious about my life?” He wonders, eyebrows raised. “Are you trying to find my weak spot so it’ll be easier for you to kill me and take my place in this dimension?”

Mike groans and covers his face with his hands.

“I’m not your doppelgänger, Richie!”

“That’s exactly the kind of shit my doppelgänger would say!” Richie points. Mike can’t tell if he’s being serious or if he’s just messing with him, but it’s annoying either way.

“I will fight you,” Mike warns.

Richie grins. “I knew it! You’re trying to weaken me before your final blow. I’m onto you, Michael.” He jumps up from the log, almost buzzing with energy, and extends his hand to Mike.

“Come on then! Fight me to the death, doppelgänger!”

Mike slaps his hand away and smiles despite himself.
“You’re a fucking idiot,” he says. Richie’s grin turns even wider.

“The mood got way too dark way too fast,” he explains. “I had to do something, didn’t I?”

“So you admit the doppelgänger theory is dumb and laughable?”

Richie sputters in disbelief, putting a hand over his heart. “It’s a solid theory!”

“No theory is solid if you have no proof to back it up.”

“You don’t have any proof that we aren’t doppelgängers,” Richie says with a cocky grin, as if this is an argument to be won instead of a myth to be debunked.

“Actually, I can prove we aren’t doppelgängers,” Mike says.

“Oh, yeah? How?”

And before he even realizes what he’s saying, before he can even stop his mouth from forming the words, Mike hands them both the perfect way to figure out once and for all if they’re twins.

“We can look into our files. Doppelgängers aren’t real people, but since doppelgängers don’t exist, we’re both real people. Therefore, we will have real and traceable information in our files.”

Richie raises his eyebrows again.

“I can get us into Mr. Brown’s office. He keeps all the files there.”

Mike’s brain is trying desperately to get out of this, but he has already unintentionally planted the idea in Richie’s head. If he doesn’t go with him, Richie will still go by himself. Mike curses his unhealthy need to constantly prove others wrong. If he could just let ignorant comments slide every once in a while, he wouldn’t be getting himself into situations where he has to break into someone’s office to cancel out the option of him having a secret twin from a mother he doesn’t know and a father he doesn’t want to know. This is great. Just wonderful. Mike was fully ready to live the rest of his life in utter and blissful denial about the explanation for his and Richie’s identical looks, but his own stupid brain had to sabotage that plan. Sometimes Mike really wishes he could kick his own ass. Either way, he can’t get out of it now. He might as well face the music. And hey, maybe they don’t find any proof that they’re related. Maybe they do just look a lot alike. Maybe that’s it.

Maybe Mike’s entire life isn’t built on lies after all.

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They sneak into Mr. Brown’s office that same night, both agreeing that they have to find out the truth. Mike can’t imagine having to spend another night wide awake, thinking of all possible explanations for this. He’d rather get this over with.

Richie picks the lock. He’s even better at it than Mike and quietly tells him there are a lot of abandoned, locked up houses in Derry his friends and him would often break into for shits and giggles, and that’s why he’s so good at it. Mike honestly wouldn’t have cared if Richie’s lock picking skills came from having broken into people’s houses to steal jewelry; he just wants to get his hands on their files and rule out all the possibilities floating through his mind.

It takes Richie a bit longer to pick the lock to the file cabinet. Mike notices that his hands are shaking and he wonders if Richie is thinking the same thing, if the doppelgänger theory was just a set up
from the start to trick Mike into looking into their files. He wouldn’t give Richie those trickery 
abilities, but then again, he barely even knows the guy.

Finally, after picking the lock for two minutes, they hear a satisfying click. Richie opens the cabinet 
proudly, but Mike has no time to pat him on the back. He searches for his file first and then also 
fishes out Richie’s, opening both at the same time to skim through them in one effort.

He lets his eyes drift over the usual shit like the names of his parents and other irrelevant information. 
Upon closer inspection of Richie’s file he discovers that they share a birthday, but even that doesn’t 
have to mean anything. It could still be a coincidence. Mike’s life could still end up being the exact 
same as it was before he met Richie when he walks out of here.

But then Richie gasps, and Mike’s eyes dart to where Richie is staring at, and there it stands, black 
on white. Undeniable proof. A knife twists itself into Mike’s back and punctures his lungs, causing 
him to gasp for air.

There, at the top of the page, it reads: Richard Andrew Tozier (né: Wheeler).

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, I know this is a cruel chapter to start a hiatus with, but my finals are coming 
up and I really have to study A Lot, so I'm taking a little break from this. I will be 
finished with my exams at the end of January and then I'm on break for six weeks 
before I start my internship, so I'll have lots of times to continue and maybe even finish 
this! So don't worry, I'm not abandoning this, this won't be an unfinished WIP, I will 
just be on a little break for a couple of weeks.

See you all at the end of January!

(Also, for those who get notifications every time I post: I did post a reylo fic but please 
don't hate me, it's a satire fic written to annoy the reyllos and I do not in any way ship 
them)
The beating

Chapter Summary

It never occurred to him that his father might have another family. For all Richie cared, he was in prison or dead, not living a perfectly average life in a perfectly average suburb with a perfectly average wife and kids. If he didn’t care enough about Richie to stick around, certainly he didn’t care enough to have any more children.

Chapter Notes

Warning for this chapter: violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Richie had spent his entire life thinking he only had his mother. It was a sad thought to have, especially because Maggie Tozier didn’t give two shits about him. So, really, he didn’t even have her. In reality, it had always been just Richie. He would think about his dad from time to time when he was younger, despite being angry at him for leaving him alone with his mother and completely disappearing out of his life. Richie couldn’t help but imagine him. Did he have the same dark eyes, the same black hair? Did he need glasses too, was his eyesight just as bad as Richie’s? And did he really leave, or did his mother just force him out?

As Richie grew older, he stopped imagining his father. He realized that his dad didn’t care about him, had never cared about him, and he accepted the fact that he would go his entire life without knowing who his father was.

It never occurred to him that his father might have another family. For all Richie cared, he was in prison or dead, not living a perfectly average life in a perfectly average suburb with a perfectly average wife and kids. If he didn’t care enough about Richie to stick around, certainly he didn’t care enough to have any more children.

Yet here it stands; undeniable proof. Him and Mike sharing their appearance, birthday and last name cannot be seen as a crazy coincidence. Not even Richie is that blind.

Upon closer inspection of Mike’s file, Richie sees that he has two sisters: Nancy and Holly. Richie’s stomach turns at the thought of growing up all alone when he could’ve had siblings, when he could’ve had a twin. His childhood would’ve been so much less lonely. He wouldn’t have to rely on the losers to keep him company, he wouldn’t have to feel like a burden. Having siblings would mean never being alone and never feeling like a burden, because siblings always have each other, no matter what.

“Richie…” Mike says softly, probably noticing the twisted hurt on Richie’s face. He reaches out to him, trying to comfort him with touch, but Richie jerks away. Searing hot jealousy suddenly blinds him. Mike grew up in a loving home, with two parents who took care of him and two sisters he could love, all while Richie got stuck with his mother in a shitty little town, desperate for the love of a father he told himself he hated. It’s not fair. Why does Mike get to live the life Richie could’ve
lived? Why couldn’t his father have taken Richie with him instead to be raised in a warm home? Why did Mike get everything, and Richie nothing?

“Stay away from me,” Richie says through gritted teeth, violently slamming his file shut.

“Richie, we should talk…”

“Oh, now you wanna talk? There’s nothing left to say. I don’t have anything left to say. I’m done.”

Mike tries to keep him there, even grabs his wrist and pleads for him to stay, but Richie breaks free from his grip and turns on his heels. He storms out of Mr. Brown’s office, not even bothering to be quiet, and starts running as soon as he steps outside. He doesn’t know where he’s going, but he doesn’t care. All he wants is to put as much distance between him and Mike as possible, as if he’ll be able to break their twin connection if he just runs far away enough.

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Richie is woken up by the sound of water trickling down on him. He opens one eye, realizing his glasses are so askew he can barely even see, then opens the other and sits up. It takes him a while to adjust his glasses, register where the fuck he is and then also realize the sound he’s hearing isn’t water trickling down on him, but Axel taking a fucking piss on him.

“What the fuck?” Richie shrieks, jumping to his feet and pushing Axel away. Axel laughs maniacally as Richie looks at the wet spot on his shirt.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, dickhole?” He yells. He would’ve punched Axel in the face if it weren’t for the fact that Axel probably carries some sort of weapon and isn’t afraid to use it.

“I was looking for a place to piss and I saw you lying there, it was too tempting!” Axel laughs, holding his hands up in surrender. Richie flips him off and walks past him, stomping over tree roots and slapping away low hanging branches. He doesn’t even know how he ended up falling asleep in the middle of the woods, but he’d very much like to return to his cabin to take a shower and pack his stuff. He has decided he’s not staying here any longer. He doesn’t care what consequences await him at home; everything is better than having to stay here another minute, being forced to look at his twin and constantly be reminded of the life he was deprived of.

Axel catches up to him and slaps him on the shoulder. As if they’re friends. As if Richie doesn’t absolutely despise him.

“Dude, what kind of shit where you on that got you passed out in the woods like that?” He asks. “And do you have any left?”

“I wasn’t on drugs, fuckface.”

“Too bad,” Axel shrugs. “I could really use something right about now, ya know? Kali hid our weed supply because we were being ‘too obvious’ or whatever.”

“I don’t care, Axel.”

“Damn, what crawled up your ass and died?”

“None of your fucking business.”

Axel grabs his arm and pulls him to a stop. Richie tries to jerk himself out of Axel’s grip, but he only squeezes his arm harder.
“You really gotta learn how to talk to people, Richard. You’re making a very bad impression.”

“Let me go,” Richie snarls. He really isn’t in the mood for Axel’s macho demeanor. He just wants to be left alone for once in his life. The last person he wants to be around after finding out he has a secret twin and two secret half sisters is Mr. Mohawk McDildo.

“Say please,” Axel purrs.

Richie spits in his face.

Axel is so taken aback by the action that he momentarily lets go of Richie’s arm, but he recovers too fast for Richie to make a run for it. Axel’s hand shoots up and wraps itself around Richie’s throat as he pushes him against the nearest tree, slamming Richie’s back into it.

“I really wish you hadn’t just done that,” Axel says.

“And I really wish you would’ve brushed your teeth before breathing in my face, but I guess we can’t all be winners.”

Axel screws his hand tighter around Richie’s throat. Richie tries his best not to gasp for air, even when his eyes sting with effort and pain. If there’s one thing he’s learned from being the subject of violence is that it’s best not to show any sign of weakness. Well, maybe that’s not the best thing you can do when someone is violent towards you, but that’s what Richie took from his experience as a punching bag. That logic might explain why he still gets beat up a lot, though.

“You have a death wish, Tozier?”

Richie shrugs. He wouldn’t say he wishes to die, per se, but the thought of dying had stopped scaring him a long time ago. He thinks about what Bill would say if he were here, something about how his weird comradery with death is unhealthy and should be discussed with Richie’s therapist. The thought makes him smile, which Axel of course takes the wrong way. Richie wonders if provoking Axel into hurting him is some kind of twisted coping mechanism. He gets his answer when Axel punches him in the stomach and Richie feels himself smile; apparently pain is his way of dealing with things just like humor is. Huh. He should call his therapist with this update.

The whole Mike fiasco is pushed further into the back of his mind with every hit, and by the time Richie is on the ground, he barely even remembers what got him so upset in the first place. Sure, he also can’t feel his lips and there’s an annoying throbbing around his ribs, but he’ll gladly take that over any kind of emotional pain.

“You’re fucked up, Tozier,” Axel says, towering over him. Richie notices the blood on his knuckles. Follows a drop of it with his eyes as it makes its way from Axel’s knuckle to his finger to the ground. “You’re really fucked up if you keep smiling after a beating like that.”

“I have every reason to smile! I just found out I have a fucking twin!” Richie tries to say, but it comes out so slurred together Axel can’t possibly understand it.

Axel shakes his head in disbelief. Richie is kind of offended that the craziest one out of the bunch dares to act as if Richie is more fucked up than he is. He tries telling him that, but again the words don’t seem to come out the way Richie wants them to. Axel looks down at him, something close to pity in his eyes, and then turns around to walk away.

“Hey, no, don’t leave!” Richie yells after him. “We were having so much fun!”

Richie tries so desperately for Axel to come back to beat him up some more that his mind comes out
of its dazed state and remembers the reason for his breakdown. All the hurt and the betrayal and loneliness come flooding back immediately, and Richie’s lulled screams turn into strangled cries. His wicked laugh turns into a twisted sob. His chest tightens with sorrow, his heart feels like someone is tearing it into little pieces. Richie realizes the impact of the events that took place last night. He realizes what this means, how alone he’s been all these years. How horribly lonely he was. How unfair it is.

He curls up into a little ball, his ribs protesting in pain, and sobs.

He just sobs.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!! I hope yall didn't lose your patience with this fic and are still here. I'll try to update at least twice a week, maybe more. And as always, I hope you enjoyed this chapter (and aren't too mad at me for it, I swear it serves a purpose)
The fight

Chapter Summary

Richie avoids him entirely. He tries to just ignore his very existence, to not let Mike bother him, but as the days pass and Richie continues to be completely isolated and miserable, it gets harder to contain all the anger and hurt he’s holding inside. Suddenly, Mike Wheeler represents everything wrong in Richie’s life. His abusive and neglectful mother, the terrible house he’s forced to live in, the loneliness, the anxiety, the depression. Mike embodies all the shit life threw at Richie, and that in combination with the effect of alienation from his peers equals a very aggressive and irrational anger.

Chapter Notes

Again, heads up for some violence and also homophobic slurs. If any of you need me to tag anything specifically, please let me know!

No longer having Kali’s gang to fall back on really makes Richie realize how isolated he is here. He becomes quite friendly with the nurses, Mrs. Bergstein and Mrs. Oliver. It’s sad to say they’re actually his only friends at camp New Horizons now, and they only hang out with him because they have to take care of him. Richie has to stay in bed for three days after he’s found by a camper taking a morning walk. He’s already apologized profusely to the poor boy who had to find him all bloodied and bruised and must be traumatized by it, but the camper had shrugged it off. Richie had kind of hoped their encounter would result in a friendship, with the camper coming to visit Richie in the infirmary, but nobody comes to see him in the three days he isn’t allowed out of bed. He guesses it’s what he deserves; he never made an effort to get to know campers that weren’t youth criminals, and now he has to spend his days with only the nurses as company.

Mr. Brown tried several times to make Richie tell who beat him up like that, but Richie isn’t a snitch. He’d want nothing more for Axel to be sent right to juvi for misbehaving at camp, but he doesn’t want to achieve that by telling on him. So he lies through his teeth, telling Mr. Brown that he never saw his attacker and that they probably did it because Richie wronged them somehow - he’s very good at that. Mr. Brown doesn’t seem to really believe him, but he eventually lets it slide.

Being alone in the infirmary also gives Richie a lot of time to think. He usually avoids being alone for that exact reason, since he usually can’t stand his own mind when he doesn’t have any distractions, but right now his thoughts are the only company he has and he’ll just have to take what he can get. He writes some letters to his friends but never sends them, not sure if telling them about Mike through written correspondence is the most efficient way. They’ll probably think it’s some weird prank he’s trying to pull. Calling them about it isn’t an option either, because they still won’t believe him. Richie curses himself for his endless need to prank his friends. He’s like the boy who cried wolf; now that the wolf is actually here, nobody will believe him.

The best thing he can do right now is just getting through his remaining weeks at New Horizons. He
decided that he wouldn’t be going home early after all, realizing that the consequences he would face wouldn’t be worth it. He needs his anxiety meds now more than ever, and if he goes home now he’ll have to deal with the knowledge of having a twin without any pill-shaped help.

Mrs. Oliver brings him a pile of letters on the third day of his bedrest. She tells him that they usually don’t give patients their mail while they are in the infirmary, but his letters were piling up in the main cabin so she snooped them away and snuck them in here anyway. Richie almost invites her to Christmas dinner right then and there.

There’s a letter from every loser in the pile, and three from Bill alone. Richie smiles as he traces his neat writing, so completely different from his own. He had to write for Bill when they were younger and Bill had broken his wrist during baseball practice, and after two days he was so pissed off at Richie’s horrible, smudged writing that he snapped Richie’s pen in half and begged Stan to take over writing-duty. Richie’s constant doodling in the margins of Bill's notebook probably had something to do with it too. Not everyone appreciates detailed penises on their Maths homework. But those afternoons together, perched together at Bill's desk at home to go over their homework, were some of Richie’s fondest memories.

Richie keeps Bill's letters for last. He goes through the other letters one by one, reading about what all the losers are up to in Derry. Beverly writes about roller derby and goes into great detail about all the bruises and injuries she has seen and endured. Ben has written Richie a poem about stupid jokes and long nights spent around a bonfire, referring to a summer a couple of years ago where he and Ben would have heart-to-hearts in the middle of the night at the Barrens, when everyone had already gone to sleep. Despite being a trashmouth, his friends tended to trust Richie with all of their problems and secrets. And Richie locked all those secrets away, cherished the meaning behind them - the trust they conveyed - and never told another living soul about them.

Mike’s letter is short and makes Richie laugh. He simply wrote ‘you’re the gayest idiot I know, and I’ve seen Stan walk into a pole because he was too busy admiring Bill’ and included a polaroid of his blinding smile, just like Richie asked him to. He gently puts the polaroid on his nightstand, instantly feeling better just by looking at Mike’s smile, and continues reading through his letters.

Stan’s letter is the longest - at least three pages. He starts by saying he knows Richie will probably get too distracted to read through the whole thing and that it’s okay if that happens, which only makes Richie want to focus on the letter harder to prove Stan wrong. Stan was never good at expressing his feelings, not on paper and not face to face, so the letter is mostly just a summary of what’s been going on with the losers. Stan mentions some rare birds he saw, brags about winning a Monopoly marathon which ended with Eddie screaming obscenities so loudly Mr. Denbrough came down to the basement to threaten to wash out his mouth with soap and talks about a movie they went to see in the theatre. He even mentions that he was brave enough to hold Bill’s hand, which makes Richie’s heart soar with pride. Stan adds that, of course, they were sitting all the way in the back and he only dared to hold Bill’s hand during the movie, not before or after, but that Bill’s grin was worth the anxiety.

Next up is Eddie's letter. It's about nothing in particular and the entire vibe surrounding it feels suspiciously like anger, but Richie knows that’s just Eddie’s way of showing he cares about him. One time Richie almost got hit by a car and Eddie yelled at him the entire walk home and also rung his house in the middle of the night to yell at him some more for ‘keeping him up and thinking about what would’ve happened if Richie actually did get hit by that car’.

Richie counts the amount of ‘I miss you, fucking idiot’ and is pleased when he counts the phrase a whole fifteen times in his one letter. The boy really is a master of words.
Bill’s letters are harder to stomach. Richie doesn’t like picking favorites when it comes to his friends, but if someone was holding him at gunpoint and forcing him to pick someone, it would be Bill. They’d been friends for their entire lives, having grown up in the same street and having gone to the same school their entire lives. Richie has shared everything with Bill, and Bill has shared everything with Richie. Out of all the losers, he still misses Bill the most.

Bill talks about the same things as the others in his letters. He doesn’t have anything new to add because they spend all their free time together anyway, but he does complain about the Monopoly marathon and what kind of animal Stan turned into when he won.

*It was kind of hot*, he adds, which makes Richie giggle. He can imagine it was.

Bill also included a drawing with his letters. He drew all the losers together in the lake at the quarry, with Beverley, Ben, Mike and Richie playing chicken while Bill and Stan throw a ball over Eddie’s head. Richie can tell Bill put a lot of work in it and he puts it right next to Mike’s picture on his nightstand. He already knows he’ll sleep a whole lot better with those two things by his side.

Richie feels better and worse once he’s gone through all the letters. Better because it’s nice to know that his friends think about him and miss him, worse because reading about the things they’ve been up to back home only makes him miss them more. Especially now, with the whole Wheeler deal, he yearns for their attention and affection.

Mrs. Oliver brings him dinner before Richie can spiral into an episode and asks him about the letters.

“They were great,” Richie smiles, eternally grateful. “Thank you for bringing them to me.”

“No problem, honey,” Mrs. Oliver says, wiping Richie’s hair out of his eyes as she helps him to sit up straight. “I mean, I could’ve waited till tomorrow to give them to you, but you looked so miserable I figured you could use some news from home. I hope you only received good news?”

“I did. They were letters from my friends, and they just wanted to update me on what’s going on at home.”

Mrs. Oliver nods.

“That’s very nice of them to do. Now, eat your dinner and get some rest. You’re out of here tomorrow.”

Richie nods and thanks her again. Mrs. Oliver smiles brightly, makes sure the pillow behind Richie’s back is fluffed up enough and disappears out of the room again.

Richie sighs once she’s gone and starts eating.

***

His first meal outside of the infirmary is absolutely nerve wracking. Richie doesn’t have Kali’s gang to fall back on and barely dares to look into their direction anymore since his beating, so he’s forced to eat every single meal in the cafeteria. Of course word got out about his beating and people stare at him like he’s some kind of circus freak as he walks by. People actually leave their table when Richie sits with them, like he’s stuck in some horrible high school movie. As if people are afraid they’re gonna be targeted too if they come too close to him.

They whisper too. Richie has had to deal with a lot of whispers in his life, a lot of pointing fingers
and disapproving glances, but he never had to deal with them alone. He always had his friends to back him up, to hide behind, but now he’s all alone and vulnerable. He tries to draw as little attention to himself as possible as he eats, shrinking into himself to make himself smaller. It’s not something he would usually do, but now he kind of feels like he doesn’t have a choice.

“I heard he got beat up because he’s a fag,” someone whispers way too loudly. Richie flinches at the slur, but can’t say that’s such a wild assumption to make. He’s gotten beaten up several times in the past for acting queer. Of course nobody outside of the losers knows he actually is queer, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t get shit for the assumption alone.

Richie feels absolutely horrible sitting through every meal like that. All alone, the subject of all the gossip at camp, stared at and pointed to. This is worse than just having to spend the entire camp alone; now he’s alone and targeted.

Mike Wheeler doesn’t make it any easier. Their similarities are also still a hot topic of discussion among the other campers and they constantly try to catch Richie and Mike together to really gawk at them, but Richie doesn’t want anything to do with Mike after what happened in Mr. Brown’s office. Rationally, Richie knows Mike isn’t the one to blame. But he has to blame someone for his shitty homelife, and Mike is simply the easiest target.

Richie avoids him entirely. He tries to just ignore his very existence, to not let Mike bother him, but as the days pass and Richie continues to be completely isolated and miserable, it gets harder to contain all the anger and hurt he’s holding inside. Suddenly, Mike Wheeler represents everything wrong in Richie’s life. His abusive and neglectful mother, the terrible house he’s forced to live in, the loneliness, the anxiety, the depression. Mike embodies all the shit life threw at Richie, and that in combination with the effect of alienation from his peers equals a very aggressive and irrational anger.

So when he spots Mike across the cafeteria one day, surrounded by friends and laughing about something, Richie has had it. Yet again, he gets the short end of the stick. Mike got their father, a good life, siblings. Mike got it easy. Mike probably never knew what it felt like to be scared for his life when his mother drank, his hands had probably never shaken so violently trying to lock his door to keep his mother out that his eyes filled with frustrated tears. And even now, at a camp miles away from their homes, Richie got beat up and isolated while Mike is surrounded by friends. It’s not fair. It’s infuriating.

Richie is across the room before he even realizes it. He pushes past the people surrounding Mike, takes one good look at his fucking twin and punches him straight in the jaw, so hard that Mike falls to the ground in pain.

The entire cafeteria immediately bursts into uproar. The other campers jump to their feet and push and pull to get to the scene, craning their necks to try to see what’s gonna happen next.

“Fight, fight, fight, fight!” Someone starts cheering, and soon the other campers join in the chant. Richie barely registers it. He just looks at Mike, still lying on the floor, and kicks him. And then he kicks him again. And then he flings himself at him, punching him in the face again and pinning him down and screaming. He sounds insane even to his own ears, but he can’t bring himself to stop. So he keeps going until he’s being pulled off Mike, and even then he struggles against the person holding him to try to get to Mike again.

“Everyone outside!” Someone yells. Probably a counselor. The campers don’t move.

“If this cafeteria isn’t empty when I count to three, everyone will be woken up at 3am tonight to clean the fucking toilets with their toothbrushes!” The same counselor threatens. That does the trick, and the campers all storm outside until it’s just Richie, Mike and three counselors left. Jay helps Mike
up, inspecting his wounds.

“You okay, kiddo?” He asks. Mike nods, despite looking pretty terrible to Richie.

“Are you calm?” The counselor holding Richie asks. Richie takes a deep breath and hums. The counselor releases Richie and moves to stand with Dawn and Jay. Only now does Richie recognize him as Leonard.

“Now, can someone explain what just happened?” Jay asks. He says it as if he wants both of them to answer, but his eyes are on Richie. Richie just shrugs, unable to find his voice. Now that the adrenaline has worn off, he just kind of wants to fall to the floor and cry. Looking at Mike makes him feel sick to his stomach; he can’t believe he did that to him.

“Mike?” Dawn tries.

“He just came at me!” Mike replies, pressing his hand against his nose.

“Is that true, Richie?” Leonard asks. Richie looks away and shrugs again.

“Well, if you’re not gonna reply, we have to send you to Mr. Brown’s office to explain yourself there. He’ll decide what happens next,” Dawn says, looking between Richie and Mike.

“W- I have to go too?” Mike says. “But I didn’t do anything!”

“We don’t know that until we’ve heard both parts to the story,” Dawn explains. “Unfortunately, neither of us was here at the moment of the fight, so we didn’t see anything. So that means both of you will have to go to Mr. Brown’s office so he can hear what happened.”

“This is absolute bullshit. I didn’t fucking do anything!”

“Language!” Jay snaps. “Look, Wheeler. Just fucking go to Mr. Brown’s office. If you didn’t do anything, you’ll be out before you can scratch your balls.” He throws him a towel. “Here, for your nose. Dawn will take you to Mr. Brown’s office.”

Mike mumbles something as he presses the towel to his nose, but follows Dawn out nevertheless. He doesn’t look at Richie as he does so, which is probably for the best. Richie follows after him, hands stuffed deep in his pockets. He’s afraid that the smallest thing will set him off again, and he doesn’t want to hurt Mike any more than he did. He can’t help but think about his mother, about how hard her hand could sting and how big his bruises were whenever she took her anger out on him, and Richie thinks about only one thing on their way to Mr. Brown’s office.

Is he turning into his mother?
Mike wants nothing more than to explain exactly what went down and make sure Mr. Brown knows he isn’t the one to blame, but upon closer inspection of Richie, Mike notices he isn’t unbothered at all. In fact, behind his big glasses, Richie looks… he looks almost scared. And as Mike takes an even closer look, he also notices how much Richie’s hands are shaking. He tries hiding it by balling them into fists, but the shaking doesn’t stop.

Chapter Notes

I failed at updating multiple times a week like I said I would but in my defense I spent the entire week stressing over a first date with someone I met on Tinder and couldn’t focus on anything else sooo (date went well and we’re actually seeing each other again this week aayyee) anyway this is a tame chapter but they’re really close to deciding to make the switch and finally going back home!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mike’s jaw throbs as they wait outside of Mr. Brown’s office until they get called in. He gently moves it to make sure it’s not broken and flinches when a hot pain spreads over his face. He presses the bag of frozen peas Dawn gave him harder against his cheek and silently curses Richie. This is all his fault. Mike shouldn’t even be sitting here. He should be in the infirmary, getting painkillers for his jaw and nose, not waiting to be punished for something he didn’t even do.

They should kick Richie out of camp. Mike scolds himself for even thinking that, considering the fact that he’ll be sent home to a mother he can’t stand with a secret too heavy for his shoulders to carry alone, but Mike was never the best at showing sympathy for those who hurt him. It’s not his fault that they’re twins - hell, he doesn’t want them to be. He’d much rather erase the last couple of days from his memory, but instead he’s forced to think about all the possibilities this situation implies, about the fact that his mother may very well not be his biological mother. He knows it can’t be easy for Richie either, finding out his father has a whole new life far away from him and his mother. Mike can guess how Richie got all those bruises; despite the story about the beating going around camp, he figures Richie must’ve provoked someone into hurting him to briefly forget that other pain, the one that comes with betrayal. But still, that doesn’t excuse violence towards others. Mike isn’t the solution to Richie’s emotional constipation, and he sure as hell won’t wave this off like it isn’t a big deal. Richie may be his brother, but that doesn’t mean Mike has to like him.

“Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Tozier,” Mr. Brown says, stepping out of his office. “I heard you two made quite a scene in the cafeteria. Let’s discuss what happened exactly.” He steps away from the doorway and gestures for the boys to get inside, so they both stand and walk into the office. Richie plops down onto a chair, seemingly unbothered, and Mike wants to punch him. How isn’t he even moved by any of this? Is it normal for him to just beat people up when he’s upset about something? Then again, Mike knows nothing about this kid. And he did hang out with Kali’s gang before they ghosted him.
He might as well be a youth delinquent for all Mike knows.

“So, who wants to start talking?” Mr. Brown says once he’s settled in his chair. He puts his elbows on his desk, leaning forward in anticipation, and looks from Mike to Richie and back.

Mike wants nothing more than to explain exactly what went down and make sure Mr. Brown knows he isn’t the one to blame, but upon closer inspection of Richie, Mike notices he isn’t unbothered at all. In fact, behind his big glasses, Richie looks... he looks almost scared. And as Mike takes an even closer look, he also notices how much Richie’s hands are shaking. He tries hiding it by balling them into fists, but the shaking doesn’t stop.

Mike’s mind rapidly goes through all the possible outcomes to this. He could rat Richie out, which will most likely get Richie kicked out of camp. Mike would have peace here, but he wouldn’t be able to live with himself knowing he just sent his twin back to his mother. Richie hadn’t gone in depth about how terrible she was, but with his own dad sitting at home, Mike can sort of imagine. He can’t do that to him, no matter how much he wants him gone.

Mike could also take the blame. Say he provoked Richie. He even considers telling Mr. Brown he called him names, the same slurs people back home hurl at Will, but even just thinking about that makes Mike sick to his stomach. He would never use any of those slurs, can barely even stand thinking them. Mr. Brown would see right through his lie.

So Mike goes for his third option: absolute silence. It’s a risk because Richie can still speak up and put the blame on Mike anyway, but right now it seems like the best thing to do. So he just stares at a spot right behind Mr. Brown’s shoulder, his fingernails digging into the palms of his hands, and presses his lips together.

“Richie?” Mr. Brown tries. Richie looks up to him, then glances over to Mike. They briefly make eye contact before Mike looks away, still angry at him, but he hopes Richie gets it. This isn’t a peace offering exactly, but it’s an extended hand. It’s up to Richie if he’ll take it.

The couple of moments in which Mike isn’t sure if Richie will speak or not seem to last forever. His heart is beating in his throat and Mike is doubting his decision to basically give full control of the situation to Richie, but Richie seems to have taken his extended hand and stays quiet too.

Minutes tick by like that, with Mr. Brown waiting for either of them to say anything, and when he finally realizes they’re not going to speak, he leans back into his chair and sighs.

“Fine then,” he says. “If that’s how you wanna do it. Since there was obviously some sort of fight between the two of you and neither of you want to tell me exactly what happened, I think you two need some time to work things out. For the remaining weeks of camp, you two will stay in the isolation cabin together. It’s a cabin up a hill away from the rest of camp, where you’ll have plenty of opportunities to talk about your problems with each other. You will still participate in camp activities and meals, but you’ll sleep in the isolation cabin. Hopefully you’ll be on good terms again once camp is over. Now, Dawn and Jay will help you get your stuff and lead you to the cabin. Any questions?”

Oh, great. Mike’s move of solidarity backfired immensely, but it’s too late to backtrack now. So he just shrugs, deciding silence is the best way to go. Richie doesn’t say anything either.

“Great!” Mr. Brown says as he gestures to the door. “You are dismissed.”

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Mike drops his vow of silence on their walk to the isolation cabin. He has hoisted his bag over his shoulder and walks next to Jay, putting as much distance between himself and Richie as possible.

“This doesn’t seem like the most productive solution to a bad situation,” he says. “Isn’t it kind of a bad idea to put two people who can’t stand each other in a cabin together, with no adult supervision whatsoever?”

Jay shrugs. “You’re seventeen, buddy. That’s only a rock throw away from being a legal adult. You two are the adult supervision.”

“See, I don’t feel like that’s how punishment is supposed to work.”

“What, you want me to bend you over my knee and spank you or something?”

“I’d personally prefer that,” Richie butts in, pushing past Dawn to walk on the other side of Jay. “At least that sounds fun.”

Jay snickers, which throws Mike out of the loop. If he didn’t know any better he’d think Richie was sort of flirting with Jay, and that certainly wouldn’t fly with any sensible man back in Hawkins. Even though they’re far away from Hawkins now, he didn’t think anyone at summer camp would be so progressive as to not take offense to someone of the same gender flirting with them.

“Dude, I already told you I don’t swing for your team,” Jay says. There’s no sign of disgust or judgment in his voice.

“I don’t have a team!” Richie exclaims, spreading his arms. “That’s the best part. I’d fuck anyone.”

“And I respect that!” Jay assures him. “But, other than the fact that I’m twenty and you’re seventeen and thus a minor, I’m just not into dudes, my dude. My apologies.”

Richie shrugs. “Apology accepted. It’s a shame, though.”

“You know, I get that a lot back in San Diego. Can’t please everyone, I guess.”

“Hey, you do you,” Richie says, patting Jay on the shoulder. “Heterosexuality is boring, but it’ll do.”

Jay laughs and nods in agreement, a sense of ease and acceptance radiating off him, but Mike is absolutely horrified at the scene that just took place. How in the world can anyone be so open about their sexuality? Richie just casually flirted with a dude, and he didn’t even get hit for it. And judging by the way Jay reacted to it, this wasn’t the first time Richie made a move on him. Mike has so many questions, almost explodes with curiosity, but his pride prevents him from even acknowledging Richie’s existence. So he just turns his head away from them and keeps walking, silently wondering how Richie ever managed to accept himself and his sexuality like that.

The four of them walk for a couple more minutes before finally reaching the isolation cabin.

“Here it is, your new residence,” Jay says, gesturing to the cabin. It looks like all the other cabins at camp but somehow looks out of place so alone in the woods. “Please don’t make too much trouble up here. It takes a while for us to run to your aid in case of an emergency.”

“That doesn’t really sound safe,” Mike notes.

“Yeah, what if we kill each other?” Richie agrees. Jay shrugs.

“Wouldn’t be our responsibility.”
“What if he kills me?” Mike asks, pointing at Richie. Richie flips him off.

“Then Richie’s mother will pay for the funeral costs,” Dawn says cheerfully. “Don’t worry, boys. Just behave and you’ll be fine. It’s not like you’re forced to spend all your waking moments with each other. Just get settled, freshen up and come back down for dinner. This isn’t the worst measurement that could’ve been taken, you know. You should be grateful Mr. Brown didn’t kick both of you out.”

“I know, I know,” Richie mutters, looking away. Mike wonders how bad the situation at home would be for him if he got kicked out. He did mention something about his mother wanting him to be disciplined at camp, and being kicked out doesn’t really show a lot of discipline. Mike is glad he didn’t tell on him when he got the chance.

“Well then. We’ll leave you two to it. Be nice!” Dawn says, explicitly pointing at each of them.

“We will try our best,” Richie promises halfheartedly. That seems enough for the counselors, as they say goodbye and turn back around to descend the hill and walk back to camp.

“Pretty lazy conflict solving they do here at New Horizons, don’t you think?” Richie says once they enter the cabin. “Just put ‘em in a cabin together and pray they don’t kill each other!”

Mike steps inside too. The cabin smells a bit musty and there’s dust collecting on all shelves and the beds. They’ll have to clean everything before going to bed tonight.

“Whatever,” He mutters at Richie’s attempt to start a conversation. “Just stay on your side of the cabin and I’ll stay on mine.”

“Side? What side?”

Mike glares at Richie and draws a line in the dust on the floor.

“Your side,” he points. “And my side.”

“What if I want your side?”

“Fine!” Mike groans, stepping over the line. “That can be your side. Just stay on whatever side you prefer and leave me alone.”

Richie looks at the line on the floor, then up to Mike and sighs. He sits down on one of the beds, ignoring the cloud of dust that flies up as he does so, and covers his face with his hands.

“I’m really sorry about what I did,” he says, voice muffled. “I didn’t… I didn’t mean to. I swear I didn’t. I just - I don’t know.” Richie drags his hands over his face and eventually lets them fall in his lap. “I got overwhelmed. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you, and I’m so so sorry, Mike.”

Mike sits down on his own bed, mimicking Richie’s position.

“You’re not the only one who has to process what this means, Richie. Did you ever stop to think how I must feel? You just found out your father has another family, which is horrible. But now I need to find out if my mother, the woman who raised me and loved me and took care of me for seventeen years, is my mother after all. Maybe your mother gave birth to twins all those years ago. Maybe mine did. I don’t know what’s the truth, but you’re not the only one struggling with this.”

Richie nods.
“You’re right. I didn’t even think about that. I really am terribly sorry for what I did. I don’t know how I can make it up to you.”

Mike exhales deeply, leaning back on his bed.

“I don’t know either,” he says truthfully. “But helping me clean this shithole we’ll have to spend some nice brotherly quality time in would be a good start.”

That gets a chuckle out of Richie.

“Of course,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

You can interpret Richie “not having a team” any way you want to! By definition that phrase fits pansexuality the best but I personally wrote it having queer Richie in mind who doesn’t like any labels. Of course pansexual Richie is also a Concept!!
Chapter Summary

“I don’t need to prove anything to you, Hawkins boy. But I like your blunt honesty. Reminds me of my friend Stan. So, just this once, I’ll do as you say.”

Mike smiles. He doesn’t know why he’s so pleased with Richie agreeing to participate in a silly camp activity, but he still feels accomplished somehow.

“And you remind me of my friend Max,” he says.

“And why is that?” Richie asks.

Mike’s smile turns into a grin.

“She can be a complete dick too sometimes,” he says cheerfully.

“Sweet, I already like her,” Richie replies. He throws an arm around Mike’s shoulders and for a brief moment, Mike lets go of his grudge against him and almost feels like… well, he almost feels like they’re brothers.

Twins, even.

Chapter Notes

It’s my birthday and I’m feeling generous so have these two chapters!

(Both of these chapters are very dialogue heavy which is usually something I don’t really do but I hope yall dont mind because Mike and Richie need to TALK, ya know)

The first couple of days of their arrangement go by in awkward silence. Mike can tell Richie doesn’t like silence either by the way he squirms and tries to fill the quiet cabin with music, humming, scribbling on paper or just about anything that will chase away the thick silence surrounding them. They’re too far away from camp to hear the lively chatter of the other campers, the typical camp noises like people splashing in the lake and music coming from the music cabin. But despite Mike’s own hatred for silence, despite what silence tends to do to his mind, he just can’t bring himself to talk to Richie. It’s as if they’d been paired up to do a school project together and were forced to spend their free time together to ‘get to know each other’, but they have nothing in common to talk about. And even if they did have something to talk about, Mike isn’t so sure he’d want to anyway.

Jay screams them out of bed on the fourth night of their situation. He storms into their cabin, bangs the door against the wall and puts a megaphone to his lips.

“Alright, fuckers!” He screams. “Down by the main cabin in five minutes! We’re doing a capture-the-flag-athon tonight. Go find Dawn to find out your team.”
And with that, he’s gone again. He hollers as he jolts down the hill, pumping his fists in the air with excitement. Mike rolls his eyes at Jay’s disappearing figure and gets out of bed to get dressed.

“Don’t tell me you’re actually going,” Richie grumbles, cracking open one eye to look at Mike.

“Of course I am. Didn’t you hear Jay?”

“Oh, I heard him alright. Doesn’t mean I’m going.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Michael…” Richie yawns and turns on his other side, briefly lifting his arm to rub his eyes. “It’s the middle of the night and I’m tired. So fuck capture the flag.”

Mike sighs as he puts on his sweater.

“You know, Richard, maybe you wouldn’t be such a lonely fuck here if you put some effort in not trying to be an indifferent asshole all the time. The act doesn’t suit you.”

He regrets saying that as soon as the words leave his mouth. Mike could punch himself in the face for being such a dick sometimes, but Richie snickers and sits up in bed.

“Well, damn. That’s the first genuinely honest thing you’ve said to me since they dumped us here. Hell, I’m pretty sure that’s the first full sentence you’ve spoken to me since they dumped us here. You think this is an act?” Richie gestures to himself as he says that.

Mike shrugs. “I guess, yeah. I think you pretend not to care about anything to protect yourself.”

“And what am I protecting myself from, according to you?”

“Dunno. That’s up to you to figure out. If you want me to play your therapist, you’ll have to pay me.”

Richie stares at him, his dark eyes reflecting the moonlight shining into the cabin. Then a slow grin spreads across his face.

“Okay,” he says, throwing back his sheets. He gets out of bed and goes looking for his clothes.

“Okay?”

Richie nods. “Okay,” he says again. He puts an unfinished joint between his lips and lights it before putting on his pants and that god awful hawaiian shirt Mike wishes he’d burned when Richie was sleeping. “I’ll go play capture the flag with you.”

“Need to prove me wrong?” Mike guesses.

Richie raises his eyebrows and offers the joint to Mike. Mike declines.

“I don’t need to prove anything to you, Hawkins boy. But I like your blunt honesty. Reminds me of my friend Stan. So, just this once, I’ll do as you say.”

Mike smiles. He doesn’t know why he’s so pleased with Richie agreeing to participate in a silly camp activity, but he still feels accomplished somehow.

“And you remind me of my friend Max,” he says.
“And why is that?” Richie asks.

Mike’s smile turns into a grin.

“She can be a complete dick too sometimes,” he says cheerfully.

“Sweet, I already like her,” Richie replies. He throws an arm around Mike’s shoulders and for a brief moment, Mike lets go of his grudge against him and almost feels like… well, he almost feels like they’re brothers.

Twins, even.

***

Mike and Richie don’t get sorted into the same team at first. Mike guesses the counselors are trying to have them be separated from each other as much as possible outside of the isolation cabin to avoid any more fighting or to allow them some space away from each other. Either way, their plans are foiled when Dawn puts Richie in Axel’s team and he immediately turns as white as a sheet.

Mike reacts on pure instinct. He can’t even think about it before he speaks up.

“Uh, actually, I want Richie on my team,” he says. Richie looks at him like he just started speaking in a foreign language, but Mike ignores him. “Yeah, uh, you see, I’m a bit nightblind and Richie has… more powerful vision with - uh, well, with his thick glasses. So that evens out the odds, doesn’t it? One blind boy plus one boy with better-than-perfect night vision equals one normal boy, right?”

Dawn looks just as confused as Richie but allows the switch. Richie only sighs in relief when he’s far away enough from Axel that he won’t hear it. Though he doesn’t thank Mike, Mike knows he’s grateful by the way he brushes his arm against his.

“Alright, guys!” Dawn continues. “It’s team blue vs. team red tonight. Make sure to keep your bandanas on at all times so people know which team you are from! The terrain is divided into two camps; team blue, your base is the old well south of the lake. Team red, yours is the burned down tree stump up in the woods. The fire pit marks the border; as soon as you cross that, you’re in enemy territory. When someone of the opposite team tags you, you’ll have to report back to your respective camp leader. I will be the leader of team blue, Jay will be the leader of team red. We can’t leave camp, the other players can. The game will last the entire night, meaning that if a flag is captured we will switch teams and start again. Clear?”

“Crystal!” Everyone yells back. Dawn nods and orders team red to follow Jay into the woods to their base. Team blue follows her to the old well.

“Thanks for getting me on your team,” Richie says as they follow Jay into the woods. Neither of them really knows any of the other campers in their team, so Mike is kind of glad to at least have Richie with him. It helps with the anxiety.


“Oh, he is,” Richie assures him. “I heard he killed his dog when he was seven.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“That’s Axel.”
They walk the rest of the route in silence while the other campers chat around them. None of them seem to be paying attention to them, but Mike knows better than that. He notices the stares when the others think he’s not looking. To be honest, he’d be staring too if he saw two identical looking boys who supposedly aren’t related. You’d almost think they were each other’s clones, or like Richie thought, döppelgangers.

“Alright, my pals!” Jay announces once they’ve reached the tree. “Here’s what’s up. I’ve won the capture-the-flag-athon every year I’ve counseled here, and I’m not about to lose tonight. So, we’ll split up in offenders and defenders; the offenders are going out to find the blue flag while the defenders stay here to tag any enemy and send them back to mommy, got it?”

“Got it,” team red says in unison. Jay grins.

“Oggy, oggy, oggy?” He says.

“Oi, oi, oi!” The others chant.

Richie and Mike are part of the offenders team. Mike doesn’t mind; he’d always been good at this part of capture the flag. He could easily blend in with his surroundings, sneak around and past everyone. It was better than having to be in the middle of the fight, looking out for the other team and getting to them before they got to their flag. That part always put too much pressure on him.

Richie seems less pleased with his position. He groans as he drags himself behind Mike, and Mike shushes him.

“We aren’t even at the border yet,” Richie reacts.

“I don’t care, this is a strategic game. You have to be quiet.”

“You’re absolutely no fun, Michael. I can’t believe we’re related.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Harsh.”

Mike looks over his shoulder to Richie to make sure he can see him rolling his eyes at him. Richie rolls his eyes too, way too excessively to be taken seriously, and it gets a light chuckle out of Mike he tries to disguise as a cough.

“So, you play a lot of strategic games back home?” Richie asks. At least he’s lowered his voice. Mike figures he can’t make him completely shut his mouth until they reach the fire pit, so he might as well humor him.

“My friends and I used to play a lot of Dungeons & Dragons when we were younger. We kind of grew out of it, but the strategy stuck.”

“Oh god, you’re a real proper nerd. I bet Ben would like you.”

“Who’s Ben?”

Richie sighs loudly. “Only the love of my life. Well, no. Maybe one of the loves of my life, ya know? I guess I don’t really have a love of my life. Except maybe Mike Hanlon. He’s like the perfect guy.”

Mike stops dead in his tracks. The mention of a boy's name as Richie's potential love of his life has
him shaken up. He stops walking and lets Richie catch up with him so they’re now walking side by side.

“So, you’re gay then?” He asks. He wishes he could say the question sounded even remotely casual, but it’s far from. His voice is strangled and he almost chokes on the word gay, so used to it being used against him that it leaves a dirty aftertaste.

“No, not gay. You heard what I said to Jay, didn’t you? I like everyone. Like, I love everyone. I have a crush on all my friends, even the one who’s a lesbian. That’s a bit fucked up, but I can’t help myself.”

Mike looks at Richie like he just fell down from space with his spaceship. In a way, queer kids are alien to him. No, Mike corrects himself. Other queer kids are alien to him. He’d always figured he was alone. Is queerness really genetic, then? If it is, Mike’s plan of marrying a nice enough girl and pretending that his feelings for boys never existed are out of the window. He can’t put his kids through what he’s going through.

“You always so open about your… preferences?” Mike asks, desperate for Richie to fill the uncomfortable silence before his mind takes him places he doesn’t want to go.

“You mean my sexuality? No. I mean, I am to Jay. But only because I got good vibes from him. And because I tried to hit on him because I thought he might be into boys.”

“But he isn’t?”

“He says he isn’t. I don’t quite believe him, but that’s a journey he has to take by himself.”

“So why did you tell me?” Does Richie know Mike loves boys? Is it written all over his face, like people say having had sex is written on your face? Can the entire camp tell he wants to kiss boys, or one boy in particular? He notices how his chest is heaving all of the sudden, and Richie puts a warm hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, are you okay?” He asks worriedly. “You look like you’re gonna barf.”

“I’m… I’m fine,” Mike says. His stomach twists and he does feel like he’s gonna barf, but he pushes the feeling down and forces himself to calm down. “Just… why did you tell me, Richie?”

Richie looks at him, eyebrows frowned with confusion, and shrugs.

“Because you’re my brother. I thought it was best to be open about it to give you a chance to drop me before we get all close and brotherly.”

“Oh,” Mike says. He feels kind of ridiculous for reacting the way he did, but he can’t shake the heavy weight pressing down on his chest just yet. “Well, I’m not gonna drop you.”

Richie beams.

“Oh, cool! Anyway, as I was saying. Ben, my friend, he’d love you. He’s a D&D nerd too and none of my friends ever want to play it with him. He’d be delighted with you. Plus, he’s cute. You’d totally hit it off together.”

Mike tries to play it cool. He doesn’t know, he tells himself, he can’t possibly know.

“You think everyone is into boys?”
“The world would be a better place if that was the case,” Richie smiles.

Mike tries to imagine that. A world where he could kiss boys and nobody would care.

A world where he could kiss Will.

He shakes the thought as soon as it emerges. He can’t be thinking about that now; he needs to focus on the game. He needs to not be so obviously gay. Richie might not know, but he could suspect. And even that is dangerous. Even suspicion can get you hurt.

“We should stop talking now,” Mike says. He points at the fire pit a few feet in front of them. They’re still hidden away behind the trees, but they’re too close to enemy territory to be careless.

Richie puts up a thumbs up in agreement. They quickly cross the camp site and dash back into the woods on the other side of the fire pit. Once they’re safely hidden behind the trees again, Richie sits down.

“Now what?” He whispers.

“We try to get to their camp by the well, get the flag, and make a run for it. We’re safe once we cross the border. You do know how this works, right?”

“Never played it,” Richie admits.

“Really? Not even when you were younger?”

“Indifferent, remember?”

“Dawn explained the rules earlier.”

“I was high.”

Mike shakes his head.

“You’re unbelievable. Whatever, it’s not that hard anyway. You a fast runner?”

“Growing up in Derry with Henry Bowers as your local bully kind of forces you to be.”

“I asked about your running, not your sob story.”

Richie laughs.

“Jesus, Mike, you’re ruthless! I’m really starting to like you.”

Mike grins at him. “I’m starting to like you too. Maybe I’ll like you even more if you win us this game.”

“Got it, boss. Find the flag, snatch the flag, run to Jay. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.”

They bump their fists together before they make a run for it again. Mike wishes Richie could be a bit more quiet, but he hasn’t spotted any enemies so far. They dash around like that until they’re close enough to the well to see some blue bandanas around a fire they built. Dawn is sitting on the edge of the well, swinging her legs as she looks up at the stars. It doesn’t matter that she isn’t paying attention; she can’t play anyway. She’s just there to send her teammates back out on the field.

“There’s the flag,” Mike whispers, pointing at the blue flag planted in the dirt a few feet away from
the well. “If we go around, we might be able to grab it and run into the woods to shake them off.”

“Cool,” Richie says.

They both make a move to go through the woods around the well, but then Mike feels someone grab him by the hips from behind. Before he can even call out, someone gags him with a piece of cloth and puts a hood over his head.
“That’s Will,” Mike says, pointing to the boy next to him in the picture. They’re perched together on a couch, both unaware of the photo being taken of them. The boy, Will, is looking at something out of frame, but Mike is looking right at him. And the look on his face, the unfiltered love in his eyes, feels so intimate Richie almost feels like intruding by looking at it.

“You love him,” Richie says. It’s not a question; Richie doesn’t need to know the answer. He already does.

Richie is in front of Mike when it happens. One moment they’re sneaking around the woods trying to get to the flag, and the next someone throws themselves at Richie and knocks him on the ground.

“You’re only supposed to tag me, Marcus!” Richie huffs once he recognizes the kid. The air was knocked out of his lungs when he hit the ground, and Marcus’s weight on top of him doesn’t allow him to catch his breath.

Marcus ignores him as he pins Richie to the ground. Richie struggles against him, confused as to what’s happening, but then he notices the three other campers holding Mike down. Someone has put a paper bag over his head with the word *Fag* written across it, and they’re trying to hold him down so they can tie him up.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Richie shouts.

“Can’t you tell?” Marcus grins. There’s sweat pearling on his forehead. “We’re playing capture the fag. Looks like we’re gonna win this game!”

“What are you talking about? That’s not what we’re doing, you fucking dickhead!”

“We all decided it was. Much more fun, isn’t it?”

Mike screams under the paper bag. His voice sounds muffled, almost like they gagged him. The three other campers, three boys Richie has seen around but doesn’t know by name, managed to tie his hands behind his back. Mike lies there on the ground, helpless and bound, and Richie is forced to watch as the boys kick at him and beat him up. One of them pulls out a pocket knife and Richie’s heart drops to his stomach. He tries desperately to get away from Marcus, to get to Mike, but he’s just too heavy.

“Leave him alone!” Richie screams. “Mike! Mike!”
“Shut up, fairy!” Marcus hisses, grabbing Richie by the throat. “Or we’ll cut you too. Mark you, yeah? To show everyone we captured you.”

Mike squirms and kicks and cries out as the boy rips open his sweater with his knife. He drags the blade over Mike’s skin, not hard enough to draw blood but still hard enough to hurt. The other boy takes out a sharpie and writes his name on Mike’s chest.

“There, claimed,” he states proudly.

“You wanna get that in blood, Brian?” Marcus suggests.

“Oh, right,” Brian nods. “Otherwise we won’t get our prize!”

Richie can’t stand it anymore. He can’t just lie here and let them torture Mike like that. So he does the only thing he’s good at: he fights back.

He takes a deep breath, briefly closes his eyes, and then surges forward with all the strength in his body. He knocks his head against Marcus’s, and the boy falls back with the force of it. The blow makes Richie dizzy and he’s pretty sure he broke his glasses, but he doesn’t have time to recover. He jumps to his feet and lunges forward, tackling one of the boys still going at Mike. He manages to get him to the ground before the two others get to him and is smart enough to pat down his pockets to feel for a knife.

“Don’t touch me, you freak!” The boy screams. Richie ignores him and dodges his hands as his fingers wrap around the pocket knife. He takes it out of the pocket and puts it against the boy’s throat in one swift move.

“Shut the fuck up,” he says. The boy immediately goes limp underneath him.

“You wouldn’t dare,” one of the other boys says. Richie looks over his shoulder to them, raises an eyebrow and promptly jams the knife into the boy’s hand.

“Fucking shit!” Brian yelps as his friend screams in pain. The three boys rush to his help, allowing Richie enough time to get to Mike and untie him before the boys focus their attention back on them. He pulls the paper bag off his head, pretending like he doesn’t notice Mike is crying, and takes the gag out of his mouth.

“We need to go,” he tells him. Mike sniffs and nods.

“We’ll get you!” Brian shouts at them.

“I sleep with a knife under my pillow!” Richie threatens. He takes Mike’s hand and guides him away from the three, dragging him with him as he runs back to their camp as fast as he can.

Richie doesn’t stop running once they’ve crossed the border. If those campers made capture the flag into capture the fag, then surely others must’ve participated too. Maybe even their own teammates. He can’t take the risk, so he avoids their base and beelines for their cabin, far away from all the commotion. Mike allows Richie to drag him with him. He doesn’t speak at all as they run back home.

Richie can tell the cabin has been broken into before they even step foot into it. The door is swung open wide and some of their clothes are lying in the dirt, trampled on and kicked into the bushes. Richie curses the campers who did this but figures he can come collect his clothes later, when Mike is safe inside and calmed down.
The inside of the cabin looks like a battlefield. Their drawers are on the floor, their beds have been flipped and most of their stuff has been destroyed. Richie ignores the mess and leaves Mike in the doorway while he finds him a place to sit down. He manages to save a single non-broken chair from the wreck and urges Mike to take a seat while he gets him a glass of water.

“Are you okay?” Richie asks him when he hands him the glass. Mike’s hands are shaking.

“How did they… how did they kn- how did…” He starts, but his sentence trails off into silence. Richie tries to put a hand on Mike’s shoulder, but Mike flinches away from the touch.

“It’s okay, Mike. We’re safe here, okay? I’ll lock the door. Barricade it even, if you want. They can’t get to us.”

Mike shakes his head. His eyes had been wandering ever since they escaped those kids, as if he couldn’t allow himself to focus on anything, but now they finally meet Richie’s.

“They knew, Richie. How did they know?”

Richie doesn’t really know what Mike means by that. He figures he’s just in shock and doesn’t know what he’s saying, so he just leaves him be as he makes his way around the cabin to take in the damage and lock the door. At least they didn’t take his weed stash.

Richie takes out a joint he rolled earlier and lights it as he walks around. Upon closer inspection, they didn’t seem to have destroyed most of their clothes. They just kind of threw them around to make a mess and, judging by the puddle of unidentified liquid on the floor, they might’ve pissed on some of their clothes too, but other than that they seem to mostly be okay.

Richie rummages through the mess, joint dangling from his lips, and stumbles upon a crumbled picture underneath a torn up book. He takes a closer look at it and his stomach drops when he realizes what he’s seeing. What this means.

He walks back to Mike, who’s still sitting in the chair Richie left him in, and hands him the picture. He also offers him the joint, already anticipating Mike declining, but when Mike sees the picture, he takes the joint and takes a drag.

“That’s Will,” Mike says, pointing to the boy next to him in the picture. They’re perched together on a couch, both unaware of the photo being taken of them. The boy, Will, is looking at something out of frame, but Mike is looking right at him. And the look on his face, the unfiltered love in his eyes, feels so intimate Richie almost feels like intruding by looking at it.

“You love him,” Richie says. It’s not a question; Richie doesn’t need to know the answer. He already does.

Mike is quiet for a long time. He just sits there, looking at the picture and slowly finishing the joint. Richie waits for Mike’s muscles to relax, for his hands to stop shaking.

“I’m in love with him,” he eventually says. His voice is soft and vulnerable. “That’s the first time I’ve ever said that out loud,” Then he runs a hand through his hair in frustration. “I should’ve never brought this picture with me. I should’ve burned it when Jane gave it to me. It just… it sells me out, doesn’t it?” He looks up to Richie. Richie doesn’t know what to say, so he says nothing.

“Yeah,” Mike says, taking the silence for what it means. “She took it of us one afternoon, without us noticing. That’s the day she found out about me. She gave me that picture and I just knew anyone seeing it would realize what Will means to me. I should’ve burned it, but I liked it too much. And now that picture is probably why Marcus and his gang came after me. They must’ve found it
snooping around here.”

“You did nothing wrong, Mike,” Richie tries to assure him, even though he knows damn well how hard it is to comfort someone about this kind of stuff when they’re not out. “It’s just a picture. It could mean anything.”

“But it only means one thing. And now the whole camp will know.” Mike bites his lip and presses the palms of his hands against his eyes to try to hold back the tears. “I’m so fucking dead.”

Richie is at a loss for words. He can’t possibly begin to comfort Mike about this, because he knows he’s fucked too. That picture shows Mike’s feelings for a boy just as clearly as wearing an “I’m a fucking faggot” rainbow shirt. And people saw that picture. People with bad intentions.

Here’s the thing about Richie though: he’s ride or die for people. He loves hard and fast and unconditionally and would put his life on the line for the people he loves. And though he wouldn’t say he loves Mike, he is his brother. His blood. They share something Richie doesn’t have with anyone else in his life, and that automatically makes him ride or die for him too.

So what he suggests next may be extreme, but it feels right to Richie.

“I’ll pretend to be you,” he says. He doesn’t even consider what that means for him, the target he’s putting on his back. Because it doesn’t matter. Mike is his brother, and he needs to protect him.

“What?” Mike asks, brows furrowed.

“Yeah! I’ll wear your clothes and some contacts and act like you. Nobody will suspect anything.”

“Why… why would you do that? That would make you a target.”

Richie shrugs.

“I’m used to it. I can handle it.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t handle it. But why would you do that for me? We don’t even know each other.”

“You’re my brother, Mike. It doesn’t matter if we’ve known each other for a week or our whole lifetime, that doesn’t change anything.”

Mike shakes his head, eyes filling with tears again. He looks away from Richie and takes a deep breath before exhaling shakily.

“I can’t ask that of you, Richie.”

“You’re not asking, I’m telling,” Richie grins. He slaps Mike on his shoulder and winks at him when Mike looks at him again. “Honestly, it’s fine. Camp is over in a week and a half anyway. I’ve been harassed for months back home.”

Mike smiles weakly.

“I didn’t ask for your sob story,” he jokes.

Richie snorts. Then he takes off his glasses, vision blurring immediately, and spreads his arms.

“See, isn’t it just like looking in the mirror?” He asks.
“Minus the blind squinting, yeah,” Mike admits. Then he sighs.

“Are you sure about this, Rich?” He asks.

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life,” Richie says, and he means it. How bad can it be, anyway? Some light beating up, some harsh words? An ambush at worst, but he just needs to be careful. And, like he said before, he sleeps with a knife under his pillow.

“Then I’ll have to pretend to be you too,” Mike notes.

“Naturally. It’s okay, I’ll teach you how to be as cool and carelessly attractive as me. And I’m sure you can find some fake glasses in the dress up suitcase they keep in the drama cabin. I can steal them for you if you want.”

Mike chuckles.

“You’ll pretend to be me, you’ll steal for me… what else, die for me?”

“Of course not, Michael!” Richie says with feigned shock. “We barely even know each other. At least buy me dinner first.”

That actually makes Mike laugh.

“You’re such an idiot, Richard,” he says, almost sounding like his old self again.

“I sure am. But I’m also your brother, so that makes you at least half the idiot I am.”

“That’s not how being related works.”

Richie rolls his eyes at him like Mike tends to do at Richie and then extends his hand.

“Anyway, if we’re gonna be pretending to be each other for the remaining days at camp, we’ll have to work together. So, friends?”

Mike takes his hand and shakes it firmly.

“Friends,” he says.
The switch

Chapter Summary

Well,” Mike starts, rummaging through his brain looking for a thought he can voice. “I think your clothes are really ugly. Like, they’re not even fashionable or whatever. They’re straight up horrible.”

“Oh, snap,” Richie says, but Mike is on a roll now.

“Like you picked them out in the dark,” he continues.

“Oh, okay,” Richie says.

“In the closet of a forty-five year old, sad, divorced man.”

“That’s the look I’m usually going for.”

“Who bought them in a thrift store in a sketchy part of town for two dollars.”

Chapter Notes

Soooooo i went on an accidental hiatus with this but i swear on my life im NOT GIVING UP OKAY!! I've just been extremely busy but i will try to find some time during the weekends to update as much as i can!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Becoming Richie Tozier takes a lot more effort than Mike had anticipated.

First of all, they have to get the glasses. This requires breaking into the drama cabin, which is, to be fair, not that hard considering the fact nobody ever locks it because there’s really nothing valuable to steal. And nobody expects campers to come in to steal some fake glasses.

Then come the clothes. Richie puts all the clothes Marcus and his minions didn’t destroy on Mike’s bed with a proud hand gesture, but Mike honestly wants to die. Every single clothing item is horribly ugly and at least a size too big, which is impressive since Richie himself is a pretty tall guy.

“I think you and Will would like each other,” Mike mutters, picking a pastel purple shirt from the pile of clothes. It has a stain on the shoulder Mike doesn’t dare to identify, and he puts it back before he catches any diseases or fleas.

“Why do you think that?” Richie says, rummaging through Mike’s clothes. He looks bored with whatever he’s finding.

“Because he has a… unique sense of fashion too. He likes bright colors that don’t necessarily match and jeans that are just a bit too short. And long white socks. Sometimes he tucks his pants in the socks, which is ridiculous but somehow works for him.”
“Huh,” Richie huffs. “That’s not a bad idea. I should try that some time.”

“Please don’t,” Mike says. Richie grins at him as reply and focuses back on his - well, Mike’s - pile of clothes.

Mike eventually picks out some outfits he thinks won’t look too horrible. He refuses to go anywhere near Richie’s hawaiian shirts, which automatically eliminates half of his wardrobe, and instead settles for a pair of black bermuda shorts, a graphic tee referencing some comic Mike doesn’t recognize, two plain grey shirts and an acid washed denim jacket. He also steals a yellow hoodie for when it gets cold.

Richie’s new wardrobe is less vibrant than Mike’s. It mostly consists of striped shirts and worn jeans with unintentional holes in the knees. Even though the two of them look identical and Richie is wearing Mike’s clothes, it still feels like he looks more fashionable in them. Like he purposely went for a careless look, like he put thought into it.

Richie also claimed two hoodies, a black one and a grey one. He tried to take Will’s sweater, but Mike was quick to snatch it away and hide it under his pillow.

“Cool,” Richie grins once he takes a good look at himself in the mirror. He runs his fingers through his hair in an attempt to make it curlier, but to no avail.

Mike glances at himself too. He’s glad he didn’t try to pull off Richie’s more ugly clothes and stuck to the basics, considering they’re not too far from what he would normally wear. He nods at himself, pushing the fake glasses up his nose. This could actually work. As long as nobody notices that Richie seems to be missing a few freckles, they could actually pull this off. Richie even put in his spare contacts he took with him in case his glasses broke. Mike thinks even their own friends wouldn’t be able to tell them apart.

Now that they nailed the clothes, the last thing they need to do is learn how to act like each other. Richie turns out to be a theatre kid, to the surprise of absolutely no one considering his flair for the dramatic, so he easily picks up on all Mike’s mannerisms and mimics them perfectly. Mike didn’t even realize he has the tendency to repeat himself until Richie starts doing it.

Mimicking Richie is a whole different story. No matter what Mike does, it never seems right to Richie. He keeps telling him how to stand, what to do with his hands, how to talk. Mike gets more worked up the longer they try to nail his impression of Richie, and by the time dinner rolls around he just wants to give up on the whole plan altogether.

“This is ridiculous,” he snaps, throwing his glasses on his bed. “We shouldn’t do this. I should just face whatever I have coming for me. I mean, it can’t be too bad, right? They can’t kill me or anything. This whole idea was stupid and dumb and I can’t put you through whatever Marcus is planning for me.”

“Hey,” Richie says, taking Mike by the shoulders. “Calm down, Mike. Why are you suddenly flaking on me? I thought we agreed we were doing this?”

“It’s dumb! I can’t pretend to be you, it’s way too hard. Everyone will see through my act immediately.”

“No, they won’t!” Richie assures him. “Nobody at camp knows me well enough to notice slight changes to the way I walk or talk. The essence of my being is very easy to grasp, by the way.”

“Right,” Mike says, not believing it for a second. If it were, then why did they just spend an hour
trying to perfect his imitation of Richie?

“I’m serious! Look, you know that thing people do where they think something, then find a more socially acceptable way of phrasing it and only then say their thoughts out loud?”

“Your brain-to-mouth-filter?” Mike guesses.

Richie snaps his fingers.

“Exactly, yeah! I don’t really have that filter. I usually just say whatever comes to mind, and it often gets me in trouble, but I can’t help it. Just forget your filter, spew out whatever bullshit you’re thinking, and ta-da! You’ve successfully transformed into Richie Tozier.”

Mike squints at him.

“It’s that easy?” He asks.

“As easy as jerking off. Go on, try it. Say the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Well,” Mike starts, rummaging through his brain looking for a thought he can voice. “I think your clothes are really ugly. Like, they’re not even fashionable or whatever. They’re straight up horrible.”

“Oh, snap,” Richie says, but Mike is on a roll now.

“Like you picked them out in the dark,” he continues.

“Oh, okay, I think that’s enough,” Richie says, biting his lip to try to suppress his grin. “You nailed the no-filter thing. Totally sounded like me.”

Mike smiles and relaxes his muscles.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea,” he says.

“I know,” Richie nods. “But really, I don’t mind. Like I said, I’m used to it. I’ll be fine.”

“Fine. But I owe you.”

Richie grins.

“Hell yeah, you do,” he says.

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Nothing really happens for the first few days. Richie, dressed as Mike, gets a few nasty looks and Mike overhears some people whisper behind their backs, but that’s it. Mike thinks it’s safe to switch back to being himself, but Richie tells him Marcus and his gang are probably waiting for the right time to strike.

“They’re like snakes, and we’re the prey,” he says, using his hands to mimic a mouth. “They wait for
the right moment, when the mice aren’t paying attention, and then they make a move.” The hand-mouth slams shut.

Mike is starting to think Richie might be wrong, but then the snakes make a move on the third day after the ambush.

It’s not a direct attack. They don’t want to physically hurt Mike, at least not yet. They want to break his spirit first.

It’s written all over camp when Richie and Mike get down for breakfast. Plastered on every door, written on every window.

Mike Wheeler is a faggot.

It’s not the worst thing they could’ve written, and it’s not the first time Mike’s been accused of being a fag, but it’s just so completely and utterly embarrassing to see those words literally everywhere he looks. People all around him are reading them out loud, pointing at them, nudging each other when Mike and Richie walk past. Mike’s stomach turns and he wants nothing more than to turn around and run back to the safety of his cabin, but Richie takes his hand before he can.

“It’s okay,” he whispers. “You’re not Mike. I am. Those words can’t harm you.”

But they can, and they do. Mike has to bite his lip to fight back the tears and digs his nails into the palms of his hands to ground himself. His mind explodes in bright, blinding colors and his breathing quickens and suddenly he’s back in Hawkins, running from Troy and his friends. They’re hurling slurs at him, accusing him of things he didn’t do but wants to do, and he feels so gross, so wrong.

How could he ever have thought he might one day be okay with who he was? Who he is isn’t okay and it never will be. No matter how hard he wants it to be, no matter how proud Richie is to be. It’s not.

Richie squeezes Mike’s hand when he notices Mike’s mind is drifting elsewhere.

“Mike, it’s fine,” he tells him. “They’re just words. They don’t mean anything if you don’t let them.”

Mike nods, but Richie’s words barely register. He tries to remind himself that he got the opportunity to give away his identity for a while. He can be a completely different person, someone who isn’t bothered by words and doesn’t give them the power to control him. Richie doesn’t care about the slurs. He doesn’t care about the accusations or the threats; he’s proud and unapologetic.

Maybe Mike can borrow some strength from him like he tends to do with his friends.

They walk through camp together, shoulder to shoulder. Most people pretend to ignore them as they walk by, probably too scared of conflict to say something. They all heard the stories about Richie. Most of them were rumors made up by Richie himself to get himself some street credit here, but they believe them nevertheless. And when Mike realizes people are intimidated by Richie, he also realizes they’re currently intimidated by him. They can’t hurt him when he’s Richie, because they’re scared of Richie.

Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Richie seems to be unbothered by all the staring and whispering as they make their way to the cafeteria to get their breakfast. He even asks someone if they want his autograph, which isn’t a Mike thing to do but was well deserved.

Mike watches as the counselors rip off the flyers and wipe off the words from the windows during
breakfast. They run around like crazy trying to get rid of the evidence, which Mike appreciates. At least they have his back.

Some kid is brave enough to approach their table and ask about the flyers, a wicked grin on their face. Mike expects Richie to tell them to fuck off, but Richie bites his lip and leans back in his chair. He looks at Mike expectedly and Mike looks back, not really knowing what Richie is expecting from him, but then he realizes he’s Richie now. And he needs to act the part.

“Didn’t your parents teach you not to believe everything you read?” Mike wonders, looking up to the kids in defiance. He takes the flyer from them and tears it in half. “Or can’t you read at all and did you come here to ask me for an English lesson? Because I can spell it out for you.” Mike crumbles the two halves of the flyers into balls.

“Fuck -” he says, throwing one ball in the face of the camper - “off.” He ends, throwing the second ball too.

The camper stutters something, but Mike interrupts them before they can finish their sentence.

“Are you deaf? I said fuck off. Or do you want me to beat it into you?” He even goes as far as to raise his fist in an empty threat, but the kid gets the message and leaves them alone.

“Holy shit, Michael,” Richie whispers when the kid is out of earshot, grinning widely. “That was fucking amazing! I mean, I’d like to believe I tend to humor people instead of threatening them with physical violence, but it worked just as well. See, isn’t it great to be someone else for a bit?”

Mike smiles back.

“Yeah, it’s pretty nice,” he admits. He’d always fantasised about being someone else, about being someone braver and bolder and better. In those fantasies he never imagined being someone like Richie, but it works nevertheless.

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To Mike’s complete and utter surprise, Richie gets through the next week with only some mild scratches and bruises. He got ambushed in the restroom once and split his lip on the sink when one of the ambushers tripped him, but Mike came in before they could do any more damage. It seems like the campers are intimidated by them when they’re together, almost like their identical appearances scare them. So they spend most of their days together, refusing to split up when the counsellors try to put them in separate teams and sitting together every single meal. They might as well be conjoined by the hips.

And since they’re together basically all the time, they talk a lot too. Mike gets to know Richie like he knows only very few people in his life. He learns about his fears and dreams and hopes and friends. God, Richie talks about his friends a lot. He talks about them so much Mike feels like he personally knows them. Like he was there when Mike Hanlon dared Bill to drink warm hotdog water or when they all stayed up for 3 days straight because Beverly said they couldn’t.

And Mike talks too, of course. He wouldn’t give it to him, but Richie is a great listener. He’s genuinely interested in everything Mike has to say, even the boring science stuff that interests Mike so much. He talks about his home life, how horrible his father - their father - makes him feel, how grateful he was to be away from him for a while. And he talks about his friends too, just as lovingly as Richie does. Richie is interested in each of their stories, all of their quirks and flaws and personalities. Mike enjoys talking about his friends, enjoys remembering them and showing Richie the letters and pictures they sent him, but he finds himself getting flustered when Richie asks about
Will. Mike knows that Richie knows what Will means to him and he still feels like he needs to hide it. Like he has to hide his smile when talking about the stars in Will’s eyes, like he has to feel ashamed. He has to remind himself to feel ashamed. But it’s just so easy to let himself go with Richie. He doesn’t feel ashamed of himself when he’s with Richie because Richie doesn’t act like he needs to be.

It almost feels like a matter of life or death to talk to one another. They’re both so desperate to share their lives with each other, seventeen lost years of it, that they often stay awake long after sunset to talk and share and discuss. There’s not a single detail about Mike’s homelife Richie doesn’t know about, and there isn’t a single detail about Richie’s that Mike doesn’t know about.

And even with that knowledge, even knowing how horribly indifferent Ted Wheeler is when it comes to his children, Richie still utters the following words one night, when there are only two days of camp left.

“I want to meet our father.”

Chapter End Notes

Everyone watch On My Block on Netflix if you love me or this fic xoxo

Also for future reference, if you want to see richie interact with certain party members or mike with certain losers, just let me know! I haven’t figured out their dynamics with the two friend groups yet but if you want to see certain interactions then i can certainly take those into consideration!
Richie thought he had put his father behind him. He genuinely thought he didn’t care about him and his life anymore. Until coming to New Horizons, Richie had thought his father was probably dead or in prison or a drug addict, whichever would ease his mind the most. As long as he could pretend his father was a lowlife nobody, it was easier for him not to miss him. But now, knowing he’s alive and has a house and a job, it’s like it turned on a faucet in Richie’s mind he can’t turn off. And if he doesn’t do anything soon, his head will overflow.

He thought about it for a while. Even made a list with the pros and cons about meeting his father. Stan and his love for order would be proud of him. And after scratching and replacing and pondering over it for days, Richie had come to the conclusion that the only way to get full closure on this was to meet his father.

Mike doesn’t take the news well. He turns white as a sheet, immediately sitting up in bed. Betrayal is plastered on his face like a mask. Richie hates that he upset Mike, but he needs this.

“Why? Why would you ever want to meet him?” Mike asks. His voice is shaking. Richie can’t imagine how horrible his relationship is with his father for Mike to react so emotionally to Richie wanting to meet him.

“Because he’s my father, Mike,” Richie tries to explain. He knew he’d have to come with a solid explanation for his sudden desire to meet the man Mike despises the most. Despite knowing Mike for only a couple of weeks, Richie already knows how black-and-white his emotions can get. Mike either loves you or hates you, and saying the wrong thing at the wrong time could tilt the scales completely. “I need to see him. I need answers to questions I’ve had my entire life about him.”

“And how are you planning to ask these questions? You can’t really walk up to him when he comes to pick me up and introduce yourself as his son, can you?”

Richie thinks about that for a second. He already knew he couldn’t exactly tag along with Mike on
the last day of camp and tell his mother to wait in the car while he goes to meet his father. The end of summer camp isn’t the time or place for that kind of reveal. But he could meet his father without tagging along with Mike.

“What if we switch?” Richie asks. Mike frowns.

“What do you mean?”

Richie gestures between them. “You know. Just stretch the switch to our home lives. Pretend to be each other for just a bit longer.”

“I’m sorry, but did you hit your head in the shower or something? You want to pretend to be me in Hawkins? And want me to pretend to be you in Derry? Are you insane?”

“Just think about it!” Richie exclaims. Honestly, it had been an impulsive thought at first, but the more he thinks about it the more sense it makes. “Look, we don’t know what the deal is with us. We don’t know who our biological mother is - yours or mine. All we know is that Ted Wheeler is definitely our father. We don’t know if they made some sort of deal. We don’t know if my mom knows about you - maybe your parents had us and put me up for adoption.”

“They would never do that to you,” Mike interrupts. Even when he’s upset with him, Mike still tries to comfort Richie. Very brotherly behavior, if Richie may so himself.

“Maybe so, but we still don’t have any answers. Maybe our dad had us with my mom and then broke up with her. Knowing my mother, she probably would’ve told him to take at least one baby with him because she wasn’t about to take care of two of his children. Which would mean Ted came home to your mom with a baby that wasn’t hers. Maybe he made up a story, or maybe he told the truth but left out my existence. The point is, going up to them together could ruin everything. Maybe my mother will move across the country with me and I will never see any of my friends again, or maybe she’ll demand that your parents take me in. I wouldn’t put it past her to get rid of me that way.”

Mike nods. He seems to agree.

“It’s too dangerous to expose ourselves like that,” he summarizes. “We don’t know what actions they’ll take to either keep us apart or keep us together.”

“And both options could potentially cause us to lose our friends,” Richie finishes. He knows they don’t have a lot in common, but the undying love for their friends is something they can both agree on.

Mike chews his bottom lip as he thinks. Richie mindlessly mimics the action.

“How are you planning on switching back after you got all your answers?” Mike eventually asks.

“You have your license, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We could meet somewhere after a certain amount of time - say, two weeks. You can borrow my mom’s car - she barely uses it anyway. Are your folks cool with you borrowing their car?”

“My sister and I have a car together.”

Richie briefly forgot Mike - no, wait, they - have two sisters. Another reason to take Mike’s place for
some time; to meet his sisters.

“Okay, cool. We could meet in New York and switch back without anyone noticing. Like the lamest magic trick ever.”

Mike is quiet for a long time, so long Richie is starting to think he passed out with his eyes open. He’s about to say something to fill the silence when Mike finally speaks again.

“I get why you want to meet our dad. I’m not happy with it and I personally wouldn’t recommend it, but I get why you want to meet him. I can’t take that from you, and I also understand being seen together by our parents could have consequences we’re not willing to live with. So, and I can’t believe I’m saying this, your plan kind of makes sense.”

Richie grins widely. “Hell yeah it does! So you’re in?”

“Only for two weeks,” Mike clarifies. “No longer. After two weeks we switch back, no matter what.”

“Absolutely,” Richie nods. He wouldn’t want to spend more time apart from his friends anyway.

“Okay,” Mike says. He throws back his covers and gets out of bed, shuffling to his desk in the half-darkness. Richie watches as he rummages around and eventually finds a pen and some paper.

“If we’re gonna do this, we have to do it right. Our parents may be idiots who don’t care about us, but our friends aren’t. This act worked at camp because nobody knows us here, but some of my friends have known me since kindergarten. They’ll see right through you if you come to Hawkins unprepared.”

Richie groans as Mike sits down next to him.

“Are you giving me homework?” He asks.

“Of course I am. How else are you supposed to be me? Do you know anything about the people I spend most of my time with?”

“Uh…” Richie says. “I know Lucas is your best friend.” Then he grins. “And Will is your booooooyfriend.”

A violent blush immediately spreads over Mike’s face. He’s too embarrassed to even look at Richie.

“Shut up, asshole. He isn’t. You can’t speak so openly about being queer in Hawkins, Richie. Not even to my friends. Things are different in Indiana.”

“Oh, I never speak about being queer in public in Derry either,” Richie assures him. Another thing they have in common; they both live in ridiculously conservative towns where it’s dangerous to be who they are. People in Derry act like being different is the same as personally coming into their homes and slitting their throats while they’re sleeping. The less attention you draw to yourself, the better. Of course staying low profile is a real challenge for Richie and his constant need for attention, but he knows when to shut up and make himself as small as possible.

“Good. So moving to Hawkins won’t be too much of a change for you, then. Anyway -” Mike writes a name down on the piece of paper and shows Richie. Lucas Sinclair.

“We’ll start with Lucas. He’s been my best friend since elementary school. He always wears a camouflage bandana - don’t ask. It’s a fashion statement, I think.”
“Respect,” Richie says. He can always appreciate fashion statements.

Mike goes through all his friends, one by one. Richie listens closely, trying to picture them by the description Mike gives him and the grainy pictures he shows him. Max has hair as red as Beverly’s, but hers is way longer. Jane Hopper spent the biggest part of her life in foster care but was adopted by the town’s sheriff when she was twelve. Richie makes a mental note to behave around her; he wouldn’t want to get in trouble with law enforcement when he’s technically committing identity theft. Dustin Henderson is the Ben Hanscom of Mike’s friends; always hungry for knowledge, always with his nose in books. He’s really smart and observant, so Richie has to be extra careful around him too.

Despite how much Mike loves Lucas, he says they don’t always see eye to eye with each other. Their personalities clash a lot and Dustin often has to play mediator between the two.

“Oh, and he’s dating Max. I know you like to flirt with everyone, but leave Max alone. And absolutely do not flirt with Lucas. Our friendship isn’t like that. Got it?”

“Keep it in my pants. Got it,” Richie says.

“And you already know what Will looks like.”

“Yes, the cute guy with the nice fashion sense. I can’t wait to meet him.”

“You better tone down all -” Mike gestures to Richie “- this around him. You might scare him off.”

“I wouldn’t dare!” Richie gasps. He isn’t about to ruin Mike’s chances with Will. But he is going to try to see if Will has feelings for Mike too. Maybe he could play matchmaker while he’s in Hawkins.

“Okay,” Mike says when he has written down all the most important information below each of his friends’ names. He hands Richie the other piece of paper he grabbed and the pen. “Your turn.”

Richie beams. Talking about his friends is his favorite thing to do. He draws little cartoon characters resembling each of the losers and writes short bullet points with the most vital information next to them. He makes sure to mention Bill is allergic to peanuts and Richie always double checks if whatever he’s eating certainly doesn’t have any peanuts in it.

“Beverly and I often blow in her car. Not a lot, only a joint or two, but it’s kind of tradition. Stan sometimes joins, if he’s in a good mood. Don’t worry, that doesn’t happen often. Oh, also, Bill and Stan are dating and I like to make Stan jealous by being affectionate with Bill.”

Mike swallows thickly. “Define ‘affectionate’.”

“Like, I don’t know. Hugging, sometimes a kiss on the cheek. I once kissed Bill on the lips and Stan didn’t speak to me for three days. Then I kissed him on the lips and we were cool again.”

“You have a very weird definition of friendship,” Mike notes. Richie shrugs with a nostalgic smile. He’s happy with his relationship with his friends. It’s unconventional and he knows most people find them and their endless affection weird, but Richie loves it. He has a very loose definition of platonic relationships and has made out with all of his friends at least once, even with Beverly. They don’t really have defined romantic relationships between them, except Stan and Bill. And even they are open to the others joining them; Stan’s ‘jealousy’ whenever Richie flirts with Bill is mostly a joke and is easily solved when Richie gives him the same amount of affection. Mike Hanlon briefly dated both of them until he started dating Ben, and Eddie dabbles in all relationships a bit. Actually, now that he thinks about it, he and Eddie are the only ones who haven’t gotten it on together besides Beverly, who doesn’t count because she’s gay and only made out with Richie once, after which she
broke down sobbing and told him she thought she might be gay. Huh.

“Anyway, make sure to always make fun of Eddie and his overalls. He has about fifty of them and they’re actually really cute but it’s kind of my thing to ridicule them and it would be weird not to all of the sudden. He’d definitely suspect something’s up.”

“Make fun of the overalls, got it.”

“Yeah. And oh, joke about being gay with Mike H. He isn’t actually gay, he identifies as pan just like Bill, but we constantly make gay jokes.”

“Like what, exactly? Nothing offensive, right?”

Oh, shoot, this is going to be way harder than Richie expected. Mike isn’t used to the innocent type of gay jokes, where gay folks just point at stuff and declare it as gay or where any kind of basic affection is gay or where anything relatable is gay. He’s probably only used to the ‘faggot’ jokes, to straight people making fun of people like Mike and Richie for their own entertainment.

“No, never something offensive. Just fun stuff. We have this running gag where I tell him his smile makes me really gay for him, so he’s constantly giving me pictures of himself which I hide in books in my room. It’s sweet because Mike is actually really self conscious and my compliments give him a confidence boost.”

Mike smiles. “That’s actually really sweet. Did you two ever date?”

“Not yet!” Richie says. He still has high hopes that that might change in the future.

Richie continues telling Mike everything there is to know about his friends. He usually gets up really early on Saturdays to go bird watching with Stan, and he always makes him eggs and bacon before they go. Ben is his History tutor despite Richie being really good at History; he just told Ben he wasn’t to get an excuse to hang out with him more. Richie usually eats dinner at Bill’s place and sleeps there a lot too. Mike listens and nods, asking questions and writing down the answers next to the cartoon figures. He’s really taking this seriously. He asks questions Richie hadn’t even thought of, like if the losers like to go to parties. They sometimes go to house parties, but Richie never drinks. He’s sure to tell Mike that; he would be able to explain a lot of weird Mike-pretending-to-be-Richie behavior to his friends, but drinking wouldn’t be one of them.

They talk about all possible details about their switch until the sun starts to rise. They write page after page after page, Richie’s scribbling standing out to Mike’s neat handwriting like a sore thumb. By the time it’s time for breakfast, Richie’s entire bed is covered in pages of their masterplan.

“Okay, I think this might actually work,” Mike concludes. “I can’t believe we’re doing this, but it might actually work.”

“Agreed,” Richie nods. “As long as we keep our head cool, we can pull this off. And we can always call each other if we have any more questions or concerns.”

“And we’ll switch back after two weeks.”

“Two weeks,” Richie repeats. He takes his water bottle from his bedside table and raises it to Mike in a toast.

“To our masterplan,” he says. Mike rolls his eyes at him before reaching for his own water to tap it to Richie’s.
Okay so when i started this fic back in November I had a very clear image of the two main relationships (byler and reddie) because i liked both of them. But over the course of the last few months, i've just kind of turned indifferent in regards of reddie and they honestly lowkey bore me as a couple now, especially because my favorite richie ship is richie/bill and that makes it very hard to stay invested in the reddie part of this fic. So I was thinking i might go back in previous chapters to take out most reddie hints and just make richie's main relationship in this fic richie/all losers (since polya richie is my SHIT) or maybe stan/richie/bill? I know a lot of you guys came to this fic because it had reddie but i just lost interest in writing them and i feel like the whole fic suffers from that lack of interest. I'm probably gonna change the richie ship in this fic either way bc i feel most comfortable with it but i still wanted to hear what you guys thought of it, so definitely tell me in the comments what you think!

ANYWAY this got really long so i'll see you all (hopefully) in the next chapter k bye love you all!
The end of summer camp

Chapter Summary

Mike nods to himself. He can do this. It’s only for two weeks, and then he can go back home and spend the remaining days of summer break with his own friends, and then they can go back to school where they’ll be together all the time and Mike will go to Will’s house every day after school and he won’t have to be around his father. Only two weeks. Piece of cake.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! As you can see in the tags, I’ve officially changed the reddie tag to richie/everyone (except beverly) tag. I was really surprised by all your positive feedback on the polya losers idea, I wasn't expecting it! It meant a lot to me to know you supported my decision. I also think polyamorous Richie creates another layer of differences between him and Mike, one which will challenge both of them during their switch. Plus, i just really love polya losers, my dudes.

I've gone back in previous chapters to change some things so it wouldn't be reddie implied anymore. In case you don't wanna go back to read all my changes, which i completely understand, i will briefly summarize them in the end notes.

Finally, this is a short chapter just to mark the end of summer camp. Mike and Richie will FINALLY be meeting the losers and the party in the following chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mike almost chickens out of their plan five times before the final day of summer camp rolls around. He keeps spiraling into the worst scenarios, some more ridiculous than others. He goes through all the things that could possibly go wrong over and over, almost driving himself insane with all the risks he comes up with. He tries discussing them with Richie, but he’s so annoyingly confident in the success of their plan that he doesn’t even want to hear it.

Mike can’t really blame him. Though he’s still pissed off at him for insisting on meeting their father, Mike also kind of understands. If he had grown up without his father and now got the chance to meet him and touch him and talk to him, Mike would’ve probably reacted the same way as Richie.

Richie tries to hide it, but he’s nervous as they pack their bags. He keeps reaching for his glasses on his nose before realizing he isn’t wearing them, and he keeps looking for the friendship bracelet around his wrist that isn’t there anymore. It’s on Mike’s wrist now, a bit too big and slightly damaged from taking it off Richie’s wrist.

Mike watches as Richie tosses Mike’s clothes in his own bag. His heart aches when Richie also throws Will’s sweater in there. He wishes he could take it to Derry with him so he wouldn’t be so alone, but he figured that Will would find it suspicious if ‘Mike’ didn’t bring the sweater home with him.
“Okay, all packed,” Richie finally proclaims. Mike rises from his bed and walks to his brother, raising his hands to fix Richie’s hair. Richie looks at Mike.

“I wish your hair wasn’t so curly,” he says. “I’ll have to explain to your friends why my hair isn’t curly.”

Mike smiles. “Just say it’s from the water here. You’ll be fine.”

Richie nods.

“You too,” he says. “Just remember to be an asshole and my friends won’t suspect a thing.”

“You’re not an asshole, Rich.” Yeah, sure, Richie can be annoying and he certainly tries to act like an asshole, but Mike knows better now.

“You’re gonna make me cry, Michael,” Richie says, wiping a non-existent tear away. Then he spreads his arms. “Now, let me hug you before we say goodbye.”

Mike steps into Richie’s embrace. Richie presses him to his chest and slaps his back, and Mike smiles against Richie’s shoulder. He’s really gonna miss this idiot.

“Okay,” Richie says once he pulls back from the embrace. “Time to go. Who first?”

They agreed that they couldn’t come down at the same time, just in case their parents saw them together and they’d make the connection before they could set their plan in motion.

“You go first,” Mike says. “I need to do one last thing.”

“Got it,” Richie says. He throws his bag over his shoulder, salutes Mike and walks out of the door. Mike watches Richie as he makes his way down the hill, keeping his eyes on his back until he can’t see him anymore. It takes approximately five minutes to walk from their cabin to the exit of camp, so Mike sits back down on his bed and takes out a book he brought with him but never had the time to read. He flips to a page somewhere in the middle of it, where he hid his picture of Will, and takes it out.

“Don’t be mad at me when I come back,” he says. He’s already assuming Richie will somehow fuck up and expose them, and he can imagine how angry Will will be if that happens. You wouldn’t give it to him because of his big, doe eyes and short posture, but Will can get really angry if need be. He once didn’t talk to Dustin for three full days because he had made fun of Jonathan. He never yells when he’s angry - his anger isn’t explosive like Mike’s is. He’s quite the opposite, actually. When Will gets angry, he gets really quiet. He doesn’t even acknowledge your existence anymore. He easily forgives and never holds grudges, but in many ways, his anger is way scarier than Mike’s.

Mike sits there for some time, holding the picture in his hands. He still remembers the day it was taken of them; they were all gathered in Mike’s basement on the first day of summer break, trying to make plans for the following months. Dustin had made an absolutely absurd proposition, so ridiculous Mike doesn’t even remember what it was, but at the time everyone had burst out laughing. Will’s laugh is one of Mike’s favorite things about him, especially when Will is laughing so hard his nose scrunches up and he has to gasp for air. While everyone was busy laughing at whatever Dustin said, Mike was preoccupied with looking at Will.

Mike sighs and puts the picture away. It’s the only thing of his life he’ll take to Derry and it’s a risk - a small one, but it could still expose him and Richie if the losers find it - but he can’t bring himself to give Richie the picture. He’ll just make sure to hide it.
He sits there for a couple more minutes, running through their plan once more. He goes through all the losers again, saying their names out loud and counting the most important things about them on his fingers. Bill Denbrough is allergic to peanuts and used to have a stutter, that’s why Richie calls him b-b-Bill. Stanley Uris has claustrophobia and can’t get into elevators. Richie always takes the stairs with him. Beverly Marsh lives with her aunt after her dad was arrested for child abuse. She doesn’t talk about him. She wears a key around her neck as a symbol for the perfect home she’ll live in somewhere in the future. Ben Hanscom is afraid of dogs and can’t walk past Mr. Miller’s house because he owns a big pitbull. He also likes poetry. Eddie Kaspbrak has asthma, though he pretends he doesn’t. Richie always reminds him to use his inhaler. Mike Hanlon is the best driver and the only one with his own car. He’s a vegetarian. And most importantly: he’ll have to pretend to be in love with all of them. Being affectionate not only with boys, but boys he doesn’t even know, is going to be a real challenge, but he’ll cross that bridge when he gets there.

Mike nods to himself. He can do this. It’s only for two weeks, and then he can go back home and spend the remaining days of summer break with his own friends, and then they can go back to school where they’ll be together all the time and Mike will go to Will’s house every day after school and he won’t have to be around his father. Only two weeks. Piece of cake.

He finally takes his bag when he’s been sitting there for ten minutes and gets out of the cabin. He locks the door behind him and descends the hill, popping into the main cabin to hand over the key and say goodbye to the counselors. Most of them have already left, eager to return to their own home where they don’t have to look after reckless kids, but Jay is still there. He smiles warmly at Mike and wishes him the best of luck and a safe trip home. Mike forgets Jay thinks he’s Richie for a millisecond and almost blows his cover by saying he should drop by in Hawkins sometime, but he can stop himself at the last minute and bites his tongue. He leaves the main cabin without another word, afraid he’ll out himself as Mike if he speaks, but does give Jay a last wave to say goodbye.

And then the moment of truth has arrived. Mike scans the crowd gathered at the exit of camp for his parents, but they appear to have already gone. Richie must’ve convinced them to leave right away, which is probably a good thing. They can’t risk having their parents see them together.

Mike continues scanning the crowd until he spots a woman matching Richie’s description of his mother. She’s tall and skinny, just like Richie is, and her hair is bleach blond. She’s wearing sunglasses too big for her face and poorly-fitted jeans. She’s leaning against her car, inspecting her nails for dirt.

He takes one final, deep breath and approaches her. The woman only acknowledges him when he’s standing right before her, and then she gives him the weakest attempt of a smile Mike has ever seen.

“You look like you gained some weight,” she says.

“Yeah, that’s what happens when people feed you,” Mike replies. His voice is a bit shaky, not used to being snarky to strangers, but Richie told him his mom stopped cooking for him a while ago. He figures now is as good as time as any to start being Richie for real.

“Oh, so they failed at making you into a respectable young man. It was to be expected, but I’m still disappointed.”

Mike walks around the car to dump his back in the trunk.

“Sorry to burst your bubble,” he says over the hood of the car before opening the door to the passenger’s seat. Maggie sighs audibly and gets into the car too.

She doesn’t say anything on the long ride back to Derry. She doesn’t ask how it was, what he did or
if he made any friends. She simply doesn’t care.

Mike doesn’t mind. For the first time in a long time, the silence brings him comfort. It allows him to go over every single detail again, making sure he absolutely doesn’t forget anything.

By the time they arrive back in Derry, Mike is ready for battle.

Chapter End Notes

The main things I've changed are Eddie's friendship bracelet (in chapter 3), which I changed to Bill's friendship bracelet, and Eddie's letters in chapter 10, which are now Bill's. I made some other minor changes to hint at polyamorous losers instead of reddie, but these were the biggest ones. Thank you again for your support and infinite patience since I'm failing to post frequently, but as I've said before: I WILL finish this! It'll just take me a bit longer than anticipated.
The return to Hawkins

Chapter Summary

Ted Wheeler’s hair is thinning. Richie can’t stop looking at it as they make their way back to Hawkins. It’s the only thing keeping him grounded, since he can’t really distract himself with conversation. Karen Wheeler asked him a few questions about camp when they got in the car, but after that the conversation quickly fell flat.

Chapter Notes

For Aurora. Happy birthday, darling!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The car ride home is suffocating.

Richie had gone over every single detail with Mike, had gone through the names of all Mike’s friends, memorised Mike’s address, learned the very basics of D&D, knew where Mike’s bedroom was and where he hid his secret stash of candy he only ever shared with Will. He was prepared for everything, anything that could possibly be thrown his way.

Everything except meeting his father.

Richie imagined meeting his father for years. He had entire conversations with him in his head, where he yelled at him for leaving him and hysterically punched him on the chest until he collapsed against him and his father would hold him and kiss him on the top of his head and apologise until Richie believed him. As the years went on and Richie got older, he stopped imagining these meetings because he told himself he didn’t care anymore. He even told Mike when they first met each other: Richie didn’t want to put time in finding someone who obviously didn’t want to be found. But deep down, in the very core of Richie’s being, there was still that little boy who sat in front of the window every day hoping his dad would return.

And now he’s sitting in the back of the car his father is driving, staring at the back of his head.

Ted Wheeler’s hair is thinning. Richie can’t stop looking at it as they make their way back to Hawkins. It’s the only thing keeping him grounded, since he can’t really distract himself with conversation. Karen Wheeler asked him a few questions about camp when they got in the car, but after that the conversation quickly fell flat.

Richie almost breaks character three times on the long drive back home. He almost confesses to everything, almost confronts Ted that he’s his forgotten son, the one he left behind or gave up or whatever it is that he did to Richie to get rid of him. The how is still a big question mark Richie and Mike can’t seem to find an answer to, and so is the why, but that it happened is without question. Ted Wheeler looked at Richie and Mike when they were newborn infants and somehow decided that Mike was worth taking home while Richie wasn’t.
And it hurts. It hurts so much, knowing that his own father didn’t want him - still probably doesn’t want him. So he almost spits it out - hey asshole, I’m your other son - imagining Ted being so shocked he swerves off the road and crashes the car and gets injured just enough for Richie to feel satisfied. But that won’t give him the answers he’s looking for - not immediately, anyway. And maybe Karen is his biological mother, and she’s already way nicer to him than Maggie has ever been. He doesn’t want to risk injuring her too. Especially because she’s the only parent Mike loves, and he can’t take that from him.

So he bites his tongue and stays quiet. He’ll get his answers, even if he has to look at Ted’s face every day for the next two weeks. Even if he has to search every inch of their house, even if he has to flip through every book and look through every drawer. He’ll find out exactly what happened seventeen years ago; if Karen Wheeler or Maggie Tozier is their biological mother, if Richie was put up for adoption or if Ted had an affair with Maggie and disappeared with one of their sons after she gave birth to them and if Karen is in the know about Ted’s adultery or if he gave it a twist that kept her oblivious to his cheating.

Richie is gonna find answers to all of those questions, even if it’s the last thing he does.

* *

Richie eventually dozes off and wakes up when Ted parks the car in front of their house. Richie rubs his eyes, chasing away the sleepiness, and stretches his arms before getting out of the car. He stretches his stiff legs too, cracks his knuckles and walks to the trunk to get his bag.

Richie jumps and hits his head when he gets grabbed from behind. He instantly turns back into the kid who used to be jumped in the hallways at school and tries to throw off his attacker, but then his attacker laughs and just presses themselves closer to Richie.

“Mike!” They exclaim joyfully. “I missed you so much. I have so much to tell you, I’m so glad you’re finally back!”

The attacker finally lets go and allows Richie to turn around. Richie instantly recognises him as the boy from the picture and smiles.

“Hey, Will,” he says. Will’s smile falters a bit and his eyebrows knit together slightly.

“Oh, shit.

“Really?” Richie asks innocently, trying to hide his anxiety. “I have a bit of a cold, maybe that’s why.”

Will looks at him long enough for it to almost be awkward, and then he breaks out his smile again. Richie’s muscles relax.

“Typical Mike Wheeler to catch a cold on summer camp. Come on, let’s go. The others are at my place.”

“O-okay,” Richie stammers. He dodged this bullet, but who’s to say the others won’t notice something off about him too? He can’t say he has a cold for the next two weeks. But he can’t avoid
Mike’s friends either. That would look way too suspicious.

Richie hands his bag to Karen, who smiles kindly at him, and follows Will to his car. Mike told him Will’s car used to be Jonathan’s, but he gave it to Will when he went off to college. It’s Will’s most precious possession.

The inside of Will’s car smells like paint. It’s such a weird smell to be in a car that Richie is thrown off guard by it, forgetting for a moment what a car is supposed to smell like. He cranes his neck to look in the backseat, half expecting to find paint cans spilled all over the leather, but finds several paintings instead.

“Hey, what’s this?” Richie asks, crawling half out of his seat to reach for the paintings. Will takes off at the exact same moment, causing Richie to fall forward and hit his nose against the headrest of his seat.

“Ah, fuck!” He curses, cupping his nose with his hands. Will stops abruptly, almost causing Richie to fall backwards against the dashboard before Will stops him from falling.

“Jesus, Mike. You know you have to wear your seatbelt when I’m driving. Well, you always have to wear your seatbelt, but especially with me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Richie waves him off. He wipes his nose and looks at his hand. Luckily there’s no blood.

“I’m sorry,” Will says bashfully. “Still a shitty driver.”

“It’s okay,” Richie says. He sits back and puts on his seatbelt. “I was just curious about those paintings. Did you paint those?”

“Yeah,” Will smiles. “I had some time on my hands during our stops on our roadtrip so I painted a bit. I made you one too, actually.”

“Really?”

“Of course! I always make you stuff.”

That’s true. Mike told Richie about the binder of drawings he got from Will. He hides it under his bed because he thinks they could be incriminating if his parents ever found them.

“Right,” Richie says. “I can’t wait to see what you painted me.”

He doesn’t miss the pink blush spreading over Will’s cheeks, and suddenly he totally understands why Mike is so smitten for him. Hell, he can see himself being smitten for him. If they had more time together and Will actually knew who Richie was, he could totally fall in love with him.

The two boys chat as if they’ve known each other for their entire lives as Will attempts to drive them to his house. Of course, to Will they have known each other for their entire lives. It’s just that Richie feels so comfortable with him so quickly that it’s almost as if he’s known him for years. Will is so easy to talk to, has so much energy and such captivating stories, that Richie doesn’t even have to pretend to like him. The more Will talks about his roadtrip with his mom and brother, the more Richie starts to adore him. By the time they’ve made it to the Byers household, Richie’s current favorite thing in Hawkins is the sound of Will’s voice.

Will guides him inside, barely able to hide his grin. Richie wonders why until Will walks into his living room and Richie is startled by Mike’s friends, all shouting his name. There’s a banner hanging
on the wall, saying *Welcome back, Mike!* His friends are standing in front of it, the same bright smile on all their faces.

Lucas is the first one to greet him. He walks up to him and gives him a firm hug, slapping him on the back. Richie falls forward a bit, not expecting the strength. Mike told him Lucas was tall, but he didn’t tell him he was built like a fucking house. He’s taller than Richie is and looks about twice as strong, but his face is kind and his smile is soft.

“Welcome back, Mike. We missed you, man.”

“Missed you guys too,” Richie lies.

Dustin hugs him next. His hug is warm and radiates kindness, and his smile is absolutely gorgeous. He has big, untamed curls partly hidden away underneath a hat and he smells like soap and bubblegum.

Jane is next in line. Her hug is short but sincere. She frowns at him and tells him he should’ve written more letters to them. Richie scratches the back of his neck awkwardly and stutters an excuse, that he was too busy during the day and too tired to really write anything at night. She doesn’t seem to buy it - something Mike warned him about. Jane seems to be able to see right through you. Richie reminds himself once again to be careful around her.

Max approaches him last. She has a bit of a sunburn on her nose and her flaming hair is tied up into a high ponytail. She’s wearing shorts that exposed her bruised knees. Something tells Richie those are always bruised, no matter the circumstances.

Max doesn’t hug him. Instead, she hits him on the arm and then smiles, which is a weird way to say you missed someone. Richie figures Eddie would probably greet him like that too, though, so it’s okay.

“So, uh,” Richie says when everyone has welcomed him back, desperately trying to remain in character, “what did I miss?”

*

The afternoon goes by in an exhausting blur. His friends all tell stories of their own holiday; Lucas and Max show a whole bunch of pictures they took on holiday and reminisce about their late night adventures in Rome, when Lucas’s family was all sound asleep and they snuck out of their hotel to get lost in narrow alleys and drink red wine in tiny bars. Max blushes at the thought of it, and Richie can almost imagine them both at a little, wobbly table at a restaurant overlooking the Colosseum. They make a cute couple.

Jane tells them about Hopper’s family and how kindly they invited her into their house and hearts. She met cousins and nieces and nephews and really felt like they were her own family. She even shows a necklace she got from Hopper’s mother, which is apparently a family heirloom.

Dustin reenacts a little play he did at drama camp, and everyone laughs at how funny he is. Mike told Richie Dustin is the funniest person he’d ever meet and Richie didn’t believe him, but he’s pretty damn hilarious.

Will tells the stories he told Richie in the car again, but this time with different details. He tells them
about the naked lady they saw strolling the streets in Chicago, nightlife in San Diego, art in New York. The three legged dog Will took care of for three days during their stop in Texas, the shady tattoo parlor in Colorado where Jonathan got a tattoo and the awesome jacket he bought in North Dakota. He tells everything with the same liveliness, the same joy and wonder as he did in the car, and his eyes are big and bright and full of stars. He wishes he could take a picture of him to send to Mike. And he also wishes, however briefly it may be, that he was in Derry and could look at the stars in Bill’s eyes or listen to Ben’s voice or nestle against Mike Hanlon’s chest. He misses his friends terribly, and for one moment he wants nothing more than to be with them in Bill’s basement and pass along a joint and love them all.

But he’s here, and he’s on a mission, so that also means he has to get along with Mike’s friends. And it’s not like he doesn’t like them. In fact, he could see himself befriending all of them, especially Max. They’re just not the losers.

Will drives him back home when the sun starts to set. He’d asked him if he wanted to sleep over, but Richie really just wants to be alone for a while. Today was exhausting, both mentally as physically, and he just wants to be himself without having to worry that someone will see through his act.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Will asks on their way back to Mike’s house. Richie looks up from the road.

“Yeah, why?” He asks.

Will shrugs.

“I don’t know, you seem kind of quiet today. Are you having a bad day?”

Richie smiles.

“No, not a bad day. Just an exhausting day. I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

Will nods. “Okay. I’ll come pick you up around eleven? We can go into town to all have lunch together and then go to the lake, if you want to.”

“That sounds perfect,” Richie assures him.

Will nods again, that same bright smile dancing on his lips.

They say goodbye on Mike’s driveway. Richie isn’t sure how they usually say goodbye, so he reaches forward to hug Will. Will hugs him back, but looks a bit confused when Richie pulls back and gets out of the car. Maybe Mike and Will don’t normally hug. Maybe that makes sense: Mike is so afraid of being outed that he’d probably avoid anything that could be seen as ‘suspicious behavior’.

“See you tomorrow,” Richie quickly says before Will can comment on it. He waves him off as Will drives away and then hurries inside, finding the house empty. Richie walks to the kitchen to get a snack and finds a note saying his parents went to town, Holly is at a sleepover and that Nancy went to a house party. Great, so nobody in his family really seems to care that he has just returned from four weeks of summer camp. Doesn’t sound too different from his own family in Derry.

Richie drags himself upstairs after his snack, sudden exhaustion tugging at his limbs. He barely makes it to Mike’s room before collapsing onto the bed. He has just enough energy left to kick off his shoes and wiggle out of his jeans. He throws his pants across the room and gets under the covers, his last thought before passing out going to Mike and his first day in Derry. He wonders how it went, if the losers noticed something off about him or if he did something that Richie wouldn’t do. He
makes a mental note to call him tomorrow night to ask how it’s going and then closes his eyes with a deep sigh.

He can already tell the next two weeks are going to be absolutely exhausting.

Chapter End Notes

Finally back with an update! I'm sorry I'm not updating frequently anymore, but I've been so busy and tired and then sick and also I just generally suck at keeping to deadlines, which is why I could probably never be a published author. Anyway, thanks for your patience and support. More updates are definitely to come!

End Notes

Please leave kind comments so I'm motivated enough to continue this!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!