Secrets to keep

by SecretChocolateStash

Summary

Where El and Sara (and they really can't believe their luck) get to go to high school, the boys are being your typical boys, Max needs a friend (or two) who isn't a boy and all of this is certain to age Jim Hopper prematurely, because watching after two teenage girls with, damn it, superpowers, is way too much for a single parent to handle.

Notes

So it's been a couple of months now since I bingewatched ST2, and then ST again, and then again, and again and then read tons and tons of fanfics and, well, it is not enough. There is never enough of Mileven out there and really, I needed some of my own. So... yeah. That's it, really.
Chapter 1

Mike took one more step closer to the edge and looked down. The quarry was wrapped in the shadows of a summer evening, but he could still somewhat see the water far below him. The sight made his stomach drop, like always. But, then again, he was feeling brave today, his head fuzzy with hormones, adrenaline and booze.

„Mike, man, what are you doing?“ Dustin asked, his voice dragging more than usual.

A bark of laughter echoed over the music coming from one of the car stereos. Mike let his gaze slip over the dozen or so people sitting around a bonfire, his eyes coming to a stop on a pretty blond girl. Melanie was smiling at him mischievously, raising her left eyebrow in a silent dare. Well, shit. Mike felt the familiar warmth pooling in his stomach and his face stretching into a grin. Maybe the jump was worth what was promised. He peered down into the darkness once more, teetering dangerously close to the edge.

„Mike, don’t be stupid!“

There was genuine worry and beginnings of panic in Dustins voice now. Will was already getting up from his seat, looking anxious, and even Max and Lucas had stopped sucking face to see what the commotion was about.

Dammit, it was now or never; his friends would reach him in a matter of seconds. He could hear Melanie gush „oh my god he’s gonna do it!“ to somebody, her voice all excited, and come on, how could he not?

Fuck it.

Mike sent a cocky wink to Melanie, just because, and stepped off the cliff.

El was so excited she could hardly sit still for even another minute. She would’ve gladly pestered Hopper about when the hell were they finally going to arrive, but considering Hoppers glum and tired face, and the fact that he had nearly stopped the car and left her by the roadside the last time she’d asked, she figured it was best to just wait.

But they were close, she could feel it.

And then Sara started jumping up and down beside her, squealing at a pitch that was sure to make the dogs in the neighborhood go nuts, and apparently, it also works on humans, because their car suddenly swerves to the opposite lane.

Hopper quickly corrected their trajectory and let out string of curses. „God dammit Sara! Are you trying to get us killed?!“
Sara just laughed merrily, clapping as they drove past a sign signaling the beginning of the town.

„Oh come on dad, like I wouldn’t have seen it coming!“

„Yeah you might have, but some of us don’t have freaking superpowers so cut me some slack, would you!“

„Like you ever need to be afraid of such things with me and El around! You should know better by now dad!“

El tried to stifle her laugh. Sometimes she felt sorry for their dad; it couldn’t have been easy to take care of two teenage girls with weird and unusual powers. But then again, he should’ve been used to it by now. They’d been a family for years now. El sometimes still couldn’t believe her luck, that the Hoppers had actually rescued her from the clutches of the sadistic doctor Brenner, alongside with their own biological daughter. And braved the long and complicated process of adopting her. Sara had been over the moon at them becoming sisters, and so had El; they’d been practically joined at the hip ever since the first time they had met at the lab anyway.

And now, almost ten years later, they were once again back to where it had all started; a small town of Hawkins, Indiana.

El let her bags drop and sat down on a bed, letting herself fall backwards, her eyes closing on their own accord. Moving from one state to another was exciting and fun, yes, but also utterly exhausting. She could hear Sara arguing with Hopper somewhere in the kitchen area.

„I wish you’d let El help us with the luggage.“

„Jane is helping.“ Hopper pointed out.

„You know what I mean!“

„Sara what is our number one rule?“ Hopper sounded equal parts annoyed and exhausted. „No being stupid. No stupid risks. We can handle it the usual way.“

Saras answer was unintelligible but made El smile anyway; she had a pretty good idea what the other girls opinion about their rules was.

The door to Els room opened wider and Sara slipped in. The mattress dipped and El could feel a warm body lay down beside her.

„I can’t believe we’re back in Hawkins!“

El let out a noncomittal „mmm“ sound. Even after all those years of living a relatively normal life she was still a girl of few words. And it was good that she was, for Sara was definitely talkative enough for the both of them.

„I still remember some of it before I was taken you know,“ she rambled on.„I remember the city square, I used to love it at christmas time. And the ice cream shop! God, I hope it’s still there! And the park where mom and dad used to take me to play...“
Saras voice faded away and El finally opened her eyes, turning to look at her.

„Do you miss her?“

„Mom?“ Sara questioned. „Of course I do. But I understand. And it’s not like we won’t see her anymore. We can always visit and she’ll come visit us! We would’ve moved out in a couple of years anyway, don’t you think? Either going to college or... whatever.“ She sighed. „Besides, they need her more right now than we do.“

El nodded. There was no doubt that their baby brother and their mothers new husband needed her more right now than a couple of teenagers. Still, El missed her too.

When their parents had gotten divorced... it had been a rough ride, for all of them. But, everybody adjusted. They’d found a rythm, learned to make it work. And then it was all turned upside down again. Sara and El needed to be moved back to Hawkins and lets just say, their mother had not taken it well. Only after a month filled with countless arguments and tears and endless promises to call every day and visit as much as possible did she finally agree to let them go with their dad.

Sara gave a loud huff and jumped up from the bed, smacking El on the thigh in the process.

„Come on lazy pants! We still need to get our exercise in.“

El groaned but got up anyway. They had promised Dr. Owens they would not slack off and would keep up with their training; it was a small price to pay for a chance to finally try out a somewhat normal life and get to go to high school.

It was almost dark outside when El and Sara finally came to a stop at a small waterfront in the old quarry. They were both panting heavily and El couldn’t keep back a chuckle as she watched Sara drop to her knees beside the water to wash her face.

„I...“ Sara panted and tried again. „I almost beat... you this time I swear!“

El’s chuckle grew to a full blown laugh.

„No, I almost let you beat me this time.“ She grinned playfully.

Sara cupped some water in her hand and threw it El’s way, but she just laughed again and waved her hand; the water came to a halt midair and fell down, not reaching it’s target.

„Not fair!“

„What?“ El shrugged innocently.

Sara was just about to try again when they heard a shout from somehow above them.

They both crouched down and pulled their hoods on, suddenly all tense; a habit more than anything else really. To stay alert, hidden. They kept quiet and let the voices drift to them. Random rumblings and bouts of laughter, voices occasionally rising and then fading off again, faint beat of music in the background. At one point a girl could be heard squeeling, more in delight than in distress.
Saras poster relaxed and she stood up.

„It’s probably just some teenagers.“

„Teenagers?“ El questioned.

„Yep. Sounds like a party.“

El let herself relax also. Teenagers meant no imminent danger.

„We should still get out of here though,“ Sara sighed, taking one more handful of water and splashing it over her face. „I don’t feel like meeting anybody while all sweaty and gross.“

A party. El was almost tempted to go and take a closer look. But, Sara was right about the sweaty and gross part and she’d rather not be seen in this state either.

She looked up, towards where the sounds came from. There was a tall figure standing on the very edge, lighted by the bonfire from behind. El pushed down the urge to hide in her hood, make herself less visible; it was foolish, really. It was too far away and definitely too dark outside for the person up there to actually see them.

Taking one last look at the water El turned back towards the woods they had come from. She didn’t get to take even one step though, before Sara suddenly gasped and grabbed her arm, her nails sinking into her skin painfully. A second later Sara whirled back towards the quarry and looked up, at the cliff edge El had seen the figure standing on before; it was still there.

„Shit! He’s not gonna make it!“ was all Sara got out before the figure suddenly stepped off the cliff and frightened screams filled the air.

The body seemed to fall in slow motion; the time it took for it to reach the bottom a good indicator of how high the drop really was.

El’s hand shot out in front of her before she had even made a conscious decision to take action; the body slowed down just before it would’ve hit the water.

„Shit-shit-shit-shit shit this is so not good we cannot do this!“ she could hear Sara chant from somewhere beside her, her panicked words cutting through El’s concentration.

In a fracture of a second El made a decision and let the body slip into the water. She still held on though, her hand stretched out and the telltale blood starting to seep from her left nostril. She could hear the sputtering and splashing and felt the person thrash around, frightened and confused. There was gasping for air and then the body’s movements slowed down. That’s when she started to slowly bring it to the shore, sliding it through the water, until it was so close that Sarah, who was knee deep in the water now, could get a hold of it. The body was still. Sara grabbed it by the shoulders and El finally let go with her mind and surged forward to help pull it ashore. They dragged the body half way out of the water and slumped down beside it, panting heavily.

It was a boy, El noticed. A pale boy with a mop of dark hair, probably around their age. He wasn’t
moving and Sara was beginning to panic again, always the more emotional one.

El crouched down near the boys face and listened. Nothing. She fumbled for his wrist, trying to find the pulse. Nothing. Damn it!

She decidedly grabbed a hold of the boys head, turning it to the side, and some water sputtered out of his mouth. A quick check of his mouth; there was nothing else blocking his airways. Bringing his head back to the original position, she pinched his nose closed and pushed his forehead back, forcing his mouth open. Leaning forward she covered his mouth with hers, beginning CPR, just like they had been taught at their basic survival training. Sara caught on in a second and when El stopped, she was already positioned over the boys ribcage and started to pump his heart.

„One, two, three, four, five...“

El waited for her to finish and gave him mouth to mouth once more.

„One, two, three...“

And El again.

Suddenly the boy jerked and started coughing. He drew deep breaths, trying to get oxygen into his lungs and his eyes snapped open. El, who was still crouched above him, her face mere inches away, could see emotions flashing through his eyes; shock, fear, confusion, relief. Then his gaze focused on her, his eyes growing wide with surprise, and El's face stretched into a big smile; he’s going to be okay. In a flash of exhilaration, before she really aknowledged to herself what she was doing, she reached forward and briefly pressed her lips to his.

His lips were soft and warm and El's heart skipped a beat and then it was racing, excited and startled at the same time. It took a second for her brain to catch up and the moment it did, she pulled back, her head whipping around to look at Sara. Saras hands were still hovering over the boys ribcage, but her eyes were on El, big with shock. The girls stared at each other for a moment, mouths hanging open. El wanted to say something, to somehow explain, but then the earth started shaking, the telltale footsteps thundering closer, and they knew they were out of time.

Sara jumped up in a heartbeat and so did El. Or rather, she tried to, but the boy had grabbed a hold of her arm, and, caught by surprise, El tumbled back down again. She turned to look at the boy, alarmed, ready to pounce on him. Before she had any time to react though he had closed the gap between them and was kissing her once more.

Warmth spread all over her body and El's breath hitched; her mouth opened to gasp for air and the boy took advantage, deepening the kiss. She could taste beer and tic-tacs. All thoughts flew out of her head, her body beginning to respond as she melted into his touch.

„EL!“ came a frantic shout from further away.

It almost wasn't enough to get her to move again, but then she heard other voices just around the bend of the road and the reality came crashing down. She pulled away forcefully and twisted her arm free for good this time, sprinting away as fast as her all of a sudden week legs allowed.
It was only for a second that Mike had turned his head away from the direction the girl had ran off to, but it had been enough. When he looked back the thickening darkness had already swallowed the retreating form and he couldn’t catch a sight of her anymore. Damn it.

Lucas was the first to come crashing down beside him.

„Mike! Mike, are you alright? For fucks sake man!“

Lucas was on his knees beside him, cluthing his shoulder, his breaths shallow and too fast.

And then there were others there, Dustin, Will, guys from his basketball practice, the girls. Someone tried to stifle a sob, and it sounded suspiciously like Max.

„Yeah I’m alright dude, I’m alright.“ Mike patted Lucas’s hand that was still grabbing his shoulder.

Giving his shoulder a final, almost painful, squeeze, Lucas got up and walked over to Max, wrapping her up in a comforting hug. Will sighed and sat down on the pebbled shore some distance away from Mike, his body sagging in relief. Dustin, on the other hand, started pacing around and did not show any signs of calming down what so ever.

„You!“ he panted. „You stupid motherfucker! You freaking dumbass motherfucker! What the hell were you thinking?! Do you have a fucking deathwish?!“

Mike opened his mouth to answer him but was cut off.

„No! You do not get to speak! You god damn fucking motherfucker!“

Mike closed his mouth. He had never, literally never seen Dustin so angry before, not even when his Dad had left or when they found out they wouldn’t be able to continue with AV Club once in high school because of some stupid rules. It was enough to sober Mike up almost instantly. That, and the fact that he was soaking wet and could have died. He looked at his friends, at Melanie, and was suddenly just ashamed. What the fuck had he been thinking? He looked back out at the water and then up at the cliffedge he had jumped off from. His hand, halfway up to his hair, started shaking and he lowered it back down, feeling weak all over.

„I don’t even understand how you are sitting over here right now!“ Dustin rambled on. „I thought we would have to come in and drag your fucking body to the shore! What the fucking hell were you thinking?!“

„Oh come on man, no harm no foul, right?“ James, one of the guys from the basketball practice, tried to lighten the situation. He backed up as Dustin sent him a glare. “Okay, okay, never mind."

Melanie, who had stood in the sidelines with her friend, had finally come to a decision and took a hesitant step towards Mike. She looked nervous and a far cry from the hot blonde she had seemed as before, and suddenly Mike didn’t want to deal with any of this shit anymore. His head swam with thoughts of how this could have possibly gone very, very wrong, and then there had been this girl, with the most delicious lips, who he was more and more convinced that he had dreamed up while he was delirious, and it was all just too much. He got up before the girl reached him and walked over to Will.

„Can you take me home? I’m tired."

Will nodded wordlessly and got up, turning back towards the road that led up the hill. Lucas and
Max joined them and so did Dustin, and he didn’t shut up about how incredibly stupid Mike had been until all five of them were finally in Wills car and on their way home.

El and Sara were hunched up behind an outcropping of stone. With El getting a late start, they hadn’t managed to make it all the way to the forest before the gang of teenagers had arrived. They waited, their hearts racing, until the very last of them dissapeared back to where they had come from before daring to move.

El let out a breath she wasn’t even aware she had been holding and Sara groaned, hiding her face in her hands.

„Oh for fucks sake, dad’s gonna kill us.“ She finally mumbled under her breath.

El rolled her eyes at the dramatics.

„No, he won’t,“ she reasoned. „He will not know. It’s gonna be alright.“

„Alright?! How can you say that? All it fucking takes is for this to reach the police department and we’re screwed!“

El frowned; Sara didn’t usually swear this much. Listening to the boy lament on the beach earlier must’ve really inspired her.

„Why would they go to the police? No reason to. Nothing happened.“

Sara let out another frustrated growl but seemed to calm down a bit.

„No, wait. You’re right,“ she said after a small pause, her voice so quiet that El barely heard. „It’s gonna be fine.“

El nodded. Of course it was, but it was nice to hear Saras confirmation anyway. El could only guess, but Sara could see and know for sure. She took one more peak towards the now empty beach and decided it was safe enough to get up from their hiding place. Her gaze fell back to the spot the boy had laid at earlier, and she halted, a wave of emotions rolling over her.

There was a burst of giggles from behind her and Els face grew hot.

„Damn it. Like always, Sara knew exactly what was going through her head. She had hoped they would at least reach home before it came up. No such luck, obviously.

„Oh my god oh my god El!“ Sara was up now, so giddy she was practically bouncing up and down. „You kissed him oh my god!“

Now it was Els turn to hide her face while groaning and giving a halfhearted „Shut up“. Sara grabbed her hand and dragged her towards the trees, trying to keep her laughter down and not really succeeding. El was glad it was now so dark outside that Sara couldn’t possibly see how red her face was. Or that she couldn’t keep a smile off of her lips almost all the way home.

Only when El was finally in her bed, all warm and cosy and ready to fall asleep, did she allow herself to properly think about all that had happened back at the quarry. She hid her face in her
hands, absolutely *embarrassed*, but her face stretched into a huge smile never the less.

„Mike.“

She tried out the name she had heard the boys friends call out; it rolled off her tongue easily.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Did I promise myself I wasn't gonna go crazy over posting a story and would try to go on with my daily life as usual? Yes. Did I utterly and completely fail and kept coming back at an unhealthy rate to see if people were liking it? YES.

Turns out I like it when people like my story. So... thank you, sincerely, for your comments and kudos. Really :)

Four sets of eyes were staring back at Mike, and it was beginning to make him uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and fidgeted with the D&D dice in his hand.

His eyes darted around the room once more and he put the dice back onto the table before him. The movement made his chest hurt and he rubbed at the spot absentmindedly.

„So...“ he tried to fill the silence but drifted off, not sure how to continue.

He was sitting in his basement with his closest friends, Lucas, Max, Will and Dustin. They had always had each others backs and there had never even been a question if Mike was going to have to give them a full explanation of what had happened last night.

Dustin, always the first to try and diffuse any awkwardness, came to his rescue.

„So,“ he began, still staring at Mike as if he had two heads, but at least saying something. „What you’re saying is... I don’t even know where to start man.“

Dustin shook his head, making Mike roll his eyes in annoyance.

„So... you’re saying you did it because she told you she’d let you get to second base if you did?“

Mike cringed. Of course that was the first thing they would bring up. Dustin made it sound like he was crazy, and, sadly, Mike agreed. It wasn’t one of his proudest moments. He shrugged his shoulders, feeling his face heat up.

„That, right there, has to be the most stupidest thing I have ever h...“

Dustin was cut off by Max who just stretched out her hand and slapped him over the back of his head.

„Ow, what as that for?!“

Max stared him down, but seeing this didn’t get her point across, threw her hands in the air.

„Oh come on guys, I don’t think any of you is fit to judge Mike at this point!“ She said, glaring at the room in general. „It’s not like you all aint just a bunch of stupid hornballs, especially when alcohol is involved, so... stop. Just stop. “
Dustin’s face went all red and Will was suddenly awfully interested in his fingernails. Lucas just sent his girlfriend a sheepish smile, not even bothering to protest. The corners of Mike’s mouth turned up on their own accord; Max was right of course. They were sixteen year old boys for fucks sake.

“But,” the redhead had her finger up. “And I will say this just once, so listen carefully, all of you. If I ever, ever catch any of you doing something so stupid because of a girl again, I will kill you, you hear me? I will kill you, I swear!”

They took a moment to let the words sink in. Max might’ve been Lucas’s girlfriend, but that didn’t mean she cared any less for the rest of them.

“Alright, moving on,” Dustin cleared his throat and ended the loaded silence, turning back to Mike. “And you’re not sure how you survived the fall or got out of the water?”

*Finally.* Mike would’ve thought that part was the most important one for his friends.

“Exactly.” Mike nodded for emphasis. “Like I said, I don’t really remember much and maybe what I do remember is scrambled by the beer or shock, but... I hit the water really... weird. Like... slowly. Gently. It’s almost as if I stopped right before I hit the water and yes I know that sounds nuts so *stop rolling your eyes Lucas!* I swear, one moment I was hanging above the water, gasping for air and then suddenly I was in the water and pulled a mouthful into my lungs and passed out. The next thing I know I’m lying on the shore and there’re these two girls there.”

“And so you think it had to be these two girls who got you out.” Lucas was eyeing his friend suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“But,” Dustin cut in, “you have no idea who the girls were or what they even looked like.”

Mike just nodded.

“Because they were wearing hoodies. And it was dark. And then they ran away before we arrived.”

“Yes.”

“That shit sounds like right out of the movies man.”

Mike felt agitated. „Look, I know it’s hard to believe but damn, why would I lie about this?”

Dustin raised his hands in surrender.

„Woah, man, I never said I don’t believe you!”

„Yeah Mike,” Will piped in, “we know you’re not lying. It’s just... *strange*, that’s all.“

Mike understood why his friends were so apprehensive. The girls were gone before anybody else could see them, no wonder they sounded like something he had made up. He reached towards the table to grab the dice he had been playing with earlier, but pulled back, cringing, as pain shot through his chest once more.

„What is it?“ Will asked, worried.

„I don’t know,“ Mike winced as he touched the sore spot. „Maybe I got hit harder than I thought. It keeps hurting for some reason.“
The others glanced at him with pity. After a moment though Lucas’s eyes grew wide and he leaned in.

„Mike, take your shirt off."

„Wha...at?“

The others looked as bewildered as him.

„Oh come on man, take your shirt off! Show where it hurts!“ Lucas urged him on, impatient now.

Still confused, Mike tugged his shirt up and looked down. Well, fuck. No wonder it hurt like hell; there was a huge bruise in the middle of his chest, a little to the left.

„Son of a bitch,“ Dustin hissed. „There was someone there!“

„What?“ Now Mike was completely confused.

„That,“ Lucas pointed towards the bruise, „means someone gave you CPR, I’m sure of it. We had that first aid course back in freshman year, remember? The slideshow, it had a picture exactly like that."

Mike did remember. And then it all clicked, the puzzle pieces sliding into place to form a coherent picture. That was why the girls had been hovering above him like they had. That was why the girls face, who was closer to his head, had lit up like a christmas tree when he had come to and opened his eyes. He had been gone and then they’d gotten him to come back.

The party grew silent, all thinking the same; whoever they had been, these girls had most likely saved Mikes life. It was too big to even say it out loud, so nobody did.

„And the only clue you do have, is that these definitely were girls and one of them was called Elle."

Max looked at Mike for confirmation.

„Yes."

„No offense, but how can you be sure these were girls? You said you didn’t see them properly."

„Because on of them yelled Elle and it was a girls voice. And this Elle, she was definitely a girl. She was close enough for me to see and I’d like to think I can make a difference between a boy and a girl you know.“ Mike deadpanned, sending Max an offended look.

He was sure, because he had kissed this girl for fucks sake. He could remember the soft gasp she’d let out and the way his hand had easily encircled the girls forearm; it was definitely a girl, damn it. He felt his heart speeding up at the thought and jumped up from the sofa, not able to sit still any longer. He hadn’t told his friends about the kiss. He didn’t even know why. He just didn’t know what to make of it. When the girl had suddenly leaned down and kissed him... it had been like a dream. And it was sweet but way too short and definitely not enough and the next thing he knew, he had pulled the girl back to him and instigated another kiss. And then his friends had barged in, the worst timing ever, and the girl took off before he could do anything else. He kept wishing he hadn’t let her go or had at least tried to follow her.

„Mike?“

He looked up and noticed his friends staring at him expectantly.
“Sorry, what?”

“I asked do you know anybody called Elle?” Max asked again.

“No.” The thought had plagued him since last night. “Do any of you?”

He was met with headshakes and felt himself deflate. He had a vague memory of the girls warm eyes and full lips, and how these lips had stretched into the brightest smile he had ever seen really, but that was pretty much it; her head had been covered with the hood and her face was mostly in shadows; Mike wasn’t sure he would even recognize her if she would pass him on the streets in full daylight. And the more he thought about it, the more he was sure; he wanted to find her and see her again. Hopefully properly this time.

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“Jim Hopper!”

Hopper looked up from where he had been perusing the electronics shelf and was met with a pair of kind brown eyes, surrounded by thin laugh lines. His mouth stretched into an answering smile.

“Joyce. Long time no see.”

The woman walked right up to him, stopped for a second, but then continued on and wrapped him in a welcoming hug.

“My god, it’s been ages!” The woman gushed. “I had heard the rumors, but nobody was certain if it was more than that! So you really are moving back to Hawkins?”

Joyce took a step back and Jim shuffled his legs, suddenly not knowing what to do with his long limbs.

“Yes, I am.” He waved his hand in nervous gesture, before letting it rest on his hip. “Feels like I never left to be honest, everything still seems to be the same. The police station still has the same old broken toilet seat.”

Joyce laughed at his try to be funny and Hopper grinned.

“So you’ll be returning to your old job?”

Hopper shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“About time we had a chief again,” Joyce confided. “The last one left more than a year ago. It isn’t easy to bring new people into this town. And Diane, how’s she doing?”

Hopper grimaced before he could catch himself and Joyce’s smile faltered.

“We’re divorced.” Jim grunted. “She remarried. The new guy is great, though. So... yeah, she’s doing great.”

Joyce placed a hand on his arm to console him and if it would’ve been anyone else, he would’ve hated it; pity parties weren’t exactly his thing. But Joyce was just being kind and had never been able
to hide her feelings, so he let her have this one.

„So you’re back here alone?“

„No, not alone, actually,“ Hopper’s face lighted up. „My daughters are coming soon to stay with me, so...“

„Your daughters?“ Joyce interrupted him with a gush.“Sara! How is she? Is she better now? When you left she was...“

Her voice drifted off and, once again, Hopper could feel her squeezing his arm in a comforting manner. When they had left Hawkins all those years ago, it had been believed that Sara was sick. Cancer. But that had just been Brensers cover story for trying to steal her away from her family.

„Yeah, no, she’s fine now!“ he quickly assured. „She’s been well for years, completely recovered.“

„Oh, that is so good to hear, I am so happy for you!“

Hopper felt all warm inside; even after all these years Joyce genuinely seemed to care.

„Yeah. And then there’s Jane. Me and Diane adopted her a while back.“ He quickly continued. Best to get his story out and mingling in the small town; less explaining for him in the future. „She was in the hospital with Sara, and had no family left, so...“ He ended with a shrug once more.

„That is so nice of you and Diane, Jim. You always were such good people.“ Joyce was smiling softly and looking at him as if he was some kind of hero.

Hopper wasn’t sure he deserved to be praised like this. But what he was sure of, was that his face was now heating up like he was a bloody thirteen year old talking to his first crush.

He was saved from the embarrassing situation as the door bell rang, signaling another client.

Joyce turned to leave.

„It is so nice to see you again Jim.“ She sent him a final smile. „Once you’re settled in and the girls are here, come by for dinner sometimes, okay? I mean it.“

„Okay, will do.“ Hopper mumbled to himself as Joyce was already half way down the aisle.

He chuckled lightly to himself and turned back to the shelf full of radios.

Joyce.

Joyce was... nice.

El grunted as Saras leg made contact with her side. She managed to stay upright and throw a punch, but Sara blocked it easily. In her last attempt El grabbed a hold of the other girl and dragged her down to the mat, trying to get her into a chokehold.
"You're out of it today," Sara panted, as she expertly slithered away from El.

El quickly rolled backwards and took in a defensive stance. Sara eyed her from further away.

They were interrupted by the intercom buzz and turned to look at the glasswall separating them from a group of scientists. Their martial arts teacher had left the room at some point and was now speaking to Dr. Owens.

"Alright girls, that’s it for today." A voice called out.

El let herself relax and rolled her right shoulder; it was still hurting from her training the day before and Sara had gotten a hit in, using the advantage. She winced as she caught a sore spot and massaged it for a few seconds before walking over to the door. Sara was already there, grinning at her.

"Sorry, but not sorry," she grinned even wider. "Your arm is fine, don’t overdo it."

El smiled despite herself. She fell into step beside Sara and together they made their way out to the hallway. They slumped against a wall, waiting, until the next door down opened and Dr. Owens poked his head out.

"Jane, Sara, you’re all clear for now! Be back for the briefing in thirty."

The girls let out a content sigh and headed to the locker room. Sometimes they wanted to run tests on them right after the workout or training sessions, and it was always tiresome.

But, all in all, it wasn’t that bad, El thought. She still remembered how it had used to be. Before. When all she used to have was her Papa. She still got the chills when she thought about that word. Dr. Martin Brenner had been a monster; having a child he had stolen from her mother and tortured on a daily basis call him Papa was just another sign of how deranged and twisted he had really been. El wasn’t sure what had happened to him in the end. All she knew was, that after the Hoppers had successfully rescued Sara and her, Brenner was called in by whatever facility oversaw his actions and removed from his field of work.

In his stead came Dr. Owens, a man with a very different approach. He had no intention to kidnap or force anybody to do his bidding and had instead begged the Hoppers for almost a year to let them keep working with Sara and El. In the end, what made the Hoppers cave, was the fact that they were simply not equipped to look after two girls with supernatural powers. Saras premonitions kept getting out of hand, draining her both mentally and emotionally, and El kept using her powers all over the place without even giving it a second thought. After one fateful night, when El had had a nightmare and had unconsciously broken every single window and glass item in the house, it was decided; the girls were enrolled in the special government program once more.

The arrangements were very different this time around. The girls got to live with their parents, but instead of going to school, like other children their age, they were taught and tutored at the Lab. They trained their skills, trained their bodies and trained their minds, all of it supervised closely by their parents. Hopper had been against it for a long time, only really coming to terms with it one day when somebody had tried to rob Saras handbag; needless to say, the burglar was worse off than the girls. Hopper suddenly liked the odds his girls had against the world. And in return the girls helped the government as much as they could and as much as Hopper deemed suitable. It was a win-win situation really, for all counterparts.

El wiggled out of her training clothes and went to the shower stall next to the one Sara was already using.
„So what’s going on with you today?“ Saras voice echoed over the splashing water.

El didn’t answer.

„It’s been happening more frequently over the past few weeks.“

El just sighed.

Sara was right of course. They had spent so much time together, she could read El as if she was an open book anyway. And still El didn’t feel like sharing. She wasn’t even sure why, but for some reason, the thought of telling her friend was embarrassing. They had always shared almost everything, so the sensation was new.

„I’m not stupid you know.“ Saras voice was closer now and El turned to see the girl peeking at her around the stall wall.

„You’ve been using your powers. More than usual.“

It wasn’t a question and El bit her lip.

„Now the question is, on what?“ Sara continued, closing off her water and wrapping herself up in a towel, before heading back to the changing rooms. El finished up and followed her.

„You know, I’ve let you be, because I thought being back in Hawkins Lab has been upsetting you. But.“ Sara pulled a brush through her blond locks, trying to get the knots out. „I now actually think your mood has more to do with what happened at the quarry last month.“

El blushed scarlett in a matter of seconds. This was total bullshit, but she could not keep her reaction at bay.

Saras mouth stretched into a wide smile. She had thrown her hairbrush back into her bag and came to sit down besides El.

„You’ve looked him up, haven’t you? That boy from the quarry.“

Hiding her red face in her hands, El nodded. Why the hell was this so hard to talk about?

Sara clapped. She actually clapped. And jumped up and down from excitement.

„I finally figured it out yesterday. Can’t believe it didn’t come to me earlier! Of course you would!“

El had lasted for about a week before she had given in and tried to look for Mike in the void. It wasn’t easy; all she had to go by was his name and a vague memory of what he had looked like in the dark. It had taken her another week to actually find him. But she did find him, and ever since then, she couldn’t help but check in every once in a while. Sometimes she lasted a day or two without, some days she had looked for him more than once. Last night she had sat in her room for half an hour, long after she was supposed to be asleep, watching as the boy was sitting on a couch somewhere, laughing from time to time and shoving popcorn into his mouth.

The boy was... intriguing. She had sat and inspected his face, finding it oddly fascinating. His eyes stood out the most, dark pools against his pale complexion. His nose and cheeks were covered with freckles, and El envied him; she wished she would have freckles. Her most favorite feature thus far was the boys hair. It had been wet and clinging to his head that evening in the quarry, so El was kind of surprised to see it messy and sticking up every witch way, longer than boys usually wore. She wished she could touch it, but that wasn’t possible in the void.
And even though nobody could have seen her in the void, El had only once dared to study the boys lips. It felt too private. And, dare she say it, kind of stalkerish.

Sara slammed her locker door closed, making El jump. She looked at Sara questioningly and wished at once that she hadn’t. Sara looked all giddy and excited, eager for more.

„You need to dish, El!“ she said as she pulled her still wet hair back into a pony tail. “But, we don’t have time right now. We need to be at the meeting in ten.“

El came to a decision and nodded. There were very few things that stayed hidden from Sara for long. It was best if El told her what had been on her mind, instead of Sara using her powers to see and seeing god knows what.

„We’re going home tomorrow evening. I will tell you then.“

Saras smile could have blocked out the sun.

„Promise?“

„Promise.“
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Is it weird to be so hijacked by your own imagination, that you can clearly see a sequel coming out before you have really even started a story? Pfft, ofcourse not.

Happy New Years Eve everybody :)

Mike and his friends sat in their favourite booth at the towns only ice cream shop and contemplated, if they should have another round.

„I say screw it,“ Dustin exclaimed, slamming his fist on the table for emphasis. „I’m gonna have one more. This is like officially the last day of summer, since school’s back on tomorrow."

He got up and walked away towards the counter, Lucas right at his heels.

„I want one too Lucas!“ Max shouted after them.

Will was still only finishing his sundae and Mike was too full; her mother had forced an unhealthy amount of casserole into him earlier, he’d barely managed even the first ice cream. He turned to look out of the window, but his gaze got caught on the reflection and he ended up staring at his own eyes instead.

„A penny for your thoughts."

He glanced up, at Max, who was watching him with a smirk on her face.

„You’re a cheapskate you know.“ Mike muttered under his breath and turned back to the window. „bring it up to a quarter and I might consider:"

He knew his friends had caught him zoning out too frequently lately, but he couldn’t help it. He was kind of in mourning. It had been more than five weeks since the quarry incident, and he had made no progress whatsoever with finding the girl. His friends had helped as much as they could, asking around and keeping their eyes and ears open, but they had gotten no leads. And with that much time already past, it was becoming less and less likely he would ever get to meet this girl again. It was bothering him. He didn’t want to let go.

The table shook as Lucas plopped down next to Max and Mike was drawn out of his thoughts.

He was just about to turn back to his friends when he saw the police chiefs truck pull in. What caught his attention though was the fact that the chief wasn’t alone; he could see two girls in the truck with him.

„Hey, guys, look.“ He perked up and elbowed Will, who was sitting right next to him. „The new girls."

His friends jerked to motion, excited, Dustin almost climbing over Lucas to get a better view. Max rolled her eyes at them but couldn’t hide her own curiosity either, leaning forward until her nose was basically against the window.
Hawkins was a small town, so, of course, everybody knew by now that their new, or rather, old chief of police who had come back, would be bringing his daughters with him. Mike didn’t remember the chief of police very well, he had been just a kid when the man left. But he did know that he’d had only one daughter back then; rumor had it that the other one was adopted.

The chief, a big, intimidating man got out of the truck first and Mike quickly averted his gaze in case he didn’t take a bunch of teenagers staring at him too kindly. Luckily the man didn’t linger and took off towards the door, leaving the girls on their own. One of them was standing next to the car now and Mike did a doubletake; the girl was tan and curvy, blond hair cascading down to her waist; someone wolfwhistled and for a moment he wondered if it was him. He definitely had been thinking about it. But then he heard Dustin grunt as if somebody had punched him, and decided it must’ve been his friend instead. The girl was stretching her hands over her head, baring a sliver of her stomach in the process, and well, fuck. Was this really happening? Apparently, yes, because when she brought her arms back down and took a look around, she suddenly stilled, having caught them staring. A big smile spread over her face and she raised her hand to wave at them.

Mike jumped back and looked at his friends, embarrassed. And shit, it only got worse: Dustin had a dreamy look on his face, his hand in the air, waving back at the girl. Mike groaned and let his head slump onto the table, Will mimicking his motions beside him.

„You idiot!“ Lucas whisper-shouted. „Way to make us look like some stalkers!“

„What?“ Dustin asked, grinning from ear to ear. „I’m just making them feel welcome, that’s all! Why is this bad?“

Max made a strange sound somewhere between laughter and choking, but didn’t take her eyes away from the window. Mike, despite being ashamed, couldn’t help himself either and turned back again to see what was going on. The blond girl was still there, laughing and saying something to the other girl who had joined her.

The second girl was taller, skinnier, with legs going on for days; the daisy dukes and hightops only managed to highlight that fact and Mikes head fell sideways to get a better look. The first girl must’ve pointed them out, for when Mike’s gaze finally made it all the way up to the second girls face, he could see her looking at them like a deer in headlights. Like literally; she had these big brown doe eyes and the exact same frightened expression. Now Mike was really embarrassed by his own behaviour. Before he could even blink though the girl was already on the move, hurrying away from the car and pulling the first girl along with her.

„Okay guys,“ Mike muttered under his breath. „We are officially creeps.“

„Oh you didn’t know?“ Max whispered back sweetly. „I could have told you this back when you lot first started stalking me, you morons.“

Els heart was beating so fast she was afraid she’d have a panic attack if she didn’t calm down right this instant. She just couldn’t believe it, what were the odds? It was her and Saras first night out of the Hawkins Lab and in the town, and already they had stumbled upon the very same people she had been wanting to, but at the same time was absolutely terrified to meet. Yes, she had been dreaming
about seeing Mike again in real life, but now that it was actually happening, she was so not ready for this!

She only had the short walk to the ice cream shop’s door to come to terms with it, so she did the best she could, drawing in deep breaths to try and slow her erratic heartbeat.

„What’s going on?“ Sara asked, confused.

„Mike.“

El more breathed the name out than really said it.

Sara gasped and her head snapped back to the windows, but the teenagers were already out of sight.

„Which one was it?“ she asked, excited, but they were almost at the doors by this point and El just shook her head.

And then they were inside and it took all of Els willpower to act normal. They walked up to the counter where dad was already perusing the menu.

„So, what are you gonna have today?“ he asked and only looked up when the girls didn’t answer.

El pretended to read the menu, but the letters kept swimming in front of her and made no sense. Sara came to her rescue and pointed her finger at a random item.

„That one!“ She squealed, a little too excited. „Let’s get that one!“

Hopper read what she had pointed at and raised an eyebrow.

„Strawberry? I thought you hated that.“

El could feel Sara cringe; dad was right, Sara hated strawberry ice cream with passion.

„For me.“ El added quickly, sending him a small smile.

„Yes, for Jane!“ Sara exclaimed, way too loudly and Hoppers face froze; it was obvious something was going on. „I want Vanilla, like always. We’re gonna go and sit down, okay?“

Sara walked away before their dad could ask anything, and, to Els surprise, steered them right to the booth next to where Mike and is gang were sitting. Before she could protest, Sara had already slumped down on the seat facing the group and there was no choice really, El was forced to take the opposite seat. She sent her sister a death glare but it went unnoticed; Sara was too busy gawking at the other table with no shame whatsoever. At one point her face stretched into a wide smile again and El assumed somebody was smiling back at her.

Hopper arrived before things could get any more awkward, sitting down next to El and right in front of Sara, successfully cutting her off from whomever she was smiling at. El scooted further down the seat, towards the window to make room. It took her a couple of seconds to realize: she was now sitting back to back with Mike. Oh god. Her skin prickled and the hair on the back of her head stood up. He was right there. Not even a foot away, if she would let herself lean back against the seat. She drew a deep breath, needing more air in her lungs and her heartbeat was so fast, too fast and it was just crazy, how she couldn’t shake the overwhelming feeling of self consciousness off.

She quickly grabbed her ice cream bowl and a spoon, to hide her shaking hands more than anything else really, and dug in.
Mike wasn’t even aware he was tapping his foot in a nervous manner until Max kicked him under the table. He sent her a sheepish smile and stopped. He lasted for a whopping ten seconds before he grabbed a spoon and started fiddling with it, making Max roll her eyes at him.

He and his friends were trying hard to act cool and normal, but there was no denying: the new girls sitting right next to them had the boys on edge. Especially Dustin, who was even now trying to subtly peek around the chief’s big form to catch a glimpse of the blond girl. They had finished their ice creams some time ago and nobody could really hold up a conversation for more than a couple of random jabs, but they weren’t willing to get up and leave either. Not even Max. To be honest, Mike was quite surprised to see the redhead showing as much interest in the girls as the rest of them did; he would’ve thought she would get jealous or something. Girls were weird like that, usually.

Dustin got his opening when the chief suddenly got up and walked away towards the bathroom. Before anybody could stop him, Dustin was out of his seat and slipping into the spot the man had occupied. Will blushed for his friend and Max slapped a hand to her forehead; Mike had to really hold himself back from doing the same. He steeled his nerves and turned towards the other table to see what Dustin was doing.

„Hello, I’m Dustin,“ his friend had his hand stretched out towards the pretty blond, a big grin on his face.

For a moment there Mike was worried that Dustin had made a complete fool of himself, but then the girls face broke into a grin and she accepted the hand offered to her.

„Hello Dustin, nice to meet you,“ she answered, looking at their friend with way more interest than anybody should on their first meeting. „I’m Sara. Sara Hopper.“

Dustins face was positively splitting in two and after shaking the hand for at least ten seconds too long, he finally let go and turned to the other girl sitting beside him. Mike could hear the girl sigh in defeat before she angled herself towards Dustin. Instead of taking his hand though she simply nodded and smiled at him.

„Jane.“

Her voice was soft, but loud enough.

Mike felt a sudden pang of disappointment. It took him a moment to place it, but then it dawned on him; neither of the girls were named Elle or anything even remotely close. He hadn’t even realized that he had secretly hoped, that by some miracle, one of the newcomers might be the girl he had been looking for.

„And these are my friends,“ Dustin was now turning towards their table. „Will, Lucas, Max, and Mike.“

Mike looked up at hearing his name and plastered a smile on his face. The pretty girl, Sara, was watching him, clearly curious, but the other girl dropped her gaze as soon as he tried to make eye contact. Mike frowned. He’d probably looked like a real jackass earlier.
He couldn’t help but inspect the girl, spying at her profile from under his fringe, trying to be inconspicuous; she was worrying her lower lip between her teeth as she looked down and then back up again, towards Dustin, and then her lips stretched out into a smile. Mike wished she would look at him.

„Yeah we go to Hawkins High!“ Dustins voice cut through to Mike and he tore his gaze away from the girl, bringing his attention back to the conversation. „We’ll be Juniors this year.“

„Nice!“ Sara really did sound pleased. „We’re gonna be in the same year! So dish, how is it? Are there many students? Are the teachers okay? Any meanies we’d best watch ou...“

She was interrupted by a loud fake cough and the teenagers snapped their heads towards the sound as one. They hadn’t even noticed chief Hopper return. The man stood a couple of feet away, looking at them with squinted eyes, as if he was contemplating throwing them all behind the bars, just for good measure.

„Come on girls.“ He called out in a gruff manner. „Time to go.“

Sara let out an impatient huff.

„Dad, can we just...“

„No."

„But just one more...“

„Sara."

The blond girl pursed her lips into a pout. Mike could see Jane trying to hold back a smile as she watched the interaction between her father and sister.

„Come on Sara,“ she said gently, standing up and climbing out of the booth, Dustin shooting up in a hurry to get out of her way. „Let’s go."

Sara sent her a long look but relented, getting up from the table. She stalked past her father, almost elbowing him in the process, and this time Jane did smile, Mike could see. The taller girl turned back towards their group and waved them a goodbye before following her sister. Still not looking at Mike though.

The chief of police stood there for a second longer, pinching the bridge of his nose. He turned to glare at Dustin and Mike could see his friends adams apple bob up and down. But then the man gave them a brisk nod and took off after his daughters.

Dustin let out a deep breath and sagged in relief. His face stretched into a wide smile.

„Well, that went better than expected!“

„Yeah, if what you expected was being shot by the chief, it did.“ Lucas shook his head in disbelief.

„No, Lucas, think about it. Tomorrow these two are gonna attend Hawkins High for the first time ever. They’re not gonna know anybody there.“ Dustins face stretched into a wide grin once more. „Except us. Strategy baby!“

„Yeah, for like the first ten minutes maybe! Did you not see what I just did? I doubt these two will have a problem with finding friends!“
„Aw man would you stop trying to rain on my parade? What’s it to you anyways? You’ve got Max!“

„Woah, leave me out of this!“

„What does Max have to do with you trying to embarass yourself? Just, be cool, okay, and try not to drool on Sara tomorrow!“

„Oh I so call dibs on getting to drool over Sara tomorrow, by the way.“

Dustin sent a pointed look towards Mike and Will; Lucas was out of the race anyway.

„Oh my god would everybody just calm their pants okay?“ Max had had enough. „You can’t just... Ugh, never mind! Let’s just get out of here. I need to get home."

They were almost at their new home, situated halfway between Hawkins and Hawkins Lab, in a less crowded area, when Sara had apparently decided that her pouting was not getting her point across well enough.

„Thanks a lot dad.“ She growled. „Do you have any idea how humiliating that was? You acted like we’re six, not sixteen!“

To Els surprise Hopper let out a loud, boisterous laugh. It took him a while before the guffaws began to die down. He wiped his eyes, tears in the corners from laughing too much, before glancing at them from the rearview mirror and letting out another round of chuckles.

El exchanged a confused look with Sara. Their dad had, obviously, finally lost it.

„Okay, I’ll bite,“ Sara relented, having forgotten she was supposed to be mad. „What the hell?“

„Language.“ Hopper bit out, always a parent first. „If you girls were six, I wouldn’t even have to be worried about you two attracting a bunch of teenage guys on your first evening in town."

El didn’t get it at first. Although far from being isolated, her and Sara had never spent too much time with kids their age while growing up, and social situations had never really been Els forte. But, now that she thought about it, the boy, Dustin, had seemed awfully interested in Sara. Her face stretched into a grin at that thought.

„Oh come on dad! It’s not like that! They were just being friendly!“

„Uhuh.“ Hopper just rolled his eyes at them. „You two might not realize this, but I was once a sixteen year old also. Oh I know how teenage boys work. Trust me, I know."

Now it was Saras turn to roll her eyes in annoyance.

„Yeah right. They all just can’t wait to go into our pants."

Hopper choked and nearly rammed the trash can in their driveway he had just turned to. The car jolted to a violent stop, the girls jerking forward in their seats, and Hopper killed the engine. He was
still for a moment before pinching the bridge of his nose and taking long deep breaths that El assumed were meant to be calming. It sounded more like hyperventilating though.

„Do not, and I repeat, do not even joke about this or you’ll be grounded until you graduate this bloody school! And... and I can still take you out of high school altogether and then it’s back to the labs tutoring program with you two!“

„Dad, no!“ El gasped, at the same time as Sara let out an indignant „You can’t do that!“

Hopper looked like he almost felt guilty about making his threat. *Almost.*

Sara took one look at him and resorted to blatant begging.

„Please dad! I swear to god, nothing like that will happen! We’ll stay away from any boys if you want us to, just please, please don’t do anything stupid!“

„I don’t want you to have to stay away from anybody. I just want you to be smart about this, okay?“

„I swear dad,“ Sara pleaded. „We will! I’ll even say no when Dustin asks me out if you want me to, just don’t...“

„When Dustin asks you out? Not if, but when? And who the hell is Dustin?!“ Hopper croaked out, cutting Sara off. „Jesus Christ Sara! What did you see?“

Saras whole being clammed up in a flash.

„Nothing.“

„God damn it you did see something!“

El could see Saras jaw clench and so did Hopper apparently. The man smacked the steering wheel, obviously frustrated, but, after muttering a couple of curses under his breath, El could hear him sigh in defeat.

„Fine. Don’t tell me. Get inside you two.“

El didn’t let Hopper repeat himself and slithered out of the car, Sara right at her heels. They basically ran to the house and made a beeline to Els room. Sara closed the door behind them and let out a small giggle.

They stood in silence until they could hear the telltale hiss of a beer bottle opening and the TV being switched on, meaning that their dad had now resumed his normal evening routine.

El grinned; their argument was over for today. Hopper didn’t have much patience to pry or preach and she liked that. He was short tempered, yes, but never one to linger.

The girls sat down on Els bed and for once, El was the one to speak first.

„Will you tell me what you saw?“

Sara watched her for a second and then her smile grew so big El was sure it had to hurt.

„Possibilities, El.“ She grinned like a mad woman. „So many possibilities. There were so many variations, all dependant on such small details, I have never seen anything quite like this before! He’s so... spontaneous. There’s almost no predicting what he might do! I might as well go in blind!“
„Go in where?“

„This relationship El!“

„Relationship?“ The word felt heavy on her tongue.

„Yes!“

„With... Dustin?“ El dared to guess.

Sara looked at her, exasperated.

„Yes of course Dustin! You were right there, weren’t you?“

El looked down, feeling funny; she hadn’t really been able to concentrate on anything but the fact that Mike was right there earlier.

„Aw, I’m sorry El.“ Sara thought she had hurt her feelings, made her feel insecure and El didn’t correct her. „You know me. I always know things and forget that not everything is as clear to others.“

„It’s okay.“

Sara looked at her, biting her lip, contemplating something.

„Do you want me to check if I can see anything about you and Mike?“ She finally offered.

El considered it for a whole point two seconds before frantically shaking her head.

„No! Please don’t.“

Most likely there even wasn’t anything to see and for some reason, El didn’t want that confirmed.

„Okay.“ Sara never pushed. „Will you tell me about him then? You promised.“

El remembered. Not that she knew what to say though.

„There’s not much to tell.“ She could feel the telltale warmth creeping up her neck. „We saved him and I was curious so I’ve been... watching him. A couple of times. To see how he is doing.“

Looking up El could see Sara chewing on her lips, desperately trying to keep from smiling.

„A couple of times.“

It wasn’t really a question and El shrugged,

„And?“ She prompted, seeing that El wasn’t going to continue.

„I don’t know if there is anything more.“

„Well, for starters, do you like... like him or something?“

Els already warm cheeks flashed to downright hot and Sara couldn’t hold back a giggle this time.

„Stop it Sara.“ El tried to act cool, although the fact that her blood had seemingly turned into molten lava did not help. „I don’t even know him. How can I like him?“
„It’s chemistry El! Sometimes you just do and that’s it!“

Sara had always been a sucker for all things romantic, so the idea of love at first sight was right up her alley. El on the other hand was not so sure about that.

„No, I... I don’t know. He’s just.... interesting.“

„Interesting.“ Sara deadpanned. „El, you kissed this guy the very first time you ever met. And it was basically your first real kiss, because, come on, kissing games at twelve do not count! And you’ve been looking him up, what, like daily now? And you were completely freaked out today when you saw him! He may or may not be interesting, but you, are definitely interested.“

El desperately wanted to contradict that, but came up empty. Letting out a frustrated growl she slumped forward, hiding her face in her hands. She seemed to do that a lot lately.

Bloody hell, she was interested. And it was making her act and feel all sorts of weird and complicated. Like wanting to talk about Mike and at the same time desperately trying to avoid the topic. She craved to see him but then again, she also wanted to run for the hills because it was just so nerve-wracking. And she was reduced to this hot mess without even having exchanged a single word with him and to be honest, at this rate, she would probably just jave a heart attack if he did try to talk to her. She had it bad.

„Oh El.“ Sara was trying hard to hold back her mirth, but failed miserably. „It’s fine. You’re gonna be fine, I promise. How about we find you something cute to wear for tomorrow, huh?“

El didn’t know weather to laugh or cry so she settled on groaning loudly.

„Sara, I know it is hard for you to believe, but trust me: a cute outfit does not solve all of the worlds problems!“
Well, El had to admit it; even if a cute outfit didn’t solve all of her problems, it did mean she had one less worry in the morning of her first ever day in school. She was so nervous she wanted to throw up and die. She had brushed her teeth twice by now, because she had simply gone through the motions and completely forgotten she had already done it and it was ridiculous, really. And her hair was refusing to cooperate and was looking stupid, especially one stubborn curl in the back of her head that made it look like she had a huge bump there.

„Sara, help!“

Her yell must’ve sounded worse than she had intended it to, for there was a loud clatter from the kitchen and the next thing she knew Sara and dad both were barging into the bathroom.

„What’s wrong?“ Hopper asked, bewildered, looking around for a possible danger or a life threatening injury, at least.

„Not you dad!“ El rolled her eyes but then felt bad. He was only trying to help. „I’m sorry, I needed Sara’s help with my hair.“

Hopper let out a quiet string of profanities and mumbled something about teenage girls before taking off and leaving them alone.

Sara pushed the door closed behind him, picked up the hairbrush from the counter and ran it through El’s hair. After a couple of strokes she put the brush back down.

„We need to put it up. It’s either that or washing your hair and there’s no time. Is a french braid okay?“

El sighed but nodded anyway. She had wanted to leave her hair down today, but, as always, her hair had a mind of it’s own. If it wasn’t for the fact that she’d been refused any hair during her hellish times at the Hawkins Lab under Brenner, she would have perhaps whimmed about it more. Now she was just happy to have a choice in the matter and took great pride in her shoulder length brown locks.

She pulled out a stool and took a seat, turning to face the mirror and Sara got to work, her fingers nimble, familiar with the task. El looked at her sister in the mirror and was suddenly envious; Sara seemed so collected and in charge. And she looked so pretty. Her hair was cascading over one of her shoulders, poofed up from the top, all smooth and shiny and, at the same time, impossibly voluminous. Her lips were tainted pink and there was a hint of mascara, which, in combination with a baby blue dress that El could never have pulled off, made her eyes look so blue it was almost criminal. If it wasn’t for a couple of pimples scattered across her chin that she had not quite managed to hide, she would have looked straight out of a magazine. El felt so... plain, in comparison. And all of a sudden, it mattered. Because, they were going to high school, with plenty of other teenagers, and, even though they didn’t have any actual experience with it, she and Sara had watched enough
television and read enough magazines to know about the social aspects they were going to face. And El was worried, for the first time, what her peers were going to think about her.

„Stop it."

The command snapped her back to reality and El lifted her eyebrows in question. Saras hands were still, braid half done, and she was watching her closely instead.

„You know you have no filter between your emotions and your facial expressions, right?"

El looked down in defeat. Yes, she knew. One more thing to freak out about.

„Stop being so hard on yourself El!“ Sara continued her work, pulling Els hair back with swift motions. „It wont help anyway. This is highs chool were talking about. I’m sure some of it will be great but some of it will definitely suck big time. But, all in all, this is good. At least we get to go! I never thought they’d let us. We get to have friends and go to parties and just be normal for once."

It should have helped, but somehow the churning in Els stomach only intensified. Sara finished the braid and grabbed a hold of Els shoulders, squeezing them lightly.

„Listen. I’m going to share something with you, okay?“ She waited for El to give her a nod before continuing. „Well, you know those guys yesterday, Dustin and Mike and..."

„Sara!“

„No, El, wait! This isn’t about Mike!“

El took a deep breath and pinched her eyes closed.

„Okay, okay, sorry. What was it?“

„Okay, so these guys, yes, they’re gonna be in the picture too, but, more importantly, you remember the girl that was with them? Max?“ El nodded for confirmation. „Well, we’re gonna be really good friends with her and trust me when I say: this. Will. Be. Awesome."

Sara was positively beaming and El couldn’t help the answering smile that crept onto her face.

„You sure?"

„Yes. This is the one thing I saw most clearly, there’s like basically no way for this to go otherwise. It’s almost as if there’s a decision that has been made that it will be so, no matter what it takes. And I’m glad. I think it will be something we will cherish very much. Now, stand up so I can look at you."

El got up and Sara moved to stand next to her, looking her over in the mirror. Sarases diversion tactic had worked, bringing Els focus to something other than slowly working herself to a frenzy and she felt better now. When she looked at them, standing there, Sara still looked so perfect, but, El had to admit, she wasn’t that bad herself. Her slouchy boatneck sweater and braided back hair gave her a cool, almost edgy look. And damn it if she wasn’t going to rock it as best as she could.

„That’s the spirit.“ Sara was smiling widely at her. „Now, let’s go, before dad decides he will call the whole thing off.“
Mike and Will were trying really hard not to laugh and were, of course, failing most spectacularly.

„What do you mean it’s none of my business who the volunteer is?!“ Dustin almost yelled at the school’s secretary. Mike had to shove a fist into his mouth. „I wanted to be the one to show them around the school, doesn’t that make it my business?“

Will let out a bout of laughter before he managed to slap a hand over his mouth.

„Mister Henderson, if you won’t stop yelling I’ll send you to the principal!“ The secretary’s face was an alarming shade of purple and Lucas, once again, tried to pull Dustin away from the desk.

„Like I said, somebody already came in before you and volunteered to introduce the school to Jane and Sara Hopper!“ Seeing that Dustin was about to argue the secretary quickly lifted her hand to stop him. „And that’s the end of it! Now, please, Mister Henderson, leave this office immediately!“

„But if you’d tell me who it was I could...“

„Enough!“ The secretary shot up from her seat and turned to Lucas now. „Please guide your friend out of here or you will all be in detention!“

Shit. That also included Will and Mike and Mike really didn’t want to get detention on his first day of school. He quickly stepped forward to grab Dustin’s other arm and together with Lucas they basically dragged their friend out of the door. Will was right behind them, apologizing profusely and still trying not to laugh at the same time.

„Son of a bitch! How could this happen?“

„Shut up Dustin!“ Lucas hissed. They were still in the hearing range.

They dragged him all the way to the main hallway before they finally let him go. Mike and Will took one look at each other and burst out laughing.

„You shitheads!“ Dustin was furious. „There’s nothing funny about this! The party should always offer assistance, remember? So why aren’t you helping me?“

„Dustin!“ Lucas, as always, was the middle man. „Shit, man, wait a second! Would you two clowns calm the fuck down!“

It took Mike and Will another minute for the laughter to die down and Lucas rolling their eyes at them did not help. What did help was Dustins face of utter disappointment; their friend was taking this really bad and Mike felt a kind of guilty for his reaction.

„Sorry man.“ He apologized. „It was Mrs. Sheppard, I’ve never seen her so angry before. It was funny.“

Dustin cocked his eyebrow, clearly not convinced and Mike shrugged sheepishly.

„Okay, now that that’s settled,“ Lucas held a pause for emphasis. „Is there anything we can do?“

The question was meant for Dustin. Mike could see the cogs in his head turning, probably trying to figure out a solution. He doubted there was one. And maybe they didn’t even need one.
„Dustin, does it really matter if somebody else shows them around today?“ He asked tentatively. „I mean, yeah, it sucks and all but it’s just one day.“

„Yes, one day, but what if it is some motherfucker who has, you know, intentions?“

„Someone like you, you mean?“ Will asked nonchalantly.

„Thank you very much, you dickhead. Why am I friends with you mouthbreathers again?“

Their bickering was cut short by the bell.

„Shit."

Dustin’s shoulders slumped and Mike felt bad once again.

„Come on, we need to go.“ He slapped Dustin’s back to comfort him. „We’ll continue this at lunch, okay? Don’t worry man, I bet it’s nothing."

Dustin sighed in defeat and let himself be towed away towards his first class.

Turned out, they didn’t even need to wait until lunchtime.

Mike’s mouth fell open in surprise as he saw none other than Max guide the new girls to their second class of the day. She had been MIA earlier this morning but he had not made anything of it.

„What the hell?“ Dustin hissed from his place behind Mike. „Lucas, did you know anything about this?“

„No, man, I swear!“ Lucas sounded just as puzzled as the rest of them.

The classroom had gone quiet, most of the students ogling at the newcomers. One look at the girls and well, fuck, Mike could completely understand the rush that went through the male population of the class. The blond girl, Sara, looked even better than she had yesterday, all smooth locks and flowy skirts and flirty smiles and Dustin was so out of his league with this one and still Mike hoped his friend would make it anyway.

But then his attention snapped to the other girl, Jane. The one who had kind of avoided him in the ice cream shop. Once again her legs were on full display, this time thanks to a short skirt. And maybe she was shy, for even now the girl was turned away from the students and was looking at the teacher instead; unlike her sister, who was smiling widely and waving at random people. It was funny to think of them as sisters really, they were nothing alike.

„Well, class, say hello to your new classmates!“ The teacher’s voice echoed over the silence. „This is Sara Hopper, and Jane Hopper, and I hope you will all make them feel welcome."

„You bet we will,“ a boy’s voice could be heard whispering, but Mike couldn’t place it. A snicker went through the class.

„Alright girls, take a seat.“
Max was already seated at her usual desk in front of Lucas, right next to Mike. The new girls had little choice though, and they ended up sitting in the front row, were some seats were still available.

Not even a minute had passed before Mike could feel a telltale nudge to his back and he sighed. Of course Dustin needs to know right now.

He stretched his hand backwards and felt a note slip into it. Bringing it to his table, he quickly scanned it before handing it over to Max, who’s name was written on it in bold, messy letters.

What the hell dude?

Max rolled her eyes and answered quickly, throwing the note back to Mike.

Dude???

Mike smirked. This was gonna be long. He handed the note back to Dustin.

Why are you messing with my plans? I was supposed to show Sara around!

Says who?

Says ME. Seriously, what’s your game plan?

What’s my WHAT?

Jeez! What’s up, why did you volunteer?

Because I wanted to DUH

Are you trying to be my wingwoman??

For crying out loud not EVERYTHING a girl does is for boys!!!

Okay, I’m confused. You still just trying to mess with me?!

Upon reading that Max let out a groan so loud it caught the attention of the teacher. And most of the class. Mike hid his smirk behind his hand and pretended to take notes.

„Is everything okay, Miss Mayfield?“

„Yes, sir. Sorry sir.“

The teacher continued on with his lecturing and Max waited a little before laying the note out in front of her again. Mike could see her scribble furiously and then the note was back in his hands.

I’ll explain later okay? After school

Mike could hear Dustin sigh in defeat.

With no notes to distract him for the rest of the period, he ended up spying on Jane instead. She had a habit to chew on the end of her pen, he found out. And the curve of her neck was graceful as fuck.
El was so tired. And to think they were only halfway through with the day! There was just so many people and, being the new kid and all, she felt like she was under a constant scrutiny. She should’ve been used to this, right? She had quite literally been a labrat at some point in her life, so being watched and judged and commented on should have been familiar and easy for her.

Well, turns out crazy scientists had nothing on a bunch of teenagers.

Somebody pushed past her, and she looked up to see a boy trying to make his way through, smiling at her apologetically.

This was another thing that kept getting to her, this constant invading of her private space. And, again, having been prodded numerous times before by doctors and whatnot, how come this, here, felt so... different?

„Jane? Come on.“

Sara and the redheaded girl, Max, were now several steps away and El was holding up the line. She hurried to them, her cheeks flushed slightly from embarrassment and also because it was freaking hot in the crowded cafeteria.

Sara, on the other hand, looked absolutely radiant, as if this was exactly her scene. She was smiling and laughing and answering random people’s questions and hellos. She was enjoying this. Instead of feeling jealous though, like before, El was relieved; her sister hogging most of the attention left her more room to just breathe.

Max must’ve noticed her discomfort, for she sent her an encouraging smile and El smiled back.

She liked Max. At first she hadn’t been sure how this would play itself out, with Sara already knowing beforehand that they were going to be friends. But then they had arrived at school, early, to check in to the office first and Max had been there, playing with the hem of her T-shirt, looking awfully nervous but also determined. She had reintroduced herself, boldly sticking out her hand, and had been awkward for only a second or two when Sara had engulfed her in a hug instead. She had stuck to Saras and Els side throughout the first half of the day, even when the other girls had tried to butt her out and take over. With that same stubborn determination that El had noticed in the morning, Max had silently refused to leave and waited it out. The smile on her face, when Sara bid the other girls a „good day“ and linked arms with Max to be on their way, had spoken volumes and made El want to give her a hug. There was something precious about that girl.

They were almost at the end of a line when Max turned to them, her eyes flicking to the side and around the cafeteria, as if hesitating.

„Would you like to come and sit with us?“ She asked, motioning towards a table in the far right. El saw the familiar group of boys already seated there and her stomach gave a jolt. „They’re my usual gang.“

Sara had turned to take a long look and Max, taking it as a bad sign, started rambling.

„I mean if you want to. They’re okay really, even if they are massive nerds sometimes. But if you prefer to sit elsewhere it is totally fine.“ She was playing with the hem of her T-shirt again. „I’ll be heading over there though. I haven’t really talked to Lucas today and... well, he’s my boyfriend, so...“

Sara was still looking at the boys, her face lighting up and her hand coming up to wave, so El took over.
„Max. It’s okay. We’d like to come and sit with you.‘‘

She was awarded with the same smile that had made El want to hug her before. Behind all of this tomboyish bravado that Max had going on, there was a certain vulnerability, almost as if she wasn’t expecting kindness. El could relate to that.

And then they got their food and carefully navigated through the throng of teenagers, trying not to drop anything and they were almost at the table before El couldn’t hold back the butterflies in her stomach anymore. He was there. Mike. She was so riddiculously aware of him, had been all morning, but until now she had been able to make sure not to get too close. Now they were going to be seated at the same table and she seriously needed to pull herself together.

Will, Mike and Lucas were all seated on one side of the table and Max plopped down next to her boyfriend, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

„Hey beautiful,“ Lucas smiled and snaked a hand around Max.

„Sara and Jane are gonna join us, okay?‘‘

It sounded more like a statement than a question. But, considering the way Dustin was beaming up at them and motioning to the free seats beside him, it was more than welcome. So she and Sara took the offered seats and to Els surprise, Sara was actually blushing as she sat down next to the boy. It was enough to distract El for a moment.

But only for a moment. Then her panicked heartbeat picked up with a vengeance and she had to take a calming breath and make a conscious decision to look up and not come off as a total loser.

There. She did it. She let her gaze wander over the boys and Max and it wasn’t that bad. Lucas and Max were still invested in each other, Dustin was busy beaming at Sara, but managed to send El a wave also, and Will was smiling at her and nodding a hello. See? She could do it.

Now all she had to do was get a grip on herself and face Mike.

Mike was positively staring but he didn’t fucking care. This girl, Jane, was sitting at their table and she had to look at him at one point. He followed her gaze as she first turned to look at Max and then Dustin and then she was smiling at Will; and then turned back to Lucas and Max again. Oh come on.

He was about to take offense and say something, anything, just to get her to react, but then, finally, the girls eyes flickered to him. It kind of felt like a lottery win and Mikes face stretched into a goofy grin. And Jane actually smiled back. So maybe she didn’t think him a total wastoid after all.

„So how’s Hawkins High so far?‘‘ Dustin just couldn’t handle being silent for long. „Is it very different to where you used to go?“

Jane stilled at the question. Yes, Mike was still staring.

„Very.‘‘ Sara answered, her voice exasperated, and five sets of eyes snapped to her, wondering at the exclamation. Upon noticing this, she elaborated. „We’ve been homeschooled until now.“
“Seriously?” Mikes eyebrows dissappeared into his fringe. “Why?”

Now even Sara looked uncomfortable. The sisters exchanged a long look, as if having a silent conversation, and for a moment Mike was sure they would not answer. But then Sara turned back to the table, set her fork down and explained anyway.

“I don’t know if any you know, but when my family left Hawkins, I was sick?”

Lucas mumbled something about having heard a rumor like that back in the days.

“Well, I was. So I was hospitalized, for like, a long time. That’s actually where we met with Jane. The hospital.“

The girls smiled at each other fondly.

“And once we got better, we were so behind, we needed private tutoring. And it kind of stuck, until dad decided to move back to Hawkins. Instead of finding tutors over here it was easier to enroll us into high school.”

Everyone had gone quiet, mulling over this piece of information. So both of them had been hospitalized? A part of Mike was curious, but most of him didn’t really want to know; the topic was too morbid. And what does one say to something like that anyway?

“That is so cool!”

Yeah, not that. Mike cringed, but that was Dustin for you. His eyes were glazed over, staring at nothing.

“Imagine not having to come to this hellhole every morning.“

Will threw a piece of bread at Dustin for being stupid and it got caught in his wild hair. Lucas burst out laughing at this and the tension dissolved. Dustin tried to fish the piece of bread out from his locks, but it just got tangled more and more. „Shit, Will, that is so not cool!“

„Yeah, you know what else is not cool? Not being able to go to school.“ Will was sometimes wiser than the rest of them put together.

„What?“ Dustin was, as usual, totally oblivious to his weirdness. „Come on, it would be cool!“

The piece of bread had now crumbled into several smaller ones. But then Sara swatted Dustins hands away and took over, carefully picking the crumbs out one by one and holy shit, Mike wished he had a camera to capture the look on his friends face. It was hilarious to watch.

„Trust me, it’s not as cool as you’d think.“

The red splotches on Dustins cheeks were kind of mesmerizing, but that voice was enough to make Mikes focus move back to Jane. Her eyes were on her plate where she was chasing a pea with her fork, but Mike was sure it had been her.

So the girl could speak.

„Why not?“ He asked, suddenly curious.

Jane looked up, and Mike kind of liked the way her eyes squinted with interest as she met his gaze. She was thoughtful for a second, chewing on a pea.
„It’s boring.“
„Boring?“
„Yes.“
„How come?“
„You never meet anyone. But the tutors, of course. It gets... lonely.“

Jane had yet to look away.

Mikes mouth opened to answer, but sometime during the last ten seconds or so, his brain seemed to have shortcircuited. Well, *damn*.

It might’ve had something to do with Jane, and there really was no other way to describe it, trying to pierce him with her gaze, her expression almost *hungry*. And it weirded the shit out of Mike. The girl had basically ignored him until now, so what the fuck? Mikes brows furrowed in confusion.

„Jane?“

Saras voice cut through their staring contest and Jane looked away, startled.

„You want my desert? It’s nice and cool, just as you like it.“ Sara pushed her yoghurt towards her sister, smiling sweetly.

Jane bit her lower lip and accepted the treat, her cheeks flushing a darker shade of pink than they’d been before. She muttered a thanks, but Sara was already focused back on the conversation about schedules with Dustin and Will.

Jane didn’t speak again during the lunch.

Neither did Mike.

Mike was rendered speechless again later that afternoon, when the five of them where sitting in Wills car, ready to go home.

„What do you mean you need friends?“ Dustin sounded offended, scared even. „What are we then, pickled cucumbers?“

Max huffed in annoyance. Dustin had barely managed to wait until the classes were over before he cornered her, demanding an explanation as to why she’d hogged the Hopper sisters all day.

„No, but... come on, guys! Yes, you’re my friends, but you’re boys for fuck’s sake. Have any you dumbasses ever thought that I might need, you know, girl friends?“

Mike couldn’t say that he’d had. Max hanging out with them had always just... been so. But now that she’d said it out loud... well. It made sense.
“And it’s not like I’ll ever be friends with Jennifer or Melanie or Stacy and her posse, that much is obvious by now, don’t you think? But Jane and Sara, they’re new. I have a chance with them.”

Max had never seemed more like a girl than right then and it was surprising, really, considering all of those times Mike had been forced to watch her making out with Lucas.

“For what it’s worth, I think you have more than a chance.” Will was always good with words. And girls, for that matter. Max’s face melted into a small smile, the worried crease between her brows finally relaxing.

“Yeah, I think so too. They were pretty cool today.”

Mike was actually happy for her.

“Yeah, they were. And, you know, you definitely have a right to have some female friends.”

“Geez, thanks, Mike!”

“What, I’m just trying to be supportive!”

“You’re an idiot.”

“As long as you promise not to forget about your boyfriend.” Lucas cut in, nudging Max to get her attention. „I only saw you at lunch today!”

“Oh shut up lover boy, you’ll survive!”

But Max leaned in to give her boyfriend a kiss anyway, and Mike cringed, turning away from them. Dustin was still staring at Max, his mouth hanging open. Him being so quiet could mean only one thing; he’s brain was going into overdrive.

“Dustin, you okay there?”

It took a couple of snaps in front of his nose to get him to react.

“Okay? No, not okay.” A wide smile spread across his face. „I’m absolutely fan-fucking-tastic! You totally have my blessing Max! Do you have any idea how much easier it will make things for me? This is... this is even better than any of those schemes I came up with!”

Now it was Maxes turn to stumble for words. Mike braced himself as the girl drew in a deep breath, indicating she was about to blow up.

“Okay, you nuckleheads! Let’s make a couple of things clear, right? First, I am not, contrary to popular belief, asking for your permission here! Okay? And second, don’t you dare treat this as some kind of... platform to get to them! This is important to me, okay? So don’t screw this up!”

“Alright, alright,” Dustin tried to placate her, but him grinning from ear to ear kind of ruined the effect. „We’ll be good. I swear!”

„Ugh! Boys! Why can’t you just act normal for once!”

Mike turned his gaze to the window to hide his smirk. He didn’t want Max to think they weren’t taking her seriously; she could be downright scary when she really got mad.
Chapter 5

El was fine. Completely fine.

There was a shuffle from behind her and once again, a hand slithered over her shoulder to slip a note into her palm and she could feel his breath on her hair. She swallowed, trying to keep herself together and carefully passed the note on to Will, who was sitting right in front of her.

It had been almost two weeks now since the beginning of school and El had made loads of progress; she could now talk to Mike almost as if nothing was amiss, instead of basically ignoring him, or, to quote Sara, looking like she wanted to devour him whole. And it hadn’t been easy either; she’d made a complete fool of herself for another couple of times after that first lunch incident. But, she had finally found a nice balance and things were looking up. She’d even started to believe there was a fair chance that she’d get through high school without revealing her complete obsession with him in the most embarrassing ways imaginable.

And then this happened.

She had been idly listening to the teacher droll on about their current literature assignment, when she could absolutely sense his warmth behind her even before he softly whispered her name, his face so close he was practically nuzzling her hair. El stopped breathing, and only remembered to start again when her head was beginning to get dizzy.

Thinking she hadn’t heard, Mike gently nudged her shoulder. „Jane!“ He called out again and this time El reacted, slightly turning her head.

„Can you give this to Will?“

There was a note between his long, pale fingers and El took it gingerly. Her hands were cold and, damn it, trembling. The rest of her, on the other hand, was quickly heating up like a furnace.

That had been thirteen minutes ago.

Thirteen long minutes, full of anticipation and shallow breaths and oh my god, why was him almost touching her making her all hot and bothered? What were the odds that Mike would not notice her ridiculous reaction? The whole damn class could probably hear her heart slam against her ribs. This was so not an intimate situation, she should have been over this!

Instead, she was left daydreaming about what if. What if there would be an intimate situation. Mike standing behind her, letting his hands slowly encircle her waist, lowering his face to whisper something into her ear, and she would lean back into him, and...

She almost jumped as the hollow sound of the schoolbell went off; the class was over. Students around her erupted into motion and she followed suit, slowly gathering her things.

For gods sake she was in so deep the surface wasn’t even visible anymore. What was wrong with her? Drawing a couple of deep breaths, she let her eyes fall shut to collect herself for a second.

„Jane? You okay?“

She opened her eyes and saw Max standing beside her table, looking quite curious with a dash of worry thrown in.
„Yes! Yes, I’m fine. Uhm... there was just... something in my eye?“ El cringed. That had sounded more like a question. „I think it’s gone now.“

Damn it. That was absolutely pathetic. And it definitely didn’t help that Mike picked exactly that moment to push past them and send her a smirk in the process and she had to look away or she’d just die from embarrassment.

„Okay.“ Max let it go anyway. „Come on then, let’s go.“

„You heard me. Where you messing with Jane earlier?“

Mike blinked at the redhead before her, taking in her protetive stance and suspicious eyes. Max meant business then. Hence her stalking him in the gym before his basketball practice.

„What do you mean?“ He tried hard to channel his childish innocence. „When was I messing with her?“

„Huh.“

Max squinted at him a little longer but Mike stood his ground. All of those years they’d been friends had taught him that Max was a lot like a boy in this matter: she took what you gave and didn’t have the patience to deal with the guessing games and doubting shit that other girls usually did.

„Okay. See you later Wheeler.“ His friend turned on her heel and took off, just like he’d thought she would. Mike grinned as he watched her leave in the direction of bleachers.

His grin stretched even wider when he saw it was Jane that Max was now climbing towards to.

So maybe he had been messing with her in English Lit. To his defence, he hadn’t meant to, not at first anyway. He’d really wanted to ask Will something and Jane had been sitting between them. It was only after he noticed how the girl had literally stillled and then shivered at his touch that he thought he could as well have some fun with it. Come on, what boy would have said no to a chance to push a girls buttons?

Besides, her hair smelled nice.

„You were so messing with her weren’t you.“

He startled but then relaxed again; it was only Will. He shrugged, not agreeing but not exactly denying it either, and went to grab a ball to start a warm up. Other guys were already shooting hoops; the practice was on in five minutes.

Correction: other guys should have been shooting the hoops by now. Which they currently weren’t, as most of them were standing around looking like idiots instead.

Mike almost dropped the ball when he noticed why, but saved it with a bounce. There where cheerleaders on the other side of the gym. And cheerleaders, by default, meant some of the most popular and prettiest girls in Hawkins High dressed in skimpy tops and skirts so short you could basically see their underwear. And, for fucks sake, they were stretching.
He slowly walked over to Peter and Shane who weren’t even trying to pretend they weren’t staring. Will stopped next to him, bouncing his ball, but his eyes were on the girls. It lowkey irritated Mike; he always needed to keep an eye on the ball or he’d lose it, but Will seemed to have a sixth sense about it. Speaking of unfair.

„See something you like?“ One of cheerleaders closest to them had turned around with a smirk.

„No we’re just wondering when you’re gonna free the court.“ Shane yelled back without missing a beat. „We have a real sport to practice here."

„Ooh, burn!“ Peter highfived him and the cheerleader turned away, flipping them off in the process.

The guys only laughed and took off towards the hoop. Will sighed beside him.

„Complete morons, these two.“ Will was still looking at the girls, his gaze almost calculating. „Not that I’m complaining though. That just makes things easier for me."

And damn, if that wasn’t irritating Mike also. Will was like some kind of girl whisperer. He was polite but witty and just cocky enough without coming off as a jerk, and girls where eating that shit up and asking for more. He had boyish charm, he’d heard being said. What were once Wills weaknesses were now turning into his biggest strongpoints, it seemed.

Same with basketball really. You’d think being almost a head shorter than most other players would hold Will back, but the coach had watched him for a whopping five seconds before he was in. Turned out he was wicked fast and percise. Mike on the other hand had been awful at first and was mostly accepted for his height. Not that he’d really even wanted to join; Will had begged him to come along so he wouldn’t have to go alone. But it worked out in the end. The practice did good for Mikes hand and eye coordination and he could finally put his lankiness into good use. He’d grown to be a pretty decent player.

The cheerleaders had started to disperse now and one of them made a beeline for Jane and Max. It was Sara. Mike almost laughed out loud. Dustin would really have to up his game now.

„Wheeler! Care to join us?“

Shit. The coach had already gathered everybody around and only he was still standing in the middle of the gym, staring at the girls like a dumbass.

Nice. Real nice.

„Holy shit Jane, Sara is really good."

El grinned. Max looked kind of starstruck, watching Sara doing her routine for the tryouts. Handstands, cartwheels, sommersaults; she’d known this would look pretty impressive to, so to say, normal people. To people who hadn’t been in excessive training program for the last seven years. Sara ended her performance with a nice back handspring and the excited gasps turned into a loud clapping.
“Where did she learn all this? Was she a cheerleader before?”

They’d practiced this, so El was ready.

“Gymnastics. We used to take gymnastics.”

She and Sara had sat in her room last night and made a whole gameplan about this. Sara was totally over the moon when she’d been invited to try out for the cheerleading squad; no surprise there really, she definitely looked the part. To be fair, they’d invited El too, but this wasn’t quite her scene so she’d declined with apolite but firm no. But Sara really wanted to do it. And Hop, after taking one look at Saras pleading face, had given them free reign to decide on their own.

As always, they needed to be smart about this. They had to have an acceptable backstory, because, as evident, Sara being this good woud raise questions. After a long debate they’d decided to go with gymnastics; it would explain most of what Sara and El could do and also why Sara wasn’t familiar with some of the moves particular to cheerleading only. It was a nice and solid idea with no evident holes.

“So you can do this stuff too?”

El nodded.

“Why didn’t you try out then? Our squad isn’t half as good as this! Except for Tina perhaps. She’s the captain. Batshit crazy if you ask me. Practices like all the time.”

El was about to shrug but decided to explain with words instead. She desperately needed to get better at verbal communication and Max, her first friend besides Sara in years, maybe even ever, presented a good opportunity to practice. And it didn’t hurt that for once, Sara wasn’t with them, doing most of the talking.

“I don’t really like cheerleading. The stigma around them isn’t really my thing.”

“Stigma?”

“You know, the vibe they give off. I’m not exactly the sexy, cheery type.”

Max’s smiled wide at that.

“Yeah I guess you’re not. Not that I mind that kind of shit, but, it isn’t exactly my thing either.”

The confession made El strangely happy and they sat in a companiable silence for a while, watching a petit brunette give a pretty solid performance.

“Max.”

“Yeah?”

“What is your type of thing?”

Max looked surprised at the question, but also flattered.

“I, um. There was a small blush rising to her cheeks. “I skateboard, actually. Used to go everywhere with my board. But less now, since Will got his liscence last spring and his brother gave him his old car. It got too much of a hassle to drag the board along to school. I’m not allowed to use it in school hallways anymore anyway. Almost ran over a teacher in freshmen year. I still go out often though, in the evenings, and on weekends.”
Max gave her a tentative sideways glance, as if waiting for El to start judging her.

„I’ve never tried skateboarding.“ She answered honestly. „It sounds cool."

„It is!“ Max sounded relieved. „Would you want to try it out sometimes? I have like, three boards, so I can loan you one."

„Yes, I would like that."

She really would.

Max’s whole face lit up.

„Awesome! We can get together over a weekend sometime, I’m usually out with a board then anyways, or hanging with the guys, or both. You can come and join us anytime you want! And Sara too, if she wants to!“

El grinned at the offer but then the reality kicked in. She and Sara still needed to fit in their regular visits to the Lab, and, with school taking a huge chunk off of weekdays, it was expected they’d sacrifice some of the weekends. This needed to be discussed with Hop, and, possibly, Dr. Owens as well, before she could make any promises.

She was thinking about what to say when Max suddenly craned her neck past her.

„I’ll be right back okay? I need to talk to someone."

Max took off towards the far end of the gym, where some boys had started to gather, picking up balls from the rack and bouncing them. El looked at the clock: Saras tryouts were almost done. The basketball seemed to be up next.

After a couple of minutes Max trudged back towards her. But it was the person El could see standing behind her, watching her leave with a grin on his face, that immediately caught her attention and her stomach did a somersault. Mike. Dressed in a basketball uniform. And Will was with him, too.

El looked around for Lucas and Dustin, but couldn’t see them. Somehow she’d gotten used to the four always being together everywhere.

Max plopped back down beside her, but El just couldn’t drag her eyes away from the boys. Seeing Mike in real life was still kind of a treat, so every chance she got, she stared.

„Will and Mike,“ she nodded towards them. „They play basketball?“

„Yeah. Mike’s okay, but Will’s a real superstar. You should come and see. I think they have a game coming soon."

„And Dustin and Lucas? Do they play too?“

„Nah. Lucas plays baseball, actually. And Dustin’s not really into sports.“ Max snorted. „Although I bet he wishes he was when he finds out Sara’s going to be a cheerleader!“

El didn’t quite get it but laughed along; her attention was elsewhere anyway. Most of the boys had stopped shooting the hoops and where quite openly gawking at the cheerleaders instead. She could see Mike amongst them, the ball under his arm all but forgotten, and something twisted in her gut.

Maybe she should have tried out also.
Hopper pulled a drag from his cigarette and looked up at the looming building before him. The Lab. It still gave him the jeebies, to be honest. What Brenner had tried to do to Sara... What he *had* done to Jane over here. It was sick. And it stuck to him, refusing to let it’s ugly claws go even after all of these years. But things were different now. He needed to believe that.

The front door swung open and Dr. Owens walked out, sending him a nod. Jim took one last drag and threw the cigarette butt away, mentally steeling himself.

„Hello Chief.“ Owens seemed in a good mood. That was good. „Do you want to talk outside or in my office?“

„Office is better. And I’d take some of that coffee of yours, if possible. The stuff you have here is way better than what we get back at the station.“

Owens chuckled at that and Hopper could feel himself calm a little.

And still, once they were seated at the comfortable office chairs, and he really should ask where they got them because the ones back at the station were, again, complete shit compared to these, he felt like a damn schoolkid in the principals office. Only he had yet to get into trouble.

Owens looked at him, expectant. Well, he might as well jump in.

„It’s about Jane and Sara.“

Owens nodded slowly, his expression not changing.

„Yes, I thought it would be.“

Hopper grunted. He was being ridiculous. He had the upper hand here. As long as the government decided to play nice, ofcourse. And didn’t he know that *that* was a damned ticking time bomb.

„I need you to let Jane and Sara off the hook.“

Owens would’ve made a good poker player. Not a muscle moved in his face.

„Can you elaborate?“

„They’re not kids anymore.“ He sighed at the thought. „I can’t keep telling them what to do. You’ve seen how they’ve changed over the past year. How bloody determined they were for a chance to get to try out a normal life. High school, of all things.“

He would’ve given a lot back in the day if he’d gotten a chance to *not* go to high school.

Owens took a sip from his coffee but still didn’t offer any input to this conversation, waiting. Jim grunted.

„So it got me thinking, they’re gonna be legal adults soon enough. I can’t protect them anymore. At least not to this extent.“
Hopper grabbed his own coffee cup and gulped down half of it at once. The hot, bitter liquid felt good going down his throat.

„I’m gonna need you to promise me that they will get a say about what they want to do with their lives. That they won’t be.. pressured to keep doing this.“

Well, his cards were out on the table now.

Owens brought his hands together in front of him, squinting his eyes at him, looking more and more like a damned principal. But Hopper wasn’t a teenager anymore, hell, he was there to protect teenage kids of his own, in fact, so he shook the feeling off.

And then Owens’s face melted into a small smile and he let his hands fall to the table, sitting back in his chair. He nodded.

„I can promise you that.“

Jim felt his muscles relax and he gulped down the second half of his coffee, feeling parched.

„I have been giving it a lot of thought also, you know. You’re not the only one who cares for these girls, Chief. And I’ve already gone ahead and inserted a suggestion about the future course of action. “

He got up from his table and walked over to the filing cabinet in the corner, pulling one of the drawers open.

„I’ll give you a copy, you can take it home if you want to check it in peace, but I need you to bring it back here.“ He pulled out a slim fileholder and shut the drawer. „What it basically says, is this: once the girls turn eighteen, we will, as you said it, let them off the hook. “

Hopper let out a long breath, relief washing over him.

„But,“ Owens held up a hand. „Of course it won’t be that easy. “

No, of course not. Nothing was ever easy with these girls.

„I want to recruit them. “ Owens let that sink in for a second before continuing. „The government wants to recruit them. But it needs to be their choice, that much I agree with. I did some research and presented a case study about Jane’s progress and use of abilities while she was held against her will and then later, and it is obvious: we need them as willing allies, not prisoners forced to do our bidding. And, honestly, at this point I’m not really sure we’d have the power to hold them against their will even if we wanted to.”

Hopper was feeling dizzy. This... this was gonna work out.

„And if they don’t want to keep working with you?“

Owens gave him a long look.

„Then they won’t. There’ll be tons of protocols of course, and, I won’t lie, they will always be kept on radar. For their own safety, as well as the countries. But they can choose to lead a normal life, if that is what they want and they won’t be bothered. I’ve advocated enough on their behalf over the years. Mind you, though, I do not plan to give up on them easily. Not at all. I’m sure I can come to some kind of agreement with them.“
Hopper nodded, his mind going a million miles per second. This he could work with. At least he knew the girls would be safe. Well, as safe as they were ever going to be, anyway.

These girls meant the world to him.

These girls where going to be the death of him!

Jim pinched the bridge his nose, again, and, damn it, it was becoming bruised by how often he’d done it recently.

„You want what?“

Jane, standing before him, was biting her lip; and Jim was sure that was not because she was worried. No, the damn kid was trying to hold back a laugh!

Sara had backed away to a reasonable distance and was currently pretending to make tea in the kitchen. Like anybody cared about a damned tea. He desperately needed a beer right now.

„A car, dad. Me and Sara would like to have a car.“

„What for?“

„To go to school.“

„What’s wrong with me driving you?“

„You don’t have time. We waited for you for three hours on Wednesday.“

Those punks. Never grateful.

„The schoolbus then?“

„It stops too far from our house.“

„What, you two can’t walk that far?“

„Would you want to walk that far every day?“

Damned smartmouth. He tried to put on his best bad policeman face.

„Neither of you even have a drivers license.“

His daughter turned a fascinating shade of red and his gut sank.

„What? What are you hiding from me?“

Jane took a deep breath and reached for her pocket, pulling out a small laminated rectangle.

Hopper didn’t even bother to get angry anymore. He didn’t have the energy he needed to get as mad as this situation asked for. Somebody was gonna pay for this.
„What is this.“
„A drivers license.“
„Who’s drivers license?“
„Mine.“
„No, see, this can’t be yours, because you have never taken a drivers exam.“

Jane had the decency to look ashamed. But, she didn’t back down, stubborn as she was and Jim took a deep breath to keep calm.

„Where did you get it from?“
„Dr. Owens.“

He was up in a flash and marched over to the phone, dialling the number and messing it up only once in his haste. The other end picked up after three rings.

„This is...“
„You gave a fucking drivers license to my daughter.“

It was quiet for a second and then there was a low chuckle on the other end.

„Ah, yes! These just got in yesterday.“

„... got in yesterday??“ He practically growled at that point. „And you didn’t think to mention it before? Do we not have an agreement? That you run everything by us first?!“

„And that’s what I did.“

What?
„What?“
„I got a go ahead from Diane, Jim.“

He stared at the phone. He wished he could rip the damn thing apart.

„Chief? You still there?“

„Yeah.“

The silence was becoming awkward.

„Ah, I see. I thought Diane and you had discussed this.“

„Yeah, well.“ He just... didn’t want to go there. Not tonight. It was late, and he was tired. „Is this thing real?“

„Of course these are real. Being a government operative has its perks. And you know the girls can drive. We just bypassed the annoying part.“

_These_. Sara has one too, then.
„Right.“

Owens chuckled once more.

„Remember what I said earlier, Jim? I was serious. If there’s anything I can do to get on the girls good side so they’d consider working with us in the future, chances are I’ll do it.“

The man was gonna end up as whipped as he was. Good luck to the poor bastard. God, he was tired.

„Just... run this kind of stuff by me in the future, okay? No more surprises like this.“

„Okay chief. You have my word.“

Jim dropped the handle back onto the phone and slumped down on the couch. Sara had come out from her hiding place and now there were two sets of eyes watching him expectantly.

„Not tonight, kids. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.“

Tonight, he really needed that god damn beer.

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Three days later Hopper took them to a local car dealer.

They ended up choosing a beautiful small dove grey two-door volkswagen golf.

El absolutely adored it.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Apparently, you CAN put your everyday life on hiatus just so you could fuss over a bunch of fictional teenagers.

Enjoy :)

„Bye mom!“
„Don’t stay out too late okay? Michael?“

Mike didn’t answer, halfway out the door already. His parents never really bothered to check on what time he got home anymore. At least something good about being a middle child; Nancy had broken the barriers before him and now mom was too busy parenting Holly so Mike got away with a lot. And his dad, well, he had always thought raising kids to be more of a woman’s job, so he stayed as far away from it as possible.

He slammed the front door closed and ran to the car. Dustin was already making faces at him from the front seat, rolling down a window so he could yell at him.

„Where were you man? We haven’t got all day to wait for you! Next time you snooze, you lose!“
„What’s got your panties in a twist?“

He climbed in to the back seat and was surprised to see only Lucas there.

„Ain’t Max coming?“
„She is.“
„Come on come on come on, let’s go!“ Dustin was going nuts in the front and Will had to bat his hands away from the steering wheel.

„Okay, what the hell is wrong with him?“ Mike was genuinely confused.

„What do you think is wrong with him? There’s only ever one thing wrong with him recently.“ Lucas rolled is eyes and Mike had a pretty good guess where this was going. „Max invited Sara and Jane. They’ll meet us there.“

„Oh. That’s cool.“

„Yeah it would be if somebody would stop shitting bricks every time Sara is mentioned!“ Lucas was trying to aim this at Dustin, obviously, but he completely ignored it.

Mike laughed.

„Oh come on man, you were just as bad when Max first came around.“

„I was not!“
„You were too.“ Will threw over his shoulder.

„You shut up and drive!“

„Exactly, Will, drive!“ Dustin added impatiently. „Even my mom drives faster than this!“

Mike laughed again. Because he felt like it.

This Saturday had just gotten even better. Not that he minded their old party, but he had to admit, it was much more lively with the Hopper sisters around. And they seemed to be around a lot lately, in school at least. But this was the first time they’d come to hang out with them outside of school and Mike liked the idea. The girls were cool.

They were almost at the arcade now and Dustin was meddling with the rearview mirror, trying to check his hair and Mike wondered if he had ever been that bad. He didn’t think so.

„There! There they are!“

„Dammit, Dustin, stop spazzing or you’ll never ride shotgun again in my car!“

Mike craned his neck to see past Dustins riddiculously coiffed curls and sure enough; he could see Max’s red hair at the far end of the parking lot.

They parked the car not far from them and Dustin was out before Will had even killed the engine.

„Hello ladies!“

„Sup, Dustin.“ Max sailed past him on her board. „Did your mom do your hair again?“

„Hey! Play nice, Maxine.“

„Okay okay, kitty, pull your claws in.“ Max came to a stop and stepped off the board right into Lucas’s arms. Mike and Will exchanged one look and hurried off after Dustin, leaving the two lovebirds alone.

Sara was sitting on the curb, nursing what looked like a scraped elbow, and ofcourse Dustin was already fawning over her.

„Will do you have a first aid kit in your car?“

Sara was trying to reassure him it wasn’t needed, but Dustin would not take no for an answer.

A loud clutter followed by a surprisingly colorful curse pulled Mikes attention to the side, just in time for him to see Jane walk after a skateboard a little further down the lot. Max was already on her way to her, calling out instructions as she circled the other girl like a pro. Jane was listening to her intently, nodded a couple of times and then tried to get back on the board.

Will let out a low whistle and turned to Sara. „Is Max teaching you two how to skateboard?“

„Well, more like one of us now. I don’t think I’ll be trying that again.“ Sara grimaced, inspecting her injury. „Have any of you tried?“

„Don’t even remind me,“ Lucas groaned and shook his head. „I landed on my butt so hard I couldn’t sit properly for a week."

Mike smirked at the memory. „Yeah you should have seen it. We were awful.“
“Actually, she could still see it. I filmed you guys, remember? I think I still have that videotape.”

“Don’t you fucking dare Byers.”

Dustin was back with a first aid kit he had pulled out from somewhere and sat down next to Sara, carefully placing her arm to rest on his knee so he could get to the elbow. Well, his friend was certainly laying it on thick alright. And whatever he was doing, it seemed to be working, if Saras pleased smile and pink cheeks were any indication.

“Crap! Why can’t I stay on this thing?!”

“You just need to get the feel of it. Find the balance and then the rest is easy.”

The girls had moved back towards them and Mike could see Jane biting on her lip in concentration. Max was hovering next to her, giving her pointers and trying to be encouraging, but Jane still toppled off the board after a couple of seconds.

“Okay, she’s gonna end up like Sara if she keeps this up.” Will commented and, to Mikes surprise, walked over to the girls.

He watched as Will held out his hands for Jane to grab a hold on so he could pull her forward on her board and Jane accepted his offer with a wide smile. It was a rocky start but they succeeded to make it at least ten feet before Janes balance slipped and the board rolled away from them. With Will supporting her she managed to stay upright and as she burst into a gleeful laugh, Will chuckled along with her. Max was whooping from joy as she rolled past them.

“Again!” The girl was obviously excited and Will obliged.

Mike found himself frowning. Suddenly she seemed to be laughing too loud. Looking too giddy. And Will was definitely smiling too much. Touching her too much.

“Mike!”

Dustin was holding the first aid kit up to him.

“Can you take this back to the car?”

Mike almost flipped him off but took the damned kit, stomping off with a roll of his eyes. If Dustin wanted to impress the girl why did he have to do the dirty work? He opened the trunk, threw the thing in carelessly and slammed the lid back closed with a little more force than necessary.

He walked back over to his friends, keeping an eye on the trio further away. Another round of laughter, as Jane almost crashed into a parked car. Why the fuck were they out here anyway? He’d thought the plan had been to go to the arcade. They should really head inside before it got too crowded and all the good games got taken.

“Shouldn’t we go inside now?” He barely managed to keep the irritation at bay in his voice.

“Nah give them a little more time man,” Lucas was watching them with a way different look than Mike had, his face all soft and a small smile playing on his lips. “Look at how happy Max is. Let her enjoy it for once.”

Mike pressed his lips together and plopped down next to Lucas. Max did look happier than usual. And he was acting like a dickhead, wasn’t he?
That didn’t stop him from squinting his eyes at Will as he grabbed a hold of Janes waist to help her get the balance on the board before slowly trying to let go altogether.

Was there something going on between these two? It wasn’t entirely impossible. You could never tell with Will, if he was just being his usual charming self or if there was a deeper meaning to his behaviour. Jane on the other hand... Mike had never seen her this carefree and unhindered before. The quiet reservation and measured mannerisms he had come to associate with her were all but gone. His chest swelled and tightened uncomfortably at the same time.

And why exactly was he sitting over here, worrying like a pussy about whether or not something was going on? These were his friends, for fuck’s sake. Or, at least, Will was. And Max. He jumped up and decided to go join them.

He was half way to them when there was a loud gasp from behind him and then Sara screamed, her shrill voice cutting off all other sounds.

„Jane, watch out!“

Everything after that seemed to happen in slow motion. Janes head snapped to the right, the sudden movement making her tumble off from the board in the process. She landed in a crouch and Mike could now see a car heading right at her. Too close, too fast. He felt bile rising in his throat from sheer horror. Jane managed to shoot a hand out in front of her just as the car was about to hit and Mike couldn’t tear his eyes away even though he really wanted to.

And then the cars breaks screeched, the sound so raw it made Mikes teeth hurt and the car jerked to such a violent stop it’s hind wheels almost lifted off the asphalt, the body metal groaning in protest. Mere inches away from Janes still outstretched hand.

The air flowed back into Mikes lungs and the world started spinning again. His legs were jello and so he stood where he was, watching as Max and Will were at Janes side in seconds and then they were pulling her up and away, Max yelling curses at the driver who in return got just as angry as she was. The driver didn’t linger for long and after a final fuck off from him, the car raced away and disappeared down the road.

Mike regained the use of his limbs and hurried over. Jane was looking bewildered but pushed Max’s and Wills hands away.

„I’m okay. I can stand.“

The words sounded small and terrified and Mike couldn’t really blame her. She looked pale and her hands seemed to be shaking, but otherwise, she was unharmed. She raised her eyes to look around, at him, at Will, and that’s when Mike noticed something. He lifted his hand to her chin to tilt her head back a little and sure enough: there was a dribble of blood seeping from her nose. His brows knitted together in concern.

„You have a nosebleed.“ He was so focused on the small red spot he almost failed to notice her sharp intake of breath. Almost. But then she turned her head away from his grip and looked down, her paleness giving way to an oncoming blush.

„Um, yeah.“ She fidgeted under his gaze. „That... happens sometimes. No big deal.“

She raised her hand to wipe at her nose but Mike stopped her before she could do it and dug around in his pocket. „Here.“ He handed her his handkerchief but she just stared at it. „It’s clean, I swear.“ The girl finally accepted it with a small smile and then Mike was pushed out of the way by Sara,
who pulled Jane into a fierce hug.

El was absolutely terrified. Had they seen it? Did they find anything suspicious? And why the hell, with all of that was going on, was there still a part of her brain that was currently occupied with crushing on Mike instead of freaking out like the rest of her? Her head was about to explode.

But then Sara was there, hugging her tight and whispering calming nonsense in her ear and the rush of blood finally died down enough for her to come back to reality.

„Shh, it’s okay Jane. It’s okay. It’s okay. We’re good.“

El almost believed her, except that Saras voice was quivering and her hands were shaking almost as bad as hers. But when Sara lifted her head from her shoulder and cast a bright smile to the others, none of that showed.

„Well, wasn’t that just rad.“ How Sara managed to make her laugh sound real was beyond El. „What a scumbag! Bet he was on crack or something.“

Their friends looked startled for a moment but then the overall tension relaxed and there were even a few tentative chuckles here and there. Mikes eyes were still dark, endless pools and El had to look away or she’d drown and be lost forever. That’s when she noticed Max was not with them; the girl had gone and retrieved the lost skateboard and was now putting it away into the trunk of their car. She looked upset and El’s heart sank for a whole different reason.

She wiped her nose once more and tucked the hanky away into her jeans pocket; no way she’d give it back to Mike, all bloody and gross. Pulling out from Saras grip she headed over to the redhead, who had popped the trunk closed now but still didn’t return to the rest of the group.

„You okay?“

Max didn’t look at her but El saw the corner of her mouth turn up.

„Like, shouldn’t I be asking you that?“

El did something she had not yet done before: she pulled Max into a hug. The other girl hugged her back, her fingers digging into her and El could feel a single sob wrack through her body.

„Max!“ She kept her voice quiet so the others wouldn’t hear. „It’s okay! I’m good. I’m not that easy to hurt, you know.“ She wished she could explain to her. Really explain to her what she meant by that. But that was just wishful thinking. Max nodded into her shoulder and then she pulled away, casting a defiant look towards the others. El fought to hold back a grin; Max and her reputation. And she understood, although she would bet everything she had that it fooled none of their friends right now.

„Guess it was a stupid idea. Sorry. We don’t have to do it again.“

El couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

„What are you talking about!“ She sputtered out when she finally found her tongue again. „I liked it! I’m gonna learn how to skateboard even if it kills me! Just... let’s do it somewhere with less cars next
Max looked at her for a second and then burst out laughing. „You’re crazy you know that?“

And just like that it was okay. The group huddled closer and together they headed off to the arcade.

Once they were in, Sara pulled her aside and into the girls bathroom. She checked the two stalls to make sure they were alone before letting out a loud sigh that El reciprocated.

„You really think it’s okay?“ El asked, keeping her voice down just in case.

Sara nodded. „Yes. From where I was sitting it definitely looked like the car stopped on it’s own. It was intense, yes, but nothing too much. And if even the driver didn’t notice, I doubt anybody else did either.“

El felt relief wash over her. It would have sucked so bad if they would’ve raised suspicions, or worse, exposed themselves while out on town with friends. Dad had been apprehensive of this; it was probably his biggest nightmare. And Els too, for that matter, even if the reasons behind it were different.

„And you?“

„Oh please!“ Sara rolled her eyes. „Nobody ever suspects me. Only dad, occasionally. And you. And the people at, you know. Everybody else just thinks I’m wicked smart and exceptionally perceptive.“

El had to laugh at that. „You smartass.“ Sara stuck her tongue out at her. „But, thanks. The warning came just in time.“

„I know,“ Saras face stretched into a smug grin. „Now come on, let’s get back out there, I don’t want to miss anything fun!“

Mike knew the exact moment that Jane stepped back into the gaming room. It’s like... the world had shifted on it’s axes when he had watched the car plow towards her before, putting her in the center of it all, and it had yet to shift back. It felt strange, but not entirely unpleasant. He was probably just still under the almost-accidents influence and it would all be back to normal tomorrow.

But for tonight, he might as well roll with it.

Sara walked straight over to the Digdug II machine that Dustin was playing at, trying to beat Max’s latest highscore. Max and Lucas were giving their best to distract him and Dustin kept hissing for them to get lost, but that only egged them on. Jane stopped a little further away and glanced around the room, looking a bit awed.

Mike let the his game of Galaga come to an end so he could get to her before Will showed up and decided to be a gentleman again.

Jane saw him a little before he reached her and to Mikes delight, her face stretched into a shy smile.
“Hey.”

“Hey.” Mike grinned and let himself drink her in. The girls gaze flickered between him, their friends and the rest of the people and he hadn’t even noticed before that she had dimples when she smiled. “You’ve been to the arcade before?”

“No.”

Somebody pushed past them and Mike had to step closer to her. The place was crowded, like always on weekends. He placed his hand around Janes shoulder and steered them away from the walking path.

“Come on. You need to try some of these. It’s really fun, I promise!” Did he sound like a total dweeb? Shit, he sounded like a total dweeb!

But then Jane smiled again and nodded excitedly and the knot of doubt in his chest disappeared. After a couple of rounds on pinball machines, a failed attempt at Duck Hunt (Jane had taken one look at it and resolutely said „no. I don’t like to hurt animals“ and Mike had let it go, even though it was just a game, not real ducks) and waiting for almost ten minutes for Donkey Kong 3 to free up but the dickheads hogging it had no plans to leave anytime soon and had just started one game after another, they ended up playing Pac-Man instead.

Well, it was mostly Jane doing the playing, anyway. And Mike was okay with that, it was kind of mesmerizing to watch the girl. She looked like a kid on a christmas morning, all wonder and joy. And although she was still far more reserved around him than she had been earlier with Will, she occasionally forgot herself and the real her came through. Like when she was finally so close to passing a level she had struggled with for the last two games, the tip of her tongue sticking out from the corner of her mouth and eyes glued to the screen, hand jerking the joystick in quick motions.

„Come on come on come on! Move, you stupid little... Ugh!” She slapped the machine as the ghost caught her and Mike had to laugh, earning himself a glare from the girl.

„This is not funny!”

The corners of her mouth were curling up though, indicating she wasn’t really mad.

„Sorry, of course not.“ The grin on his face obviously said otherwise and Jane rolled her eyes at him. „Anyway don’t worry, you’ve got one more life left! You can still make it.“

The Pac-Man came back to life and Jane concentrated on the game again.

There were very few dots left in the maze but these were scattered all over the place and she was all out of lives and power pellets, so her chances weren’t that good. Mike could see her growing more and more frustrated as the ghosts kept chasing her away from the dots, almost catching her once and he took a deep breath.

He couldn’t really believe what he was about to do. It felt too much like making a move on her. Maybe he wasn making a move on her. He steeled himself none the less and stepped closer. Closer.

He could feel the moment he made contact with her, because the girl froze as soon as he did and he had only just enough time to cover her hand on the joystick and jerk it in the right direction to save the Pac-Man from colliding with a ghost. He braced his left hand on the machine on the other side of her and focused on the game before him.

This was easy for him; he’d played it a thousand times. He knew the enemies and even though he hadn’t made the rookie mistake of leaving random uneaten dots in various places in a long time, he
could still save this level. Even with his heart pounding against his ribs like a jackhammer and Jane's closeness assaulting his senses.

He successfully ate one dot after the other and at some point Jane had started to show signs of life again, her hand twitching occasionally under his and her shoulders rising and falling in the rhythm of her breathing. She wasn’t shoving him off or cussing him out though and he took it as a good sign, his chest swelling in triumph.

He got the last dot way too soon and the level was done, robbing him of an excuse to stay like this for a little while longer. He slowly retracted his hand and stepped away, suddenly wary of the girls next move.

She stayed still and Mike gulped.

„Thank you.“

His face stretched into a wide grin. „You’re welcome.“

„Well-well-well.“

_Shit._

„How are you two doing?“

Dustin and Sara were standing not far away, both with knowing smirks on their faces that left no doubt that they’d been standing there for a while now. Jane had turned to look at them also, her cheeks slowly growing red. Mike saw her open her mouth to say something, but then the game started a new level and she resumed her playing, saved from having to come up with an answer.

„We’re okay.“ Mike answered instead with as much cool as he could muster. Which wasn’t very much at the moment. „And you two?“

„Never better.“ Dustin could not wipe the shit-eating grin off his face, apparently.

„Damn!“ Janes shoulders slumped in defeat; the game was over. She turned away from the machine and sent Mike an apologetic smile. „Sorry. The ghosts got me.“

„You sure it was the ghosts that got you?“

Jane frowned at Dustin, clearly confused at the comment and unsure what to say and Mike got this sudden urge to protect her from this teasing.

„Shut up Dustin. We were just playing.“

He could see Dustins smile growing even bigger and winced as he understood what an opening he had just given to his friend but for once, luck was on his side. Just as Dustin was about to say something, Lucas came running around the corner, almost colliding with them in his haste.

„Guys! It’s Wills turn at the Street Fighter! We’ve got the Street Fighter!“ Lucas barely managed to pant out and then he was gone again.

Mike and Dustin looked at each other for a second and then they too were on the move. Dustin took off first, grabbing Saras hand and pulling the confused girl along with him, Mike impatiently gesturing for Jane to follow them and practically pushing her all the way. Street Fighter was the newest, most coveted game in the arcade and it was near impossible to get a turn on busier days.
They made it there just in time to see Max’s character land a roundkick to Wills and the boys let out a collective „ouch!“ for the sake of their friend.

El was being stupid, she knew. Feeling jealous of this Street Fighter machine, it was entirely irrational. And still she could not bring herself out of it and watched with envy, as Mike and Lucas battled it out on screen. Mike had been playing for three times in a row now, having a winning streak and El kind of wanted his attention back. She’d really enjoyed when there had only been the two of them checking out the arcade and different games, and then the whatever it had been at the Pac-Man machine... her heartbeat still hadn’t quite normalized yet and she wasn’t sure it was going to. At least not while Mike was still in vicinity, it seemed, for it picked right up again every time he looked her way.

Which had not happened for some time now, because he was so immersed in this stupid game. El looked at the clock on the wall and her heart sank; they needed to get going soon. Hopper had made them promise to be back home by nine, and even though he himself would not be coming in until ten o’clock, El was more than sure he would call home to check on them. Her and Sara going out on their own, with friends... it was new and scary for dad. And if they ever wanted to do that again, they’d better not test him on this.

She sighed and looked around for her sister. The sight of her and Dustin huddled up on a nearby seat, heads together, whispering back and forth with silly smiles on their faces, made her weirdly happy. And also jealous. Ugh. She swallowed her feelings and walked over.

„Sara. We have to go.“

„Already?“ Dustins face fell even more than Saras.

„We need to be home by nine.“ El shrugged helplessly.

Sara and Dustin got up, slow and reluctant, and El felt sorry for them. That is until Dustin suddenly perked up and announced that he’s gonna come with them.

„I’m out of money anyway. And I can walk home from your place, it’s not far from where I live.“ El blinked. She hadn’t walked around Hawkins a lot yet, but she was sure Dustin lived at least half an hour away. The boy looked confident though. „I’ll go tell Will that he won’t have to drive me.“

El raised her eyebrows at Sara and her sister blushed, biting her lip to keep back a smile that threatened to light up her whole face. They followed Dustin back to the others and said their goodbyes to Will and Max. Mike and Lucas were still fighting.

„Later guys!“ Dustin called out to them and got a haphazard „Bye“ as an answer, but neither of the boys turned, their eyes firmly glued to the machine before them.

El was so disappointed she considered messing with the game just so they would stop. And take notice.

She didn’t. And she regretted it all the way home.
Chapter 7

Hopper needed Joyce.

Well, needed her expertise, to be exact. Although Joyce had no daughters, only two sons, Jim was still sure that she could help him with this. She might not have any experience with raising teenage girls, but hell, she had certainly been one back in the day. And from what Jim remembered, she had known her way around boys and how to handle them. The only thing he knew was how to be a teenager boy, but one look at that stupid smiling kid before him, hand stretched out for introduction, and even Jim in all of his fatherly rage could see that judging him by his own past would not do either of them justice. He had been a... a delinquent, at best, but this kid, he seemed better.

Jim snorted. Bloody hell, he had never, not once, had the courage to face any of the girls fathers, let alone to stand there, boldfaced, and ask for permission to date their daughter. He’d thought these stories were some kind of myths or only happened in movies. And now he had to deal with this shit. Well, damn. And what could he have said with Sara watching him like a hawk, her eyes pleading and warning him to be nice at the same time?

His first instinct had been to kick the boy to the curb. But he’d compromised. „We’ll see kid. We’ll see,” he’d grunted, and Saras face had lit up like a god damn supernova.

He’d recognized him right away ofcourse. It was the same curly haired punk they’d seen before the school started, in the ice cream shop. Dustin. Dustin Henderson. Had good grades, no police records and had won a couple of science fairs over the years. So he might’ve done some digging as soon as he got to work in the morning, but could you really blame him? This was about his daughter. His little girl that all of a sudden wasn’t so little anymore.

And since he was fully aware he would not be able to stop Sara, or Jane for that matter, from growing up and, eventually, as much as he hated it, start dating, he might as well at least try to prepare himself for it. Usually Diane would have been his first choice to talk to, since these were her kids too and all, but Jim had not yet forgiven her for that drivers licence fiasco.

So Joyce it was. Besides, Joyce was local. Her kid was friends with this boy. She might have some useful intel on him.

And this was a completely legitimate reason to ask the woman out for a coffee without looking like a total fool.

Mike couldn’t believe he’d missed it when Jane and Sara had left the arcade on Saturday. He kind of felt a douchebag because of it. And he felt even worse when he’d heard that Dustin had left with them, while he had been playing a video game like a total nerd and hadn’t even said goodbye.

He clicked his locker shut and scanned the hallway. Jane had to be in school, he knew, he’d seen the small grey volkswagen in it’s usual parking lot. And he wanted to see her before the classes started,
to... say hi? Apologize? Explain? That was still a bit of a grey area. He’d thought about it all Sunday but everything he came up with just seemed stupid.

Will banged the locker closed beside him. „You looking for someone?“

„No.“

„You sure?“

„Yes.“

„You remember all of this friends don’t lie shit we have going on in our party?“

Mike snorted. He was the one who’d penned down the rule back in the day. Of course he remembered. They still tried to keep to it. For the most part. „Alright-alright. I was looking for Jane.“

Will cast him a sideways glance and smirked. „Something going on between you two?“

„I just need to talk to her about something.“ It wasn’t technically a lie. A question burned on the back of his head and he blurted it out before he could think it over. „Is there something going on between you two?“

He cocked an eyebrow, trying to seem nonchalant. He managed to keep his breathing even. And his hair did a good job hiding the fact that his ears had probably turned flaming red, if the heat coming off of them was any indication. And still Will looked like he knew exactly why Mike was asking. What he was really asking. This was awkward as fuck. But, this was Will, one of his best friends and they could handle this.

„No.“ The answer came quick and easy and the pressure in Mikes chest lessened considerably. „What gave you that impression?“

Damn, he never should’ve asked about it. Now Will would suspect even more that something was going on. „Nothing. You two just looked very friendly on Saturday.“

„No shit Sherlock,“ Will chuckled. „It happens, you know, when people are friends.“

„I just thought... Jane’s always so shy, I guess.“

Now Will laughed right out loud. „Yeah around you maybe.“

It took Mike a second to understand the implication but by the time he did, Wills attention had drifted to something behind him. And then he could almost physically feel a change in the atmosphere before the hallway suddenly exploded into excited whispers and badly concealed staring.

He didn’t have to look for long to spot the reason. Dustin, that smooth son of a bitch, was strolling through the hall, his hand firmly around Sara, the two looking all gooey eyed and completely oblivious to the fuss they were causing.

„That son of a bitch!“ Will had no reservations about saying out loud what Mike had been thinking. „So he actually did it. I need to find Max. She owes me ten bucks.“

Mike was still watching Sara and Dustin; the two had stopped at a locker a little further away and Dustin stood there, waiting, looking totally whipped and still so damn happy. „You two had a bet again?“ He dragged his eyes back to Will.

His friend shrugged, not even bothering to answer. Will always had bets with Max.
„Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve wanted in.“

„Sorry man, you weren’t there.“

„Was Lucas in on it?“

„No, said he’d rather waste his money in the arcade.“

„So what was the bet on?“

„If they would start dating before or after Halloween. Max was so sure it would take longer. To quote, „No way Dustin’s gonna get his shit together before Halloween.“

Mike laughed. Max should’ve known by now not to go against Will in these matters. He was notorious for predicting couples long before they ever happened. One look and he could already tell you if the two had any chance or not.

„She still might win the other one though.“

„What other one?“

Wills face stretched into a grin. „Later Wheeler. I need to prepare for the arts class.“

Mike groaned but his friend was already walking away and he was left yelling after him.

„Will! What other one? Will!“

That little... shit.

Jane. Jane was there. Mike forgot all about Will and his stupid hints and sprinted towards the girl who had just rounded the corner.

------------------------------------------------------------------

The bathroom door slammed shut and El turned off the faucet. She was being a chicken, she knew. She had spent almost ten minutes in the girls bathroom now and had really run out of reasons to be in there by now. You could only comb your hair or wash your hands this many times before it started to look weird.

But she just didn’t know how to face Mike. It had been so easy on Saturday, but somehow, with every passing minute she was not near him, it all became so complicated again. She wished she had given in to the urge and visited him in the void the day before. Maybe seeing him there, with him not being able to see her, would have somehow taken the edge off of her nerves. But she and Sara had spent their Sunday at the Lab, and after an hour long working session followed by physical exercise she’d been drained and tired and had decided she should skip it. Even though she really had wanted to see him.

This was stupid. She needed to get out there. She would meet him sooner or later anyway; they had classes together for god’s sake.

And still her breath hitched when she spotted him standing by his locker the very moment she
rounded the corner to the main hallway. She briefly considered turning back and bying herself some more time, but then he caught her gaze and it was too late. Now she had to go on or it would be too weird. Besides, Mike was on the move as soon as they’d made eye contact anyway and was now heading straight at her, coming to a stop a couple of steps away.

„Um. Hi.“

Okay. So he was nervous. In a funny way this bit of information worked like a balm and El relaxed, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

„Hi Mike.“

The boy looked relieved and El had to wonder: what had he been expecting? She cocked her head to the side, interested in where this was going.

„So... when did this happen?“ He motioned his head backwards and El didn’t even have to look to know he was asking about Dustin and Sara. Everybody was staring at these two.

„Saturday.“ Her face stretched into a grin. She was happy for Sara, despite the fact that she had kept her up for hours on Saturday night, gushing about how great Dustin was.

„Speaking of Saturday;“ Mike scratched the back of his head, his eyes darting around the hall before they focused back on her. „Sorry I didn’t... get the chance to say goodbye?“

El pressed her lips together in an attempt to keep her face straight. He was apologizing. And she had to admit, it was cute.

„I mean, I always get this way when playing, you know, and I really wanted to kick Lucas’s ass because last time we played he...“

The boy was positively rambling now.

„Mike.“

Her voice cut through to him and he stopped, bringing his dark eyes back to her.

„It’s okay. I understand.“

Mike didn’t answer. He just stared at her, his face unreadable, for what seemed like ages and now El was beginning to feel uncomfortable and had to look away. Had she acted weird again?

She was saved from the loaded silence by the schoolbell.

Mike was trying to do his maths homework but it wasn’t going too well. There was a small sigh, a rustling of pages, and whatever little progress his brain had made with solving the equation before him was gone again.

Their party, sans Lucas, who was retaking a test, had gathered in a library for their free period to catch up on some studying and Mike had grabbed a seat next to Jane. And now every little sound or
move she made was making him lose his concentration. Not that he necessarily minded. Even the
smell of her shampoo, that wafted towards him every time she turned her head, was distracting; he
couldn’t get enough of it.

There was a giggle a couple of tables down and Mike could see a group of girls from a year below
stealing glances at them. And that was the one thing that was possibly even more distracting for him
this week than Jane was. It was nuts how much attention their party was suddenly getting. You’d
think Sara and Dustin dating would only affect the two of them, but by some freaky law of nature
they all seemed to be in the limelight. The good and the bad kind. Mike couldn’t really bring himself
to mind that the girls from Saras cheerleading squad had now started to say hello to him when he
passed them in the hallways; but he certainly could have done without Troy starting to pick on him
again. That prick had mostly kept his distance since Mike and Will had started basketball, probably
fearing the team could gang up on him. Whatever it had been, it didn’t work anymore, and Mike had
an ugly bruise on his shoulder from where it had hit the locker after Troy had ’accidentally’ bumped
into him yesterday. He wasn’t afraid of that dickhead, hadn’t been for a while now, but he didn’t
want to get into a fight with him either so he’d just walked away.

But looking at Dustin, well, this shit was worth it. His friend was, and Mike would have rather shot
himself in the leg than ever admitted it out loud, fucking glowing. It’s not like Dustin had changed
something about himself, but he definitely seemed different. It was like he’d gotten taller, broader
and more mature overnight. He was still cracking jokes and couldn’t keep his mouth shut to save his
life, his hair was still a curly mess, his lisp noticeable, but suddenly he wasn’t this goofball anymore
that he’d always been. When he was with Sara... well, he was treating her like she was a queen or
something, and in return, this was actually making him look like some damn knight in shining armor.

It was pretty amazing and a bit frightening that a girl could bring on a transformation like this in a
guy. And it made Mike question why life was so unfair; all being attracted to a girl had ever done for
him was reduce him to a complete moron. Like on Monday morning, when he’d stood there, staring
at Jane like an idiot until the schoolbell rang and the girl had practically bolted from him before he
could redeem himself. It still made him wince when he thought about it. And he’d had no chance to
speak to her privately since then either, because at least one of their friends was always there. How
Dustin had managed to get enough alone time with Sara to actually establish a relationship was a
downright mystery.

A brush against his arm followed by a soft whisper: „Mike.“ His breath caught.

Yeah, and then there was that. He turned to Jane and willed his heart to calm down. She had leaned
in again, and her face was so close he could have easily crossed the distance and pressed his lips to
hers. He tried to take the thought back but his brain had already latched on and the image it procuded
sent a flutter through his body. So much for calming down.

„What does ’denigrate’ mean?“

She’d asked about different words for a couple of times now and each time it got harder and harder
for Mike to dig his brain for the information. And it sucked, since he’d been called a nerd for so
many times and now him being smart was finally good for something and here he was, choking up
like a dumbass.

„It’s like... saying bad stuff about something, trying to make it look bad.“ He wanted to kick himself
for the oversimplified explanation, but Jane seemed satisfied and resumed her reading.

Mike wrote down some gibberish so it would at least look like he was doing his homework, not
waiting for Jane to have another question and gravitate closer again so he could be a total perv.
Maybe he should just ask her out. His stomach twisted with nerves at the thought. He hadn’t asked a girl out since freshmen year, when he’d had his first girlfriend. It had lasted for a whopping five weeks and they’d not done much more than hold hands and kissed and then the girl had moved away from Hawkins later on. And the fling he’d had with Melanie in the summer, that had been more like a bunch of hook ups at different parties, rather than something he would call dating. She hadn’t tried to contact Mike after the disastrous evening at the quarry, something he thanked the god for, because he had no idea what to say to her.

And then there was ofcourse his mystery girl. He would be lying if he said he wasn’t still thinking about her. Or the kiss. But... she wasn’t there.

And Jane was. Very solid and real and possibly interested. And he didn’t necessarily need to ask her to go on a date with him either. Maybe they could just hang out like they had on Saturday. With the rest of the gang. Totally unassuming.

Because he really wanted to see where this could end up.

This was beginning to get annoying. El scanned the page. Was this a high shool level textbook or not? How come there were so few difficult words in it? She briefly wondered if she could get away with asking what ‘impetuous’ meant, but figured it would’ve been really stretching it. There was always a chance that Sara would hear and then she’d laugh her ass off and El definitely didn’t want that. The only reason she’d gotten away with it so far was because Sara had been too busy being sickeningly cute with Dustin and paid no attention. If she had... Sara knew full well that El couldn’t possibly be having trouble with these words; after coming to live with the Hoppers, El had basically memorized all possible dictionaries and thesaurus she could get her hands on. Even though it had started as a means for her to catch up on her social abilities, it very quickly grew to be more like a hobby. So yes; she didn’t exactly need the help.

But Mike was so close and he was so warm, just like he had been back at the arcade. And El, being on the skinny side with bad circulation, always struggling to keep body heat, couldn’t help but be drawn in. She wished she could curl up in his lap like a cat and a thousand butterflies erupted in her stomach as she imagined what it would feel like.

"Enervate’? That she probably could get away with. She turned to ask Mike but the words died on her lips; he wasn’t mulling over his homework like she had been expecting. He was looking at her instead and it caught her off guard, making her forget what she had wanted to say.

"What are you doing this weekend?“ Mike blurted out before she could compose herself.

El blinked and gave an overall good impression of a goldfish.

"We’re going to visit mom, actually.“ Sara answered in her place. El knew by her voice alone that she was trying to hold back a giggle. Oh god. She was probably already mentally marrying them off or something and all the poor guy had done was ask about her weekend.

"Yeah, we’re... I mean, yes. Mom. We’re going to see mom.“ El sounded like a mumbling mess. Mike looked away and suddenly she noticed how all of their friends had dropped whatever they had been doing and were staring at her and Mike and now she actually felt like a freaking goldfish.
„Why?“

Mike shrugged. „Nothing. Was just wondering if you two were gonna come at the arcade again with us.“

El didn’t know if she was relieved or disappointed; or rather, it was probably both, but she couldn’t decide which one she felt more. In the background she could see how Will slumped into his seat and Max was sending him a smug smirk. El frowned. She knew why Sara was acting strange but what was up with those two? Hell, everybody was acting weird, herself included, and all she really wanted to do now was go get some fresh air to stop her head from spinning.

Should she say something? Do something? She desperately wanted for once to be more apt at social situations so she could handle this casually.

Once again Sara took over, breaking the silence, and El was grateful. „Yeah, that won’t happen I’m afraid. We’re leaving tomorrow morning and won’t be back until Tuesday.“

Dustin made a sad face at that and Sara pecked him on a cheek. It was so sweet it made Els heart feel funny. Suddenly she wished she had someone who would be sad to see her leave. She’d never thought about stuff like that before but now that Sara had a boyfriend... El was kind of jealous.

She decisively shut her book and got up, gathering her bag. „I have to go.“ She explained as she noticed the questioning glances. „I need to get my essay. From the locker.“

Max and Sara looked like they were about to offer to come with her and she quickly added: „I’ll see you at class, okay?“

El escaped before the two could argue. She just needed to be alone for a minute. And get her thoughts in order. And her heartbeat back to normal; that would be great. Really great.

She took a deep breath and let it flow back out again. For a moment there, against all rhyme and reason, she had really thought that Mike had wanted to ask her out. How stupid.

Mike couldn’t tear his eyes away from the door that had swung shut behind Jane as she, once again, had run away from him. Well, technically, them, since all of their friends were there too this time and he seriously wished they weren’t because they were being nosy little shits and this was why it had all gone wrong in the first place. Was Jane upset? She’d looked upset. Shit. She probably was upset and it was his fault. Why on earth had he thought it would be a good idea to do this now anyway? He should’ve waited for a better timing.

He could feel Max rolling her eyes at him even though he had yet to look at her.

Yep, she was rolling her eyes.

And Dustin and Sara were having one of these quiet conversations they seemed to have with only glances and gestures and it was fucking annoying.

He was a fucking idiot. How the hell had he managed to make this so awkward?
Wills heavy sigh was the final straw and his patience snapped.

„You know, I have to go too.“

He wasn’t even gonna grace them with an excuse. Maybe he could still find Jane and see if this could be salvaged, somehow. Although he had no idea yet, how; he’d have to wing it.

Jane never showed at her locker, confirming Mikes suspicions that she had just wanted to get away from the library. And that he had, somehow, screwed up. She arrived to the class five minutes late.

And once the school day ended, the girls were whisked away by the chief of police and Mike wasn’t going to see Jane again until Tuesday or even Wednesday.

Awesome. Fucking awesome.

El clicked her seatbelt shut and got as comfortable as possible in a plane seat. The perks of being governments secret project: they didn’t have to travel commercial. Owens had surpassed their expectations though, having a helicopter pick them up at the Lab to take them to a military base nearby where a plane was already waiting for them. The man obviously had some agenda, he’d never been this acommodating before. But El wasn’t complaining; it would leave them more time to be with their mom.

Sara plopped down beside her and sighed, making El smile. Her sister had been acting all lovesick since she’d said goodbye to Dustin last night. For a moment there she had even feared Sara would not want to come at all.

„Is it really that hard to be away from him?“

Sara grimaced.

„Yes. You’ll see. Once you have a boyfriend.“

The engines roared to life and the plane made it’s way to the runway. El braced herself; she wasn’t exactly afraid of flying, but it wasn’t a pleasant sensation either. At least not the taking off and landing part.

She waited until the plane had stopped it’s climb and the ringing in her ears lessened before turning back to Sara again.

„So you think I will have a boyfriend?“

Sara sent her a long look and El fidgeted with her bracelet.

„Oh El.“ Sara almost never called her El outside of home. „Of course you will. “

„You’ve... seen it?“

„I don’t even have to. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t.“

They were silent for a while before Sara continued.
„Is this about Mike?“

El’s cheeks started to heat up. „Maybe.“

„Thought so.“ Sara leaned back in her seat. „With all the cat and mouse games you two have going on.“

„Cat and mouse games? What do you mean?“

Saras face stretched into a wide grin. „Oh come on girl. Like you wouldn’t know what ’proclivity’ means. And he couldn’t stop staring at you. Hasn’t for a while now.“

El’s whole face flushed scarlet. So Sara had been paying attention after all.
First of all, thank you for all of the amazing comments! Each time I find myself struggling with the writing, I just need to take one look at them and I'm okay :)

And I'm gonna apologize in advance for chopping this chapter in two; it was just too long and became unmanagable. The second part is coming soon, I promise.

Also, be warned, there's gonna be drinking in this one.

Mike hadn’t even noticed how much he had gotten used to Jane and Sara always being there, until they weren’t. Or how much their presence had lightened up the day. It was Tuesday and the girls had been a no-show. And Mike was sulking. Dustin was sulking. Even Max was sulking, which left only Lucas and Will, and the two were at a loss as to how to keep the spirits of the party up.

That is until Samantha Brooks, one of the cheerleaders, appeared at their lunchtable, her hand stretched out with a flyer. Like the dumbasses that they were, they’d stared at it like it was a piece of alien equipment or something; until Will, thank god, snapped out of it and grabbed the thing. He even smiled at the girl and thanked her, and, all in all, acted like any decent human being would have. It woke Mike from his stupor and he managed to get in a quick „thanks!” before the girl left.

They huddled together over the flyer, everybody trying to get a peek.

„Pre-Halloween Bash. What, already? Halloween isn’t for another two weeks!“

„Oh my god Will. Hence the pre, okay?” Max pushed the boy out of the way to get a better look at the piece of paper. „It’s on Friday. Sara and Jane should definitely be back by then!“

„What do you mean, by then!“ Dustin whined at the comment. „They said they’d be back today!“

„Dustin would you please stop with the moaning! You’re not the only one who misses them alright! I’m the one who’s stuck with you knuckleheads again.“

„Hey!“ Mike cut in and pulled the flyer away from Max, quickly scanning his eyes over it. „I find that offensive. You were friends with us first remember?“

„Alright-alright I’m sorry! Now give it back!“

He handed the thing over and Max and Lucas resumed their reading, commenting on it’s contents.

But Mike was already tuned out. A party. On Friday. That could work. That could work really well, actually. Like always, his brain had been working overtime since last Thursday, making up different scenarios about how he should ask Jane out. But this... this was actually priceless.

„So we’re going, right?“ Lucas was looking around the table.

„Of course.“ Mike and Will answered at the same time.
„When was the last time we had a party anyway?“ Mike continued. „In July? Of course we’re going.“

Max beamed at him and gave Lucas a hug, almost squeeuling in excitement.

„Yeah I’m gonna get back to you about that. I want to ask Sara if she wants to go first.“

Everybody groaned in unison. Mike couldn’t wait for the girls to be back. Moping Dustin was the worst downer in the world. But maybe he could cheer him up. And get some information at the same time.

„Dustin.“

„Hmm?“

„How did this thing between you and Sara happen anyway? Did you ask her out?“

For a moment there was silence and he was afraid all of his friends would burst out laughing right about now, because Mike was asking something so cheesy. But when he looked around, he saw others watching Dustin with interest also. All but Max, who was trying not to smile. She’d probably already heard from Sara.

Dustin’s face took on a dreamy quality. „No I didn’t."

„What? She asked you out?“ Lucas sounded incredulous and Mike could relate.

„Well, not exactly. You see, when I left the arcade with them, Jane went home but Sara and me ended up walking and talking and she was being incredible. She actually likes Star Wars, can you believe it? So I just honestly told her that she is the most beautiful person, inside and out, that I have ever met. And then she kissed me. And then I told her ’marry me’. And she laughed and said how about we try dating first."

Mike grinned at his friend. That was kind of a sweet story. In a very, very corny way so he kept his opinion to himself.

„Wow, Dustin. That was, like, romantic and shit. Nice!“

Now how come Will had no problems with saying that stuff out loud?

Dustin sighed, a smile on his face, basking in the memory. „Yeah.“ And then his face fell again. „I can’t believe I haven’t seen her for five days now."

Everybody groaned.

The corridor that took her to the sensory deprivation tank was narrow and ill-lit. Already the air felt damp around her and the walls seemed to be closing in. El drew a calming breath. She hated that thing. But she needed it, too. They needed her to find someone, and she hadn’t been able to accomplish it with just a regular session, so she had to go in.
And she wanted to. There was no doubt about that. She was perfectly aware of the importance of her actions; they never asked for her help until it was the last resort. It meant all the previous methods and people had failed.

Dr. Owens had given her a thorough overview about the case: they were hunting for a potential terrorist. They’d tried with Sara, too, but she had come up empty. For now at least. Maybe if El could get some more information on this, it would be able to trigger a vision for Sara later on.

She came to a stop before the safety door and the thing took forever to fall open. Breathe, just breathe. She steeled herself and stepped in, towards the men in white already fussing about the tank in the center.

The clock on the wall read eleven fifteen and a surge of regret ran through her body; the others would be having lunch soon. Sara had gotten to go to school today. El allowed herself a sigh but then closed the feelings off. This here was urgent and the rest would have to wait.

As usual, the routine preparations passed way too quickly, and then she was already on the cold metal stairs, climbing higher and higher, each step taking her closer to the salty water that made her head ache and skin itch for hours afterwards.

She stepped onto the platform that would lower her into the tank and as the water made contact with her skin, the sensation of nothingness slowly started to roll over her. She cast one more look at the men standing by the computers, waiting. Dr. Owens was watching her, his kind eyes laced with concern and pity; he knew she didn’t like this particular part of her work.

El felt bad for the man. She sent him a reassuring smile and a small nod, and was glad to see his face soften up before he vanished from her view.

It was okay. She could do this.

One last breath and then the water closed in over her head, robbing her of all physical senses.

Jane finally showed up at school on Thursday and Mike’s heart sped up when he saw the girl enter the classroom. He watched with envy as Max enveloped her in a hug, but couldn’t find the guts to do it also. None of the other guys rushed to embrace her, so it would’ve definitely stood out and he wasn’t sure he could pull it off casually.

But she was there, and smiling at him, and the world was a brighter place than it had been for the past week.

By some miracle, or rather, a deliberate stalling on his part and the fact that Jane had needed to speak with the teacher and was, thus, late to the cafeteria, they ended up in the lunchline together. And it was just the two of them, finally. Well, them and the rest of the student body. But at least none of their friends were in close proximity; the gang was already seated at their usual table.

And suddenly he had no idea what to say. Shit.

„So you coming to this party tomorrow?“

Mike winced at his own words. Couldn’t he have started with something more general at first? Like
ask her how her trip was or something? Or asked her if she was okay; Sara had said she’d been too sick to attend school yesterday. She did look a bit pale today.

Jane smiled and Mikes thought processes slowed down.

„Yes.“ She looked happy and excited. „I’ve never been to a house party before.“

She had a lot of things she hadn’t done before it seemed, and Mike wondered briefly, what her life had been like until they moved to Hawkins. But then again, he hadn’t been to a lot of house parties either.

„It’s cool, you’ll see.“

„Yeah. Max is so excited." Janes face stretched into a smile as she cast him a sideways glance, making his stomach flip. „And what on earth did you guys do to her? She practically begged us for a sleepover. Said she’s having testosterone poisoning and needs a detox. She's coming over tonight.“

Mike laughed, maybe a little louder than was strictly necessary but he couldn’t help it. He felt dizzy. Probably from all the extra oxygen his heart was pumping through his veins with surprising speed and force whenever Jane was around.

The line was way too short and too soon they were headed towards the others with the trays in their hands. He was so preoccupied with Jane, he didn’t notice Troy before it was too late.

The dickhead slammed into his shoulder as they passed each other and Mike watched in horror as his tray swayed, the glass of milk falling sideways. He braced himself for the worst.

But it never came. Somehow, and he had no idea how, he managed to stabilize the tray before anything spilled. He blinked, not really believing his luck. The room around him erupted into laughter and for a moment he thought he was the reason; but then he realized that nobody was looking at him. They were staring at something behind him instead.

He turned just in time to see Troy sprawled on the floor, and James, having walked behind him, falling right on top of him, bringing on another round of laughter. Troy pushed James off and jumped up in a matter of seconds, but the damage was already done. He took one glance around the cafeteria and, thank god, stomped off, his face red with embarrassment and anger. For a moment there Mike had been worried he would try to cause more trouble.

„Who’s that mouthbreather?“ Jane asked from beside him and he his face stretched into a wide smile. This day was quickly becoming his favourite day ever.

„Troy. He’s not important. You okay? You have a...“ He gestured towards his nose.

„Oh.“ The girl quickly placed the tray onto a table next to her and took out a handkerchief to wipe the blood off. „Thanks.“

„You’re welcome.“ Mike was smiling like a fool and he wasn’t even trying to hide it.

It was his handkerchief.

Mike lived the farthest from Will, and thus, it was his house they were now parking in front of, all
seven of them squashed into Wills car.

„There is no way I’m gonna walk in there sober.“ Max argued resolutely. „We need a drink before we go.“

„Why didn’t you take some from your house then?“

„Because I don’t want to get in trouble with my stepfather.“

„I don’t want to get in trouble with my stepfather.“ Mike mocked.

„Bite me!“

„Can’t we just go to the grocery store and buy some?“

He was met with four grim glares.

„It’s Friday.“ Lucas deadpanned. „You know we can’t get booze from the store on Friday. Dorothy is at work.“

The group flinched as one. The last time they had seen Dorothy she’d threatened to call the police on them if they ever stepped foot into her store again. To be fair, they had been trying to use Jonathans old ID and she had caught their bullshit. The quarrel that followed had gotten out of hand. Way out of hand.

Mike sighed. If they wanted to make it to Samantha’s place, they’d better stay away from the store. He’d rather not have nicked liquor from his fathers stash, but... Max was right. He didn’t want to arrive at the party completely sober either. Besides, they had at least two hours to kill before it was reasonable to make an appearance.

„Alright. Wait here.“

He didn’t really want to get out of the car; he had been sitting next to Jane, and considering there was four of them on the backseat, it had been a snug fit. He liked her pressed to his side.

To his surprise, the girl got out with him. „Do you think I could use the bathroom?“ She asked, looking uncomfortable.

Mike wasn’t sure what to do. He couldn’t just waltz in there with a girl, his parents would have a fit and his mom would do something embarassing. Like start gushing over her. But one look at her big eyes and he couldn’t say no either.

„Come on. We need to be careful though. I don’t want my parents to know I went back, my old man might get suspicious if he finds something missing later on.“

He made a beeline for the basement door; he was the only one who was ever down there anyway. But, as it turned out, he was out of luck and the place was not empty: his mom had picked that exact time to do the laundry and Holly was down there with her. Making a mess of Mikes things.

„Shit.“

Jane giggled and the sound made Mike all warm inside. He swallowed. It was almost dark now; that, plus the anticipation that had been building all week, was making him feel brave. Hell, he had a plan to try something tonight anyway, why not now. He should start small though. The last thing he wanted was to scare her away and, damn, she always looked like she was about to run.
So he gathered his courage and slid his hand into Janes, not breaking eye contact, so he could gauge her reaction. She stayed perfectly still for a moment, her soft gaze on him and then he could feel her hand squeeze his. Just the bearest of hints, but it was enough to let him no she was okay with this.

Mike turned away, so she would not see the ridiculous smile that spread across his face, and pulled the girl along with him to the other side of the house. The new plan was to sneak in the front door; it was the only option. His dad was probably asleep on the lazy boy and with Mom and Holly downstairs, it shouldn’t be too hard.

Turned out he was right, his father wasn’t a problem. His snores filled the first floor, loud enough to drown out the TV that was still on. Mike motioned for Jane to wait in the entrance hall and quietly snuck to the cabinet his father held his alcohol in. He knew by heart were the bottle he was searching for was; rum was always on the far left. The bottle wasn't very big but it would have to do, there’s no way his father wouldn't notice two things missing. He shut the cabinet, tiptoed away and the first half of the mission was a success.

Now all they had to do was go upstairs for Jane to use the bathroom and then they could be out of there.

El stared at the mirror, trying to force the butterflies in her stomach to behave. The girl looking back at her seemed foreign; the shining eyes and the toothy smile, the excited blush on her cheeks... it was all so familiar, and yet couldn’t possibly be her.

Oh god. Mike had held her hand. Did it mean what she thought it meant? What she was hoping it meant? Sara’s comments came back to her, unbidden, wreaking further havoc on her already twisting gut.

„He couldn’t stop staring at you. Hasn’t for a while now.‘‘

Oh god oh god oh god. Was this actually happening? Oh god. She needed to calm down. Calm down and get back out there, before they get into trouble and the evening would be over before it had even started. She would never forgive herself if she let that happen now. It had taken days of Sara and her begging and promising to be good before dad had, begrudgingly, against his better judgement as he’d said, allowed them to go out today. They still got a curfew, and that, too, had taken half an hour to argue out, but one o’clock wasn’t so bad.

She sent herself one last giddy smile and pushed off the basin, opening the door as quietly as she could. Mike was standing in the dim hallway, leaning against the wall with his head thrown back, idly playing with the bottle in his hands, and El had to draw in a breath.

His head snapped in her direction as the door closed with a click and then he was there, grabbing her hand again, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The contact made her heart speed up and El revelled in the sensation.

They were halfway downstairs when they heard the basement door swing open.

Mike stopped and cursed under his breath. For a moment they just stood there, but then he pulled her back upstairs and into one of the bedrooms. At first she thought it might be Mike’s, but the white and
pink striped interior, as much as she could see of it in the dark, suggested it rather belonged to a girl. Mike carefully navigated them to one of the windows.

„This is Nancy’s room.“ He whispered as if reading her thoughts. „My older sister. Her boyfriend used to come in through the window all the time. She’s in college now so I use it to sneak in and out sometimes. Be careful alright? The roof can be slippery.“

He tucked the bottle away into his jacket, cracked the window open and climbed out, El right at his heels. She crouched on the dark tiles as Mike carefully slipped the window back shut and motioned towards the edge. He went first and El watched as he let himself drop off, onto something halfway between the earth and roof. He stepped back and El followed his suit, easing herself down next to him; Mike grabbed a hold of her waist to steady her and even though she didn’t really need the support, she let him help anyway, because it was sweet and he was touching her and she hadn’t even realized how badly she had been wanting it to happen.

Turned out Mike himself could have used some help instead. One moment he was standing before her and the next he was already on the ground, flat on his back. El quickly jumped off and hurried to him, trying hard to keep from laughing too loud. The boy groaned and she crouched down beside him.

„You alright?“ She managed to ask between her guffaws.

„Yeah. Lucky I landed on my back.“ El was confused for a second but then he patted his jacket where the bottle was hid.

El giggled and the boy looked up at her, a goofy grin on his face. But then his happy features transformed into a dazed one and suddenly the scene reminded her too much of another time. Mike lying on his back, in the dark, her hovering above him. The laughter died on her lips.

„Guys!“

El jumped up, her heart pounding. Max and Lucas were there, standing not far away, looking at them expectantly.

„Come on, where’ve you been?“ Max chastised. „Let’s go!“

They ended up picking an empty parking lot near the kids playground to have their preparty at. El and Sara had gotten the task of going to the grocery store to get some soda to top off the rum, as the two of them were new in town and hence, not in trouble with Dorothy. And now the two bottles were being passed around hand to hand.

The drink was already getting to El.

She wasn’t a complete novice, but she wasn’t used to alcohol by any means either. There had been an occasional bottle of cider during her and Saras free summer evenings. They’d gotten it from this small convenience store, where one of the young clerks liked to flirt with Sara. And El had actually enjoyed those evenings. That is, all four of them, until one day Dr Owens had come up to them, sighed heavily, and said if they kept this up he would have to tell their mom and dad.
They’d been fools to think this would go unnoticed; they were surrounded by doctors for god’s sake on a daily basis.

And then there’d been this one time, almost a year ago, when she and Sara had done something really stupid; they’d managed to get their hands on a bottle of brandy and, as they were home alone, had polished almost the whole thing off. They’d wanted to know what this fuss over being drunk was all about. To be fair, it had been fun. Until they ended throwing up in the bathroom, the both of them. They’d been lucky enough to not get caught that time, thank god. Needless to say, El couldn’t really imagine ever having brandy again.

But rum, even though it tasted bitter and burned on the way down, was okay. At least in small quantities and with plenty of soda. And the fact that she was sitting here, on the curb, on a Friday evening, sharing this rum with her friends... Her head was dizzy with far more than alcohol; it was sheer joy and unbridled excitement.

She wanted to pinch herself to make sure this was real. She and Sara were out on a Friday night to party with their friends, and she wished she could shout out loud how happy this made her. And by the looks of it, Sara was just as over the moon as she was.

And that wasn’t even the best part. Mike was sitting right beside her, his shoulder pressed against hers, and her heart was thumping so loud it soothed all outside noises down to a dull buzz. Each little move he made, each chuckle that passed his lips; she could feel it reverberate through her whole body. He moved his leg, his thigh brushing against hers and El shivered.

Mike noticed. „You cold?” His eyes bore into hers, steady and intense as if she was the only thing in the universe, and El could feel a blush coming on. From just the way he was looking at her. Oh god.

She had to turn her gaze away. „A little.” Like she could confess he was making her shiver.

Mike moved to stand up and El wanted to protest at the sudden lack of contact and warmth, but then he shrugged out of his bomber jacket and sat back down, draping it over her shoulders, engulfing her in his smell and the bodyheat that still lingered on the material. El was glad she was sitting down; she wasn’t sure her legs would be able to carry her at this point.

„Here. That better?”

„Yes.” The huskiness in her voice surprised her and she cleared her throat. „Aren’t you gonna be cold?”

But Mike just grinned. „Nah I’m good.”

The round of drinks reached them again and Mike grabbed the bottles, offering them to her first. El’s insides melted just a little bit more.

„Damn, man, don’t spill it!” Dustin managed to right the bottle just in time and Mike tightened his grip on it, before raising it to his mouth.

He was doing fucking great. They had run out of rum a while ago and Will, his good buddy Will,
had taken pity on them and driven home and brought them a half empty bottle of vodka that his mother had lying around the house. Will was fucking awesome. Because, shit, he was putting up with this drunken lot without having had a single drop of booze himself, and that meant he was a fucking superman.

Mike would’ve handed the bottle to Jane first but she had gotten up a while ago and now the girls where a little distance away, trying to hone their Charlies Angels stance and that was absolutely fucking hilarious to watch. She’d given his jacket back, and hell, he’d seriously liked seeing her wearing his jacket, but he was glad too because it was getting cold outside.

„SHIT!“ Max had lost her balance and almost toppled over, but Jane and Sara managed to keep her upright somehow and all three of them burst out laughing and damn, it was a beautiful sight and Mike’s face stretched into a grin.

Everything was turning into a blur and Mike didn’t even realize how much time had passed before Will was suddenly herding them all to the car, going back and forth several times, because Dustin and Sara kept kissing, Max was still trying to rehearse her pose and Lucas was just sitting on the ground next to her, laughing his ass off and they weren’t moving until Will went and pulled them along. He didn’t need to worry about Mike though; Jane was already climbing into the backseat and Mike was drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

As they were driving to the party, Jane let her head rest on his shoulder for a while. The small gesture made him wildly happy; she was beginning to loosen up around him. Mike wasn’t gonna waste this chance and breathed her in, the familiar scent of her shampoo filling his nostrils. God, he hoped some of it would stick to his jacket. At one point, he noticed Will cocking his eyebrow at him from the rearview mirror. His only reaction was a sappy smile and he felt stupid because of it, but whatever; it was totally worth it.
El looked at the fancy house in front of her and shivered for a whole different reason. The place seemed packed with people and the blaring music echoed all the way down to the street. The party was in full swing, and it was so overwhelming, she now understood why Max had wanted a drink before they got here. She regretted passing up on the vodka earlier. As a result, the mellow buzzing in her head was giving way to coherent thought, and that wasn’t necessarily good at a scene like this.

A warm hand enveloped hers and Mike leaned in to talk to her, his soft hair brushing against her cheek. She had a sudden urge to run her fingers through the dark mass.

“You alright?”

It was almost scary how well he was able to read her this evening and El wondered, if it was because she was so obvious. Or was it something else. Whatever it was, his constant presence and attentiveness was reassuring and at the same time, completely disorientating. She found herself fumbling over the simplest of actions, but for once, she didn’t really care. As she looked around, nobody seemed to take notice anyway, their focus scrambled by the alcohol and overall excitement. Except for Will, maybe, but the boy was nothing if not discreet.

She realized she’d been staring at Mike the whole time and blushed. Not that it made any difference; her cheeks were probably permanently tinted pink by now. „I’m fine. I just... didn’t expect it to be this big, I guess.”

The front door banged open and a burly guy with a rainbow coloured wig stumbled out, hurrying off towards the backyard.

Mike grinned and pulled her forward, towards the house. „Come on! It’ll be fun. I promise.”

The others were already on the move, halfway down the wide driveway, and they hurried after them. And if El had thought the noise on the outside was bad, it had nothing on the deafening clamour that met them inside. The music was playing so loudly she could feel it in her bones and the yelling teenagers, trying to be heard over the stereo and other people, only added to it.

Somebody squealed and jumped to hug Sara and El recognized the girl, although she didn’t know her name; it was one of the cheerleaders. She couldn’t hear what was being said but the girl motioned them onwards and the gang headed deeper into the house, struggling to weave through the cramped corridor.

„That’s Samantha.” Mike had to practically shout into her ear. „It’s her place.”

El nodded in understanding, not even trying to speak. He was so close. There just wasn’t enough
room for him not to be and all of these warm bodies pressed into one limited space made it feel so intimate it was messing with her head. Somebody was pushing through to go in the opposite direction and they needed to stand aside and wait. Mikes thumb was rubbing circles on the back of her hand and it felt like caressing, sending her nerve endings into frenzy.

They found the others in the kitchen, pouring drinks and El seized the opportunity, chugging down a cup of red liquid. It tasted like fruit and something fizzy. Tasty.

„Woah, take it easy.” Mike chuckled beside her and took the cup. „This can knock you out if you’re not careful.” He filled her cup again anyway and El sent him a grateful smile.

Their gang was slowly starting to break up and mingle. Already Lucas and Max were further away, talking to a group of boys dressed in, what she could only assume, had to be togas. Sara was being greeted from left and right and was pulling Dustin along with her and El couldn’t even see Will anymore. She wondered if she should stick with Sara, but couldn’t bring herself to step away from Mike.

„Mike, man, you’re here!” El startled as a tall boy came out of nowhere, slapping Mike on the back. The two did the weird half handshake half hug thing that boys always seemed to do and started chatting.

El took in her surroundings, a sense of wonderment washing over her. This was like something out of the movies she’d seen on TV. There were people everywhere, most of them in costumes; some in full gear, others only having an item or two to distinguish them as a character. Some of the girls were wearing such skimpy outfits, El was sure their goal had been to use as little clothing as they could possibly get away with. She kind of envied their confidence; she would’ve never dared to don just a bikini and a Miss Universe sash and call it a costume. The house itself was decorated for halloween, too, with plenty of spiderwebs and occasional spooky candles and pumpkins here and there. The dim lighting and loud music only intensified the unreal feeling it all gave her. It was thrilling to actually be there and get to experience this firsthand.

Mike burst out laughing at something his friend had said and El’s attention snapped back to him.

And just like that, out of nowhere, it felt awkward to just stand there. She swiveled the drink around in her cup and took a swig. Was she being creepy? Oh god, she probably was. Why was she assuming Mike even wanted her to stick around? All of the others had disappeared. God, she needed to do something. Act like others did.

She glanced around the room, feeling more apprehensive than amazed this time. There were some familiar faces that she recognized, but none she would’ve been comfortable to go and start a conversation with. El bit her lip. She should still move and perhaps go and try to find Sara. Or Max. Or...

All of her thoughts came to an abrupt stop as a hand snaked around her waist and then Mike was pulling her closer. He pinned her to his side, still talking to his friend and Els breathing became a ragged mess.

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Mike could feel Jane starting to fidget beside him and was worried she was about to do something stupid. Like, leave. And there was no way in hell that he would let her get away from him tonight, let
alone in a house full of drunken guys who were more than likely to start hitting on her, if they got the chance. She was looking very cute tonight, with her Farrah Fawcett hairstyle, and the jeans she had on fit her like a second skin. Yes, he had been perving earlier and staring but he couldn’t help it.

So seriously, he had no choice but to grab on to her waist and bring her flush against his side, so she would just stay put for a little while longer, until he could wrap this conversation with Sean up.

What he hadn’t been ready for was his own reaction as the girl turned her head to look at him and her breath fanned over his neck. Fucking hell. He stumbled on his words and had to swallow. Lucky for him Sean was too far gone to pick up on anything and kept rambling. And he was a good friend and all, but Mike was so distracted he just wanted him to leave now.

„Listen, I’ll see you around okay?“ He shouted to him over the noise and, thank god, Sean took the hint and after a couple of more words, staggered away from them.

Mike gulped, his heartbeat picking up now that he was alone with Jane again. His throat was dry as hell, and, even though he was drunk enough already, he still grabbed a cup of punch before steering them away from the kitchen.

What should they do? What would give him an excuse to just keep her close to him? Should they sit down somewhere and try to talk? One look around and he threw the idea out the window; every available surface seemed to already be in use. Or they could dance. Only most of the dancing he ever did was slow dancing, because, let’s be honest, his dancing skills just sucked. And even though he really wanted to hold her in his arms as they’d sway to the music, it would probably be too much for him right now. He was drunk and he’d probably not be able to resist and would end up groping her or something and all of his previous experiences with that had always ended up with him and Melanie making out somewhere.

And it had not been a problem for him.

But Jane wasn’t Melanie.

Mike didn’t want her to feel like all he wanted with her was a party hook up or something. Not that he wouldn’t want to make out with her, because, fuck, that thought just made his whole body weak. It was more that he didn’t want this to be just a party hook up. He wanted... more. Even if he couldn’t put it to words what that meant exactly. He wanted her to be there tomorrow morning, too. Not just for tonight. And he knew it with more certainty the more time he spent with her.

So they ended up wandering around the house, stalking from room to room and trying to guess who the party goers were supposed to be dressed up as. Mike couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed that much.

Or wanted to kiss someone that badly.

All of these random, little touches were driving him insane. Her fingers running over his arm when she wanted his attention. Her lips brushing along his cheek when she leaned in to say something. Her body momentarily pressed against his as someone pushed past them.

His resolve to take it slow and be a gentleman lasted for a whole thirty minutes.
El threw her head back in laughter. Mike was trying to guess who a girl in a black leotard and legwarmers was supposed to be. So far the offers had been a hooker, a ballerina and Sally from Grease.

"Oh come on, are you sure it’s even a costume? Maybe she just came straight from aerobics or something." Mike was grinning at her, not even looking at the girl in question and Els laughter gave way to butterflies rummaging around in her stomach.

His eyes were slightly hooded and she’d caught him staring at her lips for a number of times now. It was unsettling, to say the least. And it wasn’t helping, that the two cups of whatever the drink had been had finally caught up with her, and she was left feeling so dizzy, and yet so uninhibited. Everything seemed possible all of a sudden.

"She’s from Flashdance, you silly." She had meant it to sound teasing, but her voice broke half way through and it ended in a soft whisper. Because Mikes eyes were on hers again, and, apparently, that alone was enough now to steal her breath away. God, she was hopeless.

Mike leaned in again. "Do you wanna dance?"

"Okay, but I have to warn you, I don’t know how." She admitted after a hesitant pause, smiling sheepishly. "I haven’t really danced before."

Mike only smiled and lead her into the living room, where the furniture was pushed aside to create a makeshift dancefloor. There almost wasn’t any room, but they managed to make themselves a free spot in between the moving bodies and then Mike was stepping closer, slow, but unwavering, as if it was inevitable that this was happening. He took her hands and placed them on his shoulders and if El had thought she’d been unsettled before, it had nothing on how she was feeling now.

A steady rhythm was thumping through her body and she couldn’t tell if it was the music or her heartbeat or both, because all she was aware of was Mikes hands encircling her waist and bringing her closer still, until the fronts of their bodies were almost touching. He applied slight pressure and El obliged, beginning to move with him, instinctively. Her breathing was so shallow she was afraid she’d pass out and she couldn’t find the courage to actually look at Mike. But if his constant swallowing and sharp intakes of air were any indication, this was affecting him too.

El couldn’t stop smiling.

Mike was in absolute heaven. And also, in his own personal hell. Because it was fucking awesome to finally have Jane in his arms, but then again, it wasn’t enough. And, to top it off, he was all nervous and being a complete coward, because he still hadn’t kissed her. There just never seemed to be a good moment to do it and the more time passed, the more he had managed to work himself into a complete mess. Shit. This had never been so complicated before. Not even when he’d kissed a girl for very first time ever.

And because he was such a coward, he missed out on the opportunity.

"Jane!" Sara and Max were suddenly there, throwing themselves at Jane and she let go of him so she could speak to them. Mike wanted to groan. The three put their heads together, giggling and
discussing something.

Sara turned to him. „Sorry Mike we’re gonna steal her away for a little while okay?“

She didn’t wait for a reply and the two practically dragged Jane off. The girl barely had enough time to send him an apologetic smile and then she was out of his sight.

Damn it. Maybe a date, where all of their meddling friends would not be present, would’ve been a better idea.

He sighed and navigated through the people to get to the kitchen. Might as well use the chance and grab another drink. And see where the other guys are; if Sara and Max were at large, that meant Dustin and Lucas were somewhere on their own too. Not that it was easy to find someone in this crowd and the house was like a fucking labyrinth.

He ended up spotting Will first, leaning against a wall, chatting up some chick in a nurse costume. Seemed to be going well, too; the girl was all sultry looks and coy smiles. Mike contemplated for a whole second if he should maybe leave him alone. His face slowly stretched into a grin. Nah. If he was so rudely interrupted before, he could as well pay it forward.

His grin stretched even wider as Will rolled his eyes in annoyance upon noticing him.

„Will, buddy!“ He rested his elbow on his shoulder, because he knew it would irritate Will even more. Sure enough, his friend shrugged his arm off and Mike laughed. „How’s it going?“

„Smooth, Mike, real smooth.“ Will sighed in defeat and motioned to the girl. „This is Nicole.“

„Hi Nicole."

The girl smiled at him and raised her cup in greeting.

Mike didn’t recognize her. She definitely wasn’t from their school. „You’re not from Hawkins, are you?“

Will groaned. „Don’t you have things to do? Someone else to bug?“

„No, I’m good."

„You jackass."

Will was smirking despite his harsh words and the girl in front of them giggled. She was pretty; Mike could totally understand why Will wanted to get rid of him. Not that he was gonna make it easy. This was too much fun.

„So where are you from Nicole?“

„She’s from Sweden, actually.“ Will answered instead, sending the girl a charming smile.

„Wow, that’s cool.“ Mike wasn’t expecting that kind of answer. Foreigners were a rarity in Hawkins. The surprise must’ve been clear on his face, because the girl laughed and leaned in to explain.

„Me and my sister, we’re visiting. Our cousin brought us along tonight.“ She pointed a little further away from them, to where two girls were talking animatedly. He knew one of them; Kelly, a senior in Hawkins High.
The girls looked their way as if they could sense someone staring at them and Nicole waved. The two waved back and Mike could see the girls stealing glances at them and whispering something to each other. The one he didn’t know was eyeing him with obvious curiosity and, he had to admit, his ego was flattered, even if he wasn’t interested.

He was just about to leave and go see if he could find Dustin and Lucas somewhere, when the girl appeared at their side and Nicole pulled her into their midst to introduce her.

„Guys, this is my sister, Eleanor.“

The girl sent Mike a flirty smile. „But you can call me Elle.“

His vision tunneled so fast it gave him vertigo.

Elle. Call me Elle. This girl was named Elle. Shit.

His gaze snapped to Will, who was watching him intently, the same realization clearly visible in his eyes. Could it be? The memory was triggered for the second time that evening: him on that beach, lying on the gravel. The girl crouching next to him. The smile. The kiss.

And once again his heart sped up and he felt dizzy. Just like the first time, back at his house, when he’d fallen and Jane had hovered over him and he’d had a complete sense of deja vu.

Jane. Fuck.

But... Shit.

He had to find out. He needed to find out.

If this might be the girl he’d been looking for. The one who had possibly saved his life.

El couldn’t be mad at Sara and Max for dragging her away, even though she would’ve gladly kept dancing with Mike for the rest of the evening. The three of them roamed around the house, laughing, fooling around, until they found an empty spot on one of the sofas on the second floor and coveted it, taking a seat to have a ‘girls talk’. Which mainly consisted of Sara and Max prying on what was going on between her and Mike, with an occasional gossip thrown in.

„We were just dancing!“ She insisted for the umpteenth time, but she couldn’t banish the blush or the happy smile from her face and her friends just laughed and kept on teasing. She didn’t even mind, not really. Somehow them talking about it made it even more real.

And it also made her long to be with him again, her heart skipping a beat at the thought. So when they finally got up because Sara wanted to go to bathroom, El waited out the line with the others but didn’t go inside, heading back downstairs instead. It took her five minutes and two drunk guys trying to feel her up until she finally saw him. Standing in one of the hallways. Talking to a girl. A pretty, blond girl, who kept giggling and touching his arm. For a moment she just stood there, staring.

Els chest tightened uncomfortably and she drew a breath, wondering what to do now. Should she still go over anyway? Maybe it was just a friend. She shouldn’t jump to conclusions before she even knew what was going on.
Shit. She couldn’t go over. Her legs literally refused to take her there. She slowly walked a little closer, strategically placing herself half behind a corner to spy on the two.

Her unease only grew. Mike seemed... entranced. His gaze wouldn’t leave the girl beside him. The twisting in her gut got so bad El abandoned her drink on one of the shelves nearby. But she couldn’t not look either. And when the two moved away, towards the back of the house, she trailed behind them, like the stalker that she was. Until they exited through the backdoor and El came to a halt. Damn it. She couldn’t follow them there.

But she couldn’t give up either. So she headed to one of the windows instead and peeked through the gap in the curtains. They were almost out of her view, half hidden behind the window frame, but she could still see them. She resumed her watch, small knives poking at her heart each time the girl or Mike laughed or touched or looked at each other. There was no way this was just a friendly banter.

The girl put her hand on Mikes shoulder and something in El snapped. Suddenly angry, she flicked her head and one of the girls high heeled shoes twisted under her, making her tumble.

And then it all went wrong.

Mike still wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure and he needed to be sure. And, shit, he couldn’t bring himself to just ask out right if she had ever saved a boy in the quarry from drowning. It seemed so stupid. So he kept asking all of these stupid little questions that he thought would bring him closer to the truth, and so far all he had gotten was that it might be her.

But she was drunk and rambling and kept getting off topic and Mike was far from sober too. And the noise in the house was too loud, he couldn’t even hear half of the things she’d said. He ended up asking her if she would want to go get some air and taking her out the back. The backyard was empty, probably due to the cold weather and the rain that had started to drizzle at some point and he was thankful for some peace.

The girl had been in Hawkins in the summer, for two weeks, and the time frame matched. She’d said she had been to the quarry, too. To swim, because she and her sister were in a swimming team back home and they needed the practice. It all fit.

So when the girls leg suddenly buckled under her and Mike caught her by reflex, he didn’t stop what happened next.

Because, Elle was about to kiss him, and, in his drunken haze, his logic said that this was actually a great way to know for certain if it had been her back at the quarry.

He still remembered the kisses.

Mike caught the girl before she could fall. He fucking caught her and held her upright, his arms around her waist and the girl took the opportunity. El could only watch, too late to act, as she pressed her lips to Mikes. And Mike let her.
No.

Els heart shattered into a million pieces. This wasn’t happening. She was supposed to be the one out there with him. The one he was kissing.

This wasn’t happening.

She watched, crushed, as the girl ran her fingers through Mikes hair on the back of his neck. His hair, that she had so much wanted to touch earlier, and her heart broke all over again. Oh god. She was so stupid.

The lightbulb on the porch burst into a million little flashes and it startled El so much she had to swallow a sob. All of her anger evaporated. Oh god, she hadn’t even realized she was using her powers this time.

Oh god. She needed to get out of there. Right this instant.

El stumbled away from the window and looked around. The walls were closing in and she felt like she was suffocating. She needed to leave.

Sara. Where was Sara? She couldn’t just leave without telling her. She’d worry. But she couldn’t see her. Damn it, where was she?

El finally spotted Lucas, and, thank god, beside him was a mop of red hair. So she gathered whatever strength she had left in her and headed over, calling out to Max on the way.

„Max!“ She tried to yell over the noise but her voice was so hoarse it didn’t carry. „Max!“

Max only noticed her when she was finally close enough to place a hand on her shoulder. El could see her smile slip away as she took her in.

„Jane, what’s wrong?“

„I’m not feeling well."

Maxes face twisted with worry and she leaned over to tell Lucas something before taking Els hand and towing her away. She felt like a rag doll, her muscles weak and her limbs not working. Max pulled her into a more quiet corner.

„Did something happen?“

El shook her head. She didn’t want to talk about it. She just wanted to get out of here. „No, I... I think I drank too much. And my head is pounding. I think I should go home before it gets even worse."

Max bit her lip and El could see she had her doubts, but she let it go and El was so grateful she felt bad for not telling her the truth. But she couldn’t. She just couldn’t. She was so stupid.

„Come on.“ Max linked their arms and, once again, pulled her to motion, guiding her through the rooms. It felt like walking through fog; every sound, every view, every sensation she got was muted down to a mere hollow shell. She barely registered as they stopped by Wills side.

She pretended she didn’t hear the concern in their voices. Pretended she didn’t hear Mikes name pop up. Pretended not to see their glances, full of guesses and questions and compassion.

Will was kind enough to drive her home and she forgot to even thank him.
It wasn’t her. This wasn’t the girl.

Mike was sure the moment her lips slanted against his. It felt all wrong. And when the girl wrapped her hands around his neck to bring him closer, trying to deepen the kiss, all he wanted to do was pull away.

That’s when the lightbulb above their heads went out with a bang and Elle jerked back, shrieking. Mike almost laughed, but caught himself at the last moment. The intrusion had been enough to kill the mood, thank god, and Mike jumped at the chance to get away. This wasn’t the girl, and all of a sudden even the idea that she could have been seemed ridiculous. What the hell had he been thinking? And he’d wasted all of this time on this that he could have spent with Jane instead.

Jane. He wanted to go find Jane. Like, right now. And forget *this* here even happened.

„We should head back inside.“ He blurted out before the girl could say anything, and even though she looked put off by the suggestion, she nodded.

He ditched her as soon as they were in and didn’t even feel bad about it. She had lost every appeal now that the possibility of her being the mystery girl was gone. And fuck, Mike still couldn’t believe he’d thought it a possibility in the first place. Damn it, why was he always such an idiot when drunk?

Jane. He needed to find her.

„She went home.“

Mike stared at Max. This wasn’t happening. What did she mean Jane went home?

„Why?“

Max shrugged but her eyes were accusing. „Said she wasn’t feeling well."

Mike frowned.

„When?“

„Ten minutes ago or so. Will took her.“

Of course he did. Shit. Will was always there to be the good guy. Why the hell had *he* not been there?

Max squinted her eyes at him, contemplating. „Will said Jane saw you talking to this... Elle. Figured that might’ve had something to do with it. She wanted to leave soon after."

Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*. Mike hadn’t even noticed. What the hell was wrong with him? He needed to talk to Jane. He needed to talk to her right now.
„Shit.“ He rubbed his temples. His head was beginning to ache. „Do you think I could go over to her place?“

Max laughed. „To the chief’s house? In the middle of the night, drunk and underage? So you could talk to his daughter? Go right ahead, buddy.“

Fuck, he seriously wasn’t thinking straight anymore. He sighed in defeat; there was nothing he could do for now.

„What was up with this Elle anyway?“ Max asked after a pause. „Was she the one from the quarry?“

Mike felt like shit.

„No.“

Max didn’t even say anything, just sent him a pitying look and walked away, leaving Mike to wallow in his misery.

Shit. How could he have fucked this up so spectacularly?

Chapter End Notes

I know, I'm sorry!
I will clean this mess up, I swear!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I sincerely wish I could have updated sooner, but, as it is, real life caught up with me, demanding my time and attention and leaving me with so little time to write. Trust me, I would just write all the time if I could :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mike was at Janes doorstep as early as he deemed suitable on a Saturday morning. Which was at ten o’clock. Even though he’d been up at seven and out of the house at nine and technically he had been there for half an hour already; he just hadn’t dared to walk up to the door and knock, so he’d taken a stroll around the neighborhood to buy himself some time. He’d also contemplated if he should maybe call Jane on the phone instead, but hell, he really wanted to see her.

Although he had no idea how this was supposed to play out. All he knew was he had to at least try. So he pushed the doorbell before he could chicken out again and waited, hoping that Jane would be the one to answer.

Of course, his luck was shit.

The door swung open and he was met with the police chiefs gruffy face.

„Hello, sir.“ He croaked out.

The man grunted something unintelligable in response. Mike took that as a hello.

„Is Jane home?“

The man just stared at him, inspecting, intimidating, and Mike felt like he was under a questioning for high treason. Or like the man knew what he’d been up to last night; the thought sent a flare of panic through him. He forced the stupid feeling down and stood his ground. There’s no way he could’ve known. And he really wanted to see Jane.

The man frowned at him for a little longer but then relented. He looked to the side and then back at him, sighing heavily.

„No. She’s not here.“

He was lying. Mike was sure he was lying. But what could he do? Push past this two hundred and fifty pound policeman to break into his house? Yeah, that would have gone really well.

„Do you know when she will be back?“ He asked instead.

There. There it was. The man looked to the side again and Mike could swear he rolled his eyes at someone. Jane was there. He knew she was.

„Not today. She’s... visiting her mother.“

Mike blinked. This man was the lousiest liar he had ever seen.
“Didn’t she just visit last weekend?” The question slipped out before he could catch it.

The man sent him a glare and he gulped.

“She’s visiting again.”

Mike must’ve had a deathwish, because he just couldn’t stop. “Is Sara visiting again also?”

The man actually cursed out loud.

“Look, kid, the point is, Jane is not here, okay? Now, is there anything else I can help you with?”

His tone made it clear it would be better if there was not.

But Mike was a man on a mission, too.

“Could you at least tell her I came by when she comes back?”

For a moment Mike was afraid the man would slam the door in his face. He sure looked like that was exactly what he wanted to do. But then he just sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Okay, kid. What was your name again?”

“Mike. Mike Wheeler, Sir.” He was beginning to hope this wasn’t a total loss. “And, maybe she could call me, when she comes back?”

This time he did slam the door in Mikes face.

Mikes shoulders slumped.

Shit.

Jane didn’t want to see him.

El watched as her dad shut the door with a bang and exhaled. She hadn’t even realized she’d been holding her breath.

Mike.

Mike had come to see her. To say she was confused, was a massive understatement. The wild surge of happiness that had flared in her heart, when she’d first noticed him through the window, was almost instantly replaced with a sharp pain in her chest as her mind produced a very vivid recollection of the last time she’d seen him. On that porch. Kissing that girl.

No.

Mike could go and screw himself. Or that girl, for that matter, if he so wished. He had nothing to say that would interest El.

Damn it. She was just lying to herself now. There were so many things Mike could say that she would’ve gladly given her right hand to hear. But it was stupid. Because he was never gonna say
And there was no way in hell she would let him see her in this state. She’d hardly slept and it was easy to tell by the dark circles under her eyes. Her eyes, that were red and puffy, even after she’d washed them with cold water for almost ten minutes.

She hadn’t even noticed dad had come to stand before her until he spoke.

„Wanna tell me what this is all about?“

„No.“

„Did that punk do something?“

„No.“

„What the hell did he do?“ Dad was growling by now, his patience wearing thin. „Because I will go and land his sorry ass in the police department if I have to."

„Dad, no!“ El was horrified. „It’s not... It’s nothing important okay? I just don’t want to talk to him right now."

Hopper let out an irritated sigh.

„Jesus Christ what are you taking me for? I might be thick, but even I know what a silent treatment is.“

El groaned. This was not a conversation she wanted to have with her dad. Not now.

„Okay, fine! So he did do something and I am mad at him and I don’t want to talk to him, okay? It still isn’t that big of a deal so can we just drop this?“

„Fine!“ Her dad snapped. „Don’t tell me then! And go to your room! And you too!“

He’d turned and was now pointing his finger at Sara, who was standing in the kitchen, looking wary; El hadn’t even noticed when she’d appeared there.

Hopper stomped off, muttering under his breath and fumbling for a cigarette. „I can’t deal with this shit before I’ve even had my morning coffee."

El and Sara exchanged one look and made themselves scarce, sneaking off to Els room and shutting the door behind them.

„Was that Mike?“ Sara asked as soon as the door clicked closed.

El really didn’t want to talk about it, but... this was Sara and they always told each other everything.

„Yes.“ She sighed in defeat.

„And why did you not want to see him?“

„Why would I want to see him?“

„Okay.“ Sara was watching her closely, taking in her ragged exterior and El could see a frown forming on her face. „I know you left early, Max told me. I’m so sorry by the way, that I wasn’t there.”
Sara looked really concerned and El didn’t want her to feel bad. „It’s okay. Will brought me home.“ „Yes, Max told me that too.“ A small smile was on her lips for a moment but then it faded. „She also said you leaving had something to do with Mike. So, what is this about?“

El looked down, picking off lint from her leggings. It took her a moment before she was able to answer. „I saw him hitting on another girl.“

Sara let out a long breath. „You sure? Maybe you misunderstood.“ „No.“ El shook her head. „I’m pretty sure I didn’t.“ „Then why was he here this morning?“

El ignored the question and remained stubbornly quiet, playing with her bracelets.

„Look, El, I seriously think you might be over reacting here. From what I saw of you two last night, I really don’t think there’s a chance he was interested in another girl.“ Yeah, because Sara hadn’t seen them kiss. And El wouldn’t tell her, either. Because it was stupid and she was stupid and her stupid little crush on this boy was stupid and El was so tired of being stupid. And even just thinking about it still cut like a knife. She couldn’t say it out loud.

„Whatever.“ She huffed and grabbed a pillow to hug. „I really don’t want to talk about this right now.“

Sara pursed her lips and El knew her sister didn’t want to let this go, so she quickly cut in. „Why is dad mad at you?“ The distraction worked like a charm. Sara’s face stretched into a grin and she bit her lip, looking away from El.

„I wasn’t back for the curfew.“ Els eyebrows shot up in surprise. Sara didn’t need any encouraging though, she was always prone to share, so she dived right into it.

„Dustin and I didn’t notice the time so we ended up getting back an hour late. Dad was furious.“ Saras face fell and she groaned, slumping forward in despair. „And now I’m grounded. I’m grounded, can you believe it? And Dustin can’t come over either. Dad said he’d lost his visiting privileges for failing to bring me back in time.“

It was funny to see her sister like this and El couldn’t quite keep the smile off of her face, earning a glare from Sara.

„It’s not funny.“

El laughed. „It is, a bit. Sorry!“ Laughing felt good. „What were you two doing that you didn’t even notice the time?“

Sara looked up, her face stretching into a grin again and turning red, a dead give away for what she was about to say.

„Well, we kind of ended up in one of the bedrooms upstairs and...“
„Oh my god Sara!” El cut in, suddenly all alert and leaning forward. „You didn’t!”

„No! No.“ Sara let out a string of giggles „Not that! We just... I don’t know. Made out, is the right expression, I believe.“

El sat back, a wave of giddiness washing through her on Sara’s behalf. Sara was smiling, her gaze unfocused, obviously stuck in the memory of last night. And as El watched her, the more it brought back the memory of her own evening, that had ended so differently, and just like that, she was hurting again. She drew in a deep breath to keep the feelings at bay.

„That’s cool.“ She managed to conjure a decently earnest smile. „Sorry you got into trouble though. How long are you grounded for?“

Sara pouted. „Ugh. I have no idea. It sucks so much! Might be a week, might be until I graduate. Dad didn’t say, and I figured if I don’t ask, he might let me off earlier. You know how he is.“

„Yeah.“

Sara sighed and got up. „I’m gonna go hit the shower. I seriously stink. But I still want to hear about your evening later, okay?“

She was out of the door before El could reply.

And even though Sara thought she had it bad, El couldn’t help but think she would’ve been more than happy to change places with her right now. She would gladly be grounded, if the reason behind it was that she’d been home late because she was making out with a guy she liked. Instead of watching the said guy make out with someone else.

Because this sucked so much more.

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Mike couldn’t hold still. He fidgeted in front of his locker, bouncing from foot to foot, keeping his eyes on the entrance like a hawk. The girls should show up any minute now, he was sure, and then he’d get to talk to Jane. To his credit, he wasn’t the only one; Dustin was right there with him, having already whined most of the morning about not having seen Sara for the whole weekend, and, apparently, Max was in the same boat with them. And Lucas and Will stuck around, because, well, everybody else was there.

Not that Mike would let the fact that all of his nosy friends were, once again, present, stop him this time. Hell, he’d never get anywhere if he did.

Friday night had been paining him for the whole weekend, so he’d ended up doing nothing useful, just moping around the house and sulking. And thinking. And, not that he was proud of himself or anything, calling to Janes house for at least ten times, hoping Jane would pick up. But she never did; it was always the chief and so Mike just hung up, not even considering talking to the man. Until someone had obviously had enough and the phone was left off the reciever, so he couldn’t call in anymore.

But school, school was a good chance. Jane had to come to school, and she’d be stuck here with
him, with much less opportunities to avoid talking. And god, he just wanted to see her and talk to her and leave this mess behind. And then, kiss her and ask her out. Something he should’ve done a while ago already, really.

And it was a good, solid plan, only now it was almost time for the first lesson and the girls were still a no show. Mike let out an irritated sigh.

They came into his view just as he was sure they’d have to call it quits and head to the class. Mike’s heart picked up its usual rapid pace whenever Jane was around and he halted in his movements, his focus zooming in on Jane, hungry eyes taking in every detail of her.

She was looking lovely, of course, wearing a really soft looking sweater today that just invited you in for a hug and Mike’s body reacted by heating up at the thought. Dustin was over at Sara’s side in a second, the two of them stealing a kiss right there in the middle of the school hallway and damn it, Mike wished he could do the same.

Instead he approached Jane with caution, not knowing what kind of greeting to expect.

„Hey Jane.‟

„Hey.‟ The girl sent him a brief smile and turned back to shoving her stuff away into the locker.

Mike gulped, half relieved; at least she was talking to him. Now he’d just have to scope out what was going on in her mind.

„How was your weekend?‟

Jesus, great. Now he was making small talk. Mike wanted to punch himself.

Jane grimaced, crunching her nose, her lips still smiling and it was so fucking adorable it was ridiculous and made Mike feel like a sappy fool.

„Yeah, sorry about that. I had a bad hangover and I think I got sick or something. Didn’t really want to see anybody.‟

Mike’s face stretched into a grin. That was good, wasn’t it? She hadn’t been avoiding just him then.

„Listen, about last - .‟

He was cut off by the bell. Fucking hell. The hallway was suddenly full of motion, all of his friends, including Jane, now hurrying off towards the first period and Mike had no choice but to follow.

If that stupid bell interrupted him one more time, he was going to fucking break it.

El couldn’t be more grateful to the schoolbell, that had, once again, saved her ass. She let out a shaky breath as she stormed down the hallway, away from Mike. Well, not away exactly, since he was following somewhere behind, going to the same class and all, but still. Away from having to talk to him. Away from having to look at him, pretending she was okay, that they were cool. It was harder than she’d thought it would be.
Damn it. She’d thought she’d had enough time to bury her feelings. Because, let’s face it, she had obviously overestimated Mikes and she was definitely not going to make that mistake again. She had decided to play it cool. Turned out, that was much easier said than done and here she was, breathless, her heart thumping in her throat, part of her high on seeing Mike, part of her hurting so bad she wished she could have skipped today. She was not ready for this. Ready to face him. Or for him to look at her just as he had last Friday, all intense and singular and drawing her in no matter how much she tried to resist.

And god, he must’ve been staring at her for the whole first period, because every single time she gave in and peeked at him, she was met with his gaze. To make it even more awkward, all of their friends kept glancing at both of them, quickly averting their eyes as soon as El noticed.

This was so not going the way she wanted it to. And what was Mikes problem anyway? He was the one who’d ditched her at the party, why was he acting all interested again all of a sudden?

Mike was up from his seat and at her table as soon as the bell rang. So much for her plans to subtly avoid him.

„Jane, can I talk to you?“

„You are talking to me.“ She answered with an easy smile, gathering her stuff.

„No, I mean, in private.“

El wanted to clench her teeth but somehow managed to force her jaw to relax. Her stupid heart was going crazy in her chest just from the implication.

„About what?“ She asked as nonchalantly as possible, getting up and waiting for Mike to step back so she could get past. The boy didn’t move, his eyes boring into hers and shit, this was getting out of hand way too fast.

El thought quickly. „Actually, now is not a good time. I have something I need to ask Mr. Walsh. Mr. Walsh!“ She yelled out the last part, waving for the elderly teacher who was about to leave the classroom. The man halted, thank god, and El pushed past Mike, giving her best to ignore the sensation of his bodywarmth rolling over her, leaving her weak in the knees.

„Mr. Walsh,“ She hurried forward and fell in with the mans steps. „I wanted to ask about the assignment for next week. I didn’t find enough material and wondered if you have any suggestions where to look.“

The teacher led her out of the classroom, heading towards the teachers lounge and started to drone out a list of books she should check. El let her concentration fade; she had finished this homework already. She looked back towards the classroom just in time to see Mike turn and head the other way.

She’d thought the sight would make her sigh in relief. But the sigh that escaped her lips resembled a sob instead.

By lunchtime Mike was sure he had seriously miscalculated the whole situation. He’d thought she
might be mad, but Jane didn’t seem to be mad. In fact, she didn’t seem to care much at all. He’d thought she would avoid him or not talk to him; nope again, she talked to him just fine. But she kept it superficial and him at a distance and damn it, it was frustrating. She was brushing him off, and, to be frank, he would’ve preferred her angry. Then he could just apologize and get it over with.

He squinted his eyes at the girl, sitting in front of him, squished in between Sara and Max, whispering something with the latter. She’d pulled Max to sit beside her as soon as they hit the table, like she’d known Mike was thinking about taking that seat himself. So now he was left with sitting opposite her, studying her features as she animatedly explained something quietly enough for him not to understand a word of what was being said. Jane wasn’t paying any attention to him and he missed the feel of her warm brown eyes on him.

He sighed and wolfed down the rest of his lunch in silence.

Mike tried one more time before the schoolday was over and El was so tired and on the edge by then it was hard to stay indifferent; it was like she’d been on a roller coaster all day, her emotions going up and down at ridiculous speed. He caught her by the arm as they were walking to their last class of the day and held her back, letting their friends get a couple of steps ahead of them. El leaned in to the touch, as minute as it was.

„Jane, can we just talk, please?“ He sounded as frustrated as she was at this point and El sighed.

„Of course. What is it?“

„Are you mad at me?“

Yes.

„No. “ She snorted. „Why would I be mad at you?“

Mike seemed thrown off by her answer and El felt a tinge of satisfaction.

„I don’t know. Because of Friday maybe?“ El raised her eyebrow and the boy hesitated. „You just seem... I don’t know. Something feels off. “

El let out a small laugh, hoping it didn’t sound as fake and shrill to Mike as it did to herself.

„You’re funny. Come on, we need to get to the class. “

She shook his hand off and hurried after the others, who had stopped outside the classroom and were now looking at the two of them, waiting. Mike didn’t fall behind.

„What are you doing after classes?“

Damn it, he was persistent.

„Heading home. Sara is grounded, so we need to go straight home or we’ll get in trouble.“

„You’re not grounded though? Can I see you later?“
“Oh.” She was almost tempted to give in, but then her mind very helpfully sent her a mental picture of Mike and that girl from Friday night, and her resolve solidified once again. „I really need to start on that assignment for Walsh today. I don’t think I’ll have time.“

She sent him an apologetic smile and although he seemed disappointed, he let it go.

El bolted away towards the class, choosing not to acknowledge the questioning glances and raised eyebrows her friends exchanged as she scurried past them. Because, come on, this was none of their business, no matter how dear they were to her.

Mike positively wanted to shake Jane to knock some sense into her. Or, alternatively, kiss her until they were both completely sensless. He’d been trying to sort this mess out since yesterday morning, hell, even since Saturday morning, and now it was Tuesday and he’d had no luck whatsoever. Why did girls have to be so irrational? And was there a handbook or something he could read to give him any idea how to deal with this shit?

It didn’t really surprise him when she failed to show up at the cafeteria at lunchtime. If she hadn’t before, she sure was beginning to avoid him now.

„Sara, where’s Jane?“ He demanded, his patience snapping. He was halfway through his food and more and more certain Jane would not be coming.

Sara sent him a long, considering look and hell, Mike wished girls would just say what was on their mind because this shit was nuts. Why couldn’t all girls be as easy to deal with as Max was? Although even she had started to act more like a girl lately, quite obviously influenced by her new friends and their ways.

„She went to the library.“ Sara answered just about as he was starting to wonder if he had to search the whole school. „Said she needed some material for her homework."

Mike shot up from his seat and dumped the half-eaten lunch, a decision he would probably regret later on. He could eat like a horse these days and still go hungry. But he was willing to risk it if it meant he could corner Jane in the library.

Lucky for him, the girl was indeed at the library. Not in the department she was supposed to be at, of course, if she’d actually been looking for stuff for her assignment; she was perusing the dictionaries instead. For a moment he just stood there and took her in; her head was tilted to the side, long fingers running over the backs of the books as if she was looking for something. Totally oblivious to the surroundings.

Mike smirked and snuck up to her in the narrow aisle, just in case she would think of running.

„Hello Jane.“ He greeted her only once he was directly behind her and the girl jumped and whirled around, trepidation clearly visible on her face.

„Mike!“ She took a step back. „Hi."

She was looking around like a trapped animal, obviously scheming how to escape and Mike stepped
closer again so he’d be able to stop her if necessary, because they were going to talk, god damn it.

„Are you avoiding me?“ He asked, getting straight to the topic.

Jane gulped, the nervous smile fading off of her face.

„No.“ Her eyes darted all around the place, looking at everything except him.

„Yes, you are."

Something in the girl cracked and for the first time Mike could see behind the mask she’d so carefully kept on for the last two days. Her eyes flashed and a series of emotions flickered over her expression as she finally snapped her gaze to him. God, she looked beautiful at that moment. And pissed. And... and hurt. Fuck.

„Yes, I am."

„Why?“

„Because I want to."

„Is this because of Friday?“

She didn’t answer and only rolled her eyes.

A thought came to him, making his chest expand with delight and he blurted it out, because, as usual, the filter between his brain and mouth just didn’t seem to work in critical situations.

„Are you jealous?“

Jane gasped indignantly, sputtering, but not getting any coherent words out. She tried to walk away but Mike quickly slammed his hand to the shelf to stop her. And then to the other side of her, so she wouldn’t get any ideas. His breath caught at the sudden closeness. But it was nothing compared to Jane, who was basically hyperventilating now. Mike would’ve grinned at that if the sensation of her basically in his arms wouldn’t have been so overwhelming. He swallowed, hard.

„Are you? Jealous?“ He asked again, keeping his eyes on Jane. Who was decidedly staring at a point above his left shoulder. „Because you saw me talking to that girl?“

He watched, fascinated, as a myriad of feelings raced across the girls face and his heart, impossibly, started beating even faster. Because, shit, there was definitely something going on between them and the fact made him heady.

And then Janes expression suddenly stilled and the mask was back on. First emotionless, but then it morphed into something he’d never seen on her face before; cold, sarcastic, almost bitter. He would’ve recoiled, but his body wasn’t cooperating and willing to step away from her.

„Talking?“ She asked, cocking an eyebrow and Mikes stomach fell. „Is that what they call it now?“

Shit. His hands fell away from the shelf and he took a step back, his mind going a million miles per second. This was way worse than he’d thought.

She’d seen the kiss. She had to have. He hadn’t told anyone. And none of his friends had given him any shit about it and they definitely would have if they’d known. Against all odds, Jane had somehow seen it. Shit, he’d never even considered that possibility. He was a fucking moron.
„You saw the...“ He gulped; he couldn’t even say it. Shit.

„You two sucking face? Yeah.“ The words were harsh and foreign, coming from the girl who’d always been so friendly and shy. He didn’t know what to say.

Janes face contorted into a mirthless smirk and she pushed off the shelf.

„Whatever. I’ll see you around, Wheeler.“

He let her walk away this time, not knowing what else to do.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to leave a kudos if you liked it!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I know, I know, again with the part 1 :D I’m sorry, but, apparently, I am unable to write short, or even normal length chapters. part 2 coming in 3-4 days, as usual.

And thank you for all of your lovely comments I have recieved thus far, I appreciate every single one of them very much!

Well, El had gotten what she’d wanted; Mike was staying away from her. Only, now that she had it, she wasn’t so sure this was what she truly wanted anymore. She’d seen him around during the morning, her mind still freakishly aware of every time he was in the same room with her, but he never ventured closer to her than ten feet. Except for lunch, where they’d sat opposite each other, at their usual seats, all awkward and quiet.

And this absolutely sucked.

Had it really been necessary for her to be a full out bitch in the library? The scorned and stubborn part of her wanted to punch herself for even thinking that and was screaming hell yes! while the other, the hopelessly-crushing-on-Mike part was in utter despair, much to her shame. Because seriously, how could she be so weak, wishing she could just walk up to him and beg if they could simply forget about the whole thing and carry on from where they left off on Friday night?

Even just thinking about the Friday night got her all flustered again, for both all the right and all the wrong reasons. Because yes, the end of the evening had gone all seven ways to hell, but the more time passed, the more she was also assaulted by memories of all the good that had happened.

Memories of how they’d danced, their bodies moving in the same rhythm. Of how Mikes hands felt on her waist, hot and heavy, sending tingles down her spine. Of how she’d been so sure he’d wanted to kiss her at several points during the party. Of how she’d wanted so badly for that to happen.

She couldn’t stop her mind from generating hundreds of different scenarios of how it all could have gone. Or stop herself from dreaming, hoping, against all odds, that it all still might go differently. If only she hadn’t gone and chased him away yesterday.

And if there was something even more confusing than her own emotional state, it was the way Mike was acting. El just didn’t get him. He’d gone and made out with another girl, ruining everything, but was now looking like he was the one who’s hurting. Like, what the hell?

The few times she’d been careless enough to meet his gaze, and it wasn’t that hard really, considering that even though he kept his distance he was still staring at her most of the time, she was left breathless by the swirling emotions in the dark depths of his eyes.

Shit. She was utterly failing at being over him.

But then again, he’d been a total dick and hurt her.

El was torn and confused. The constant ups and downs in her mood were beginning to drain her and
she found herself irritated and snapping at the slightest provocations. So, it wasn’t even her fault, really, that once the last class of the day, which just had to be P.E., rolled about, she was so past any rational behaviour it wasn’t even funny anymore.

Mike was positively in pain. Because, apparently, now that he was not welcomed to touch Jane, or even talk to her, actually, there was nothing he wanted to do more. Staying away from her hurt so bad, he could almost physically feel it. His hands were literally aching to grab hers, or better yet, to slide over her waist, bringing her close, holding her there; it didn’t help one bit that he now knew exactly what it would feel like. Or if she would even just smile at him or say hello, that would’ve been great too, at this point.

But he’d been a fucking idiot and now she wanted nothing to do with him. She’d called him Wheeler, for fucks sake. She’d never gone by his last name before.

And even though he wanted nothing more than to walk up to her and force her to listen and to forgive him, he chickened out every time. He had tried all morning to come up with words to say to Jane, but couldn’t form any coherent sounding sentences, so he’d just stayed away. Pining for her from a distance. For which the P.E. class actually provided a good opportunity for, since the teachers were being lazy this time and had put them to play dodgeball and now the boys were sitting on the bleachers, waiting for their turn, ogling at the girls in the meantime. Gym shorts were, you know, short.

He watched as Jane caught a ball and slammed it back towards the opposing team; she was very good at dodgeball.

Of course she was. Jane was amazing. Why wouldn’t she be good at this too. Although, he would’ve found her amazing no matter if she could play the game or not, if he was totally honest. And still, it was fascinating to watch how precise and agile she was.

Mike was so focused on Jane he didn’t pay attention to what else was going on around the court. So when Jane, once again having caught a ball, hurled it towards Stacy instead, he was completely caught off guard.

The ball hit the other girl smack in the face, with enough force for Stacy to topple over.

The boys on the bleachers erupted into various ouches and curses, but it was all muted by the high pitched whistle coming from one of the teachers.

„Miss Hopper!“ Mr. Ronson bellowed, while the female P.E. teacher hurried to Stacy, pushing the other curious girls out of the way. „What do you think you are doing?!“

Jane shrugged. „Playing dodgeball?“

„She’s in your team!“

„So my aim was off!“ Janes voice was rising too now and the teacher had had enough.

„To the principals office, right now, Miss Hopper!“
Mr. Ronson marched off towards the door and Jane groaned, her shoulders slumping in defeat as she followed.

„Wow.“ Lucas sounded shocked. „So Jane has a mean streak.“

„No she doesn’t.“ Mike answered automatically. There had to have been a reason, he was sure.

„Yeah that’s not it.“ Will agreed from beside him, watching the girls with squinted eyes.

The girls P.E. teacher was helping Stacy up now and Mike could see a big red splotch on the left side of the girl’s face, where the ball had hit her. The teacher guided her away, towards the locker rooms, yelling out instructions for the rest of them. „Everybody take five, we’ll be right back!“

The girls dispersed and Max and Sara walked over to them. Sara looked distraught.

„I just don’t get it what her problem is?!“ Mike could hear the exasperated question once they were near enough.

„Whos?“ Lucas asked. „Janes?“

„No. Jane was just...“ Sara shook her head and sighed. „I meant Stacy’s. She’s just been so nasty to me lately! And I don’t really get it! We were fine in the beginning, but ever since I-“

Sara halted in the middle of the sentence. „Oh.“

Mikes brows furrowed and he looked at his friends in confusion, just in time to see Will and Max exchange a knowing look. He felt out of the loop, but then again, Lucas and Dustin seemed just as baffled as he was.

„What do you mean she’s been nasty to you?“ Dustin questioned, stepping closer to Sara to place a hand on her waist, worry evident in his voice.

Sara was deep in her thoughts, not answering right away. „That’s... you know, never mind. Max, can I talk to you for a second?“

„Sara!“ Dustin whined, but the girl just pecked him on the cheek absentmindedly and pulled away, motioning for Max to come with her.

Max bit her lip but followed anyway, leaving the boys alone once more.

„Okay, you.“ Dustin pointed at Will. „Talk.“

Will rolled his eyes.

„No, talk! You always know what’s going on in girls heads. So spill, what was this all about?“

„Jesus, Dustin, think.“ Will deadpanned. „Why would Stacy be nasty to Sara?“

Dustin just splayed his hands out wide, indicating he had no clue and Will sighed in frustration.

„Okay, let’s put it this way. You remember when you had a crush on Stacy back in the eighth grade and she turned you down?“

Dustin nodded, his face apprehensive.

„Well, I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t turn you down anymore.“
Dustin looked gobsmacked and opened his mouth to say something, but their conversation was cut off as the gym door banged open and Mr. Ronson came back.

„Alright, switch! Girls, take a break, boys you’re on!“

Mike sighed and made his way over to the court.

Jane didn’t come back for the rest of the lesson.

El sat, arms crossed over her chest and waited. She could hear rumbling voices from inside the principals office but couldn’t make out the words.

They’d called her dad to school. And it was completely ridiculous. All she’d done was throw a ball in a class where she was supposed to do that, for gods sake. So why were they treating her like a criminal now?

Okay, maybe she didn’t need to hit Stacy that hard. But hell, she couldn’t bring herself to regret it either. Not after the way she’d seen Stacy maliciously hissing the word *penis-breath* in Saras face and Sara had just stood there, mouth hanging open but no words coming out, eyes blinking as if she was fighting back tears. Els feelings had crashed over her head in a frightening wave of fury and indignation and she’d reacted in Saras stead. And, damn it, she would do it all over again. Sara had always been nothing but nice to Stacy so this had been completely uncalled for.

Although she did kind of wish she’d not done it in front of all of their peers. El shuddered as she recalled all of the shocked looks she’d recieves; especially Mikes. She was pobably branded a weirdo now, a violent one at that.

The door creaked open and El raised her gaze, trying to gauge her dads mood. To her relief, he just looked tired and annoyed, but not mad.

She got up and fell into step with him, neither of them saying a word until El had gone and gathered her stuff, left the car keys and a note to Saras locker and exited the building.

„You’re suspended.“ Dad finally grunted, as they walked towards his car.

El blanched. She hadn’t been expecting that.

„For tomorrow.“

Oh. Only for a day then. She let her breath out. It wasn’t so bad. Maybe she could even use a day off, actually. A day away from all of this mess and high school stuff. She could go to the Lab and bury herself in the activities she was so used to for the past eight years. That she, sometimes, even kind of missed.

„What did that girl do?“ Dad asked, waking her from her reverie and El felt warmth and comfort spreading in her chest. That was dad for you; never questioning her motives or sense of moral.

„She bad-mouthed Sara.“
Dad clench his jaw and sighed. His hand came to rest around her shoulder, embracing her briefly and El leaned in to the loving touch.

„You did good, kid. You did good.“

El’s face stretched into a small satisfied smile.

„But. I don’t ever want to be called to school again, you hear me? So, keep it lowkey, next time, will you?“

He ruffled her hair like she was seven instead of soon to be seventeen and El couldn’t help but laugh, swatting his hand away.

„What do you mean you’re not coming?“ Sara blurted out, the stunned look on her face almost comical.

„I mean that I’m not coming today.“ El looked down, fidgeting with her bracelets.

She had been hiding out in the Lab since Wednesday afternoon and even now, on a Friday morning, she couldn’t find the strength to leave the place just yet. Even though she kind of, sort of missed her friends. And dad, whom she hadn’t seen since Wednesday either. He’d had an overnight shift the day before, hence Sara and El had stayed at the Lab for the night instead of going home.

And she didn’t even try to deny that she missed seeing Mike, too.

What she definitely didn’t miss though was all of the stupid drama she’d been through earlier this week. In the comfortable familiarity of the Lab and its usual routines, that demanded her attention and shifted things into perspective in the bigger picture, she could finally feel some sense coming back to her. And she wasn’t sure she wanted to let that sanity go again.

„So you’re skipping?“

El didn’t even bother to answer and Sara huffed in annoyance.

„Fine, suit yourself. It’s not like I can drag you with me. But I seriously think you’re making a mistake here.“

Sara stomped away from her and El sighed. Her sister wasn’t quite her usual cheery self either these past two days. The mess with Stacy was bothering her more than she let on, and if El didn’t think it utterly ridiculous, she would’ve said Sara was actually worried about the whole situation. That, plus the fact that she was still grounded and unable to spend time with Dustin, was making her sister grumpier than El had seen her in a long time.
Her plans to skip were blown out the window an hour later, when she was just on her way to get some gear for a trek out in the woods to build her stamina.

Dad stomped down the hallway towards him, his face set and El was suddenly reminded of Sara earlier; the two were so similar when irritated. Els stomach fell. Sara must have told him she was skipping. Shit.

She didn’t even get a hello.

„Let’s go.“

„Dad...“

„Let’s. Go.“

El knew better than to argue and followed him.

„You’re going to school. I swear to god, you’re going to school or I will take you out.“

„Dad!“

„No, don’t dad me!“ He stopped and turned to wiggle his pointer finger at her. „You and Sara were the ones who wanted to go to school in the first place! So now you will go to school, god damn it. It’s bad enough you got suspended but now you’re skipping too? Don’t test me!“

He resumed his fast pace and led El straight out the door, glumly nodding to the people they passed.

„Can I at least go and change?“

„No.“ Dad basically growled. „You’re already late.“ He quickly scanned her outfit. „It will do.“

This so would not do but El knew she had no say in the matter at this point; dad had already made up his mind and she didn’t want to anger him any further, in case he would actually act out on his threats. He could, if he was pushed past the breaking point.

So she kept quiet and let him drive her to the school, resigning to her fate.

Sara came to the school alone in the morning and Mikes stomach plummeted with disappointment. He missed Jane. It had been bad enough that she’d been suspended for a day, but that she also failed to show up today got him wondering. Was Jane really so pissed, she would even go so far as to skip school to avoid him?

He’d thought about asking Sara, but the girl looked strained enough as it was so Mike decided not to. He would survive another day without seeing Jane. Probably.

Only, as it turned out, he didn’t have to.

They were halfway through the second class of the day when the door opened and Jane walked in. His heart lept in his chest, as if a heavy weight had been lifted. He hungrily took in every detail of
her, as the girl apologized to the teacher and sat down in a free seat at the front of the room.

A wide grin spread over Mikes face. Jane was there.

Because, if there was anything worse than not being able to touch her or talk to her, it was not being able to see her at all. So he used every opportunity to just stare at her, and once the class ended and Sara dragged her away to their lockers, whispering something urgently, Mike stalked after them and made himself busy at his own locker; a perfect spot to spy on them some more.

Jane was looking different today. She had her hair up in a french braid, and her clothes were... different. She was dressed all black from head to toe, in a very form fitting turtleneck sweater and some kind of pants. The weirdest part of her outfit had to be the combat boots; something Mike found strangely appealing. And he wasn’t even into the theme, but Jane carried it out like she was born with it. It looked... hot.

And here he was, not allowed to even go near her. Shit.

Mike didn’t even notice Lucas was there until his friend spoke.

„Okay, why are you looking like a lovesick puppy that’s just been kicked?“

Mike sighed but didn’t turn to Lucas, motioning his head towards Jane instead.

„Oh. Still not talking to you? Come on man, why don’t you just apologize?“

„I tried.“

Lucas furrowed his brows. „And?“

„It’s complicated.“

„Well, then uncomplicate it.“

Mike rolled his eyes. „Easy for you to say. You’ve only ever had to deal with Max.“

„What the hell does that even mean?“

„You know, she’s never much for drama.“

Lucas guffawed, gaining Mikes attention. His friend sent him a pointed look.

„You seriously think me and Max have never had a fight? Have you met her? Trust me, she can be crazy alright, if she wants to.“

Yeah, okay, so Max did have her quirks. Maybe Mike had just never really thought about it until now, because it wasn’t his problem. Lucas sighed exasparatedly.

„Look, point is, whatever happened, girls just want to hear they were right. And you were wrong. And that you’re sorry and wont ever do it again. And, most importantly, that they always come first.“

Mike raised his eyebrows in surprise.

„Shit, and here I always thought Will was the only one of us who knew anything about girls.“

Lucas punched his shoulder and Mike couldn’t help but laugh.
„Come on man! I’ve managed to keep a girlfriend for three years now. Have some faith! Just talk to her.“

„You think I haven’t tried to? She wont even look at me! I don’t...“ Mike needed to pause for a moment. „I don’t think she wants to have anything to do with me anymore. I think I blew it for good.“

Lucas just shook his head. „Damn, you’re dense.“

Mike shot him a glare and the boy continued.

„I mean, look. Judging by how upset she is, this matters a great deal to her, okay? The only way for you to completely fuck it up at this point is to give up. Just talk to her, alright?“

Mike didn’t answer and after a consoling slap on his shoulder, Lucas left him to his thoughts.

Maybe Lucas was right. Maybe he could just tell Jane everything, no matter how stupid it was. Although, damn it, he wasn’t sure he himself would’ve believed this shit if it wasn’t him it happened to; it sounded more like a really ridiculous excuse, right up there with the likes of the dog ate my homework. But what other option did he have left? He didn’t want to lie to her, and, to be honest, at this point, truth could actually be the best chance he even had.

And it wasn’t like he would even be able to give up anyway. He needed to do something.

„What the hell were you thinking?“ Sara hissed at her and El rolled her eyes.

„Like I already said, dad didn’t let me go and change!“

„What the hell was he thinking? How can you show up at school like this? You look like a... a punk, for gods sake. And what if somebody starts to suspect something? This looks highly suspicious, you know!“

„Would you just calm down?“ El was beginning to lose her nerve. „You see ghosts at every corner!“

„Just because you don’t care about this place doesn’t mean that I don’t! Can you please not ruin this!“

El was about to explode but, thank god, the situation was saved by Dustin who swept in, out of nowhere, and pulled Sara into a hug. Not in the mood to see their PDA, El used the opportunity and took off towards the girls bathroom. Because, Mike was keeping tabs on her, again, and even though she was going crazy with all the distance between them, she wasn’t in the mood to speak to him either. Not today, while she was feeling so awkward in her usual Lab attire that had already gotten enough attention from other students. If she wasn’t considered a weirdo before, she sure was now; Sara was right about that.

To add to her troubles, she was just washing her hands when there was a sudden gasp from behind her and Max stepped into view. El hadn’t noticed her enter, too consumed by her own thoughts.

„What is that?“ She grabbed Els hand and twisted the wrist upwards, taking in the small tattoo El had
so vigilantly kept hidden so far. She had none of her usual bracelets or band aids on today and with the sleeve pushed out of the way so it wouldn’t get wet, the nondescript 011 was clearly visible on the pale skin.

*Shit.*

„Is this... Is this a tattoo? A real one?“ Max looked awed, running her finger across the numbers, as if trying to see if it would smudge.

Els mind raced for an explanation. She’d thought she could just keep it hidden; how naive of her, in retrospect. She’d never considered that she might become so close to new people, that they had to notice it sooner or later.

„Yeah, it’s... real.“

Smooth, real smooth.

„Oh-one-one. Eleven. What does it mean?“ Max finally let go of her arm and El used the opportunity to push the sleeve back down, hiding the tattoo.

„It’s... It’s my lucky number. Sort of. It’s... how old I was when I finally got rid of cancer.“

„Oh.“ Max didn’t pry any further.

„Yeah. I got it a year ago, in secret. My parents went nuts when they found out! Said I looked like a runaway prisoner.“ El rolled her eyes for good measure. „So I promised them I’d keep it out of sight. Not many people know I have it. I’d like to keep it that way, if you don’t mind.“

Max nodded. „Of course. Your tattoo, your call.“ Her face stretched into a grin. „But it’s the freaking coolest thing I’ve ever seen! If it were mine, I’d show it of. All the time.“

El laughed at the other girls earnest confession, feeling strangely lighthearted. It took her a moment, before it clicked; she’d been afraid that Max would judge or wouldn’t understand. She should have known better than to doubt her.

Max sent her a warm smile, before suddenly looking awkward. „Anyway, I just wanted to, you know, know if you’re alright.“

Els heart grew two sizes bigger. It was incredibly humbling and heartwarming to be cared for.

„I’m...“ The polite lie died on her lips. „No. Not yet. But, I will be. Thank you.“

„Okay.“ Max nodded. „You know you can come and talk to me any time, okay? Just throwing it out there.“

„Okay.“

El felt so much better already. Max was great.

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By the end of the schoolday Mike had finally decided to stop being a coward and approach Jane. Because, if he didn’t do it now, he would not see her for the whole weekend and it just wasn’t
acceptable. Or even bearable.

Jane finally appeared at her locker, and Mike drew a deep breath, forcing his legs to move forward. It got easier with each step and he almost couldn’t believe he was really doing it.

Until a girl stepped right into his way and he came to sudden stop, almost bumping into her.

„Hi Mike.“

Melanie.

Shit.

„Melanie. Hi.“ He tried to step past her but the girl continued, stopping him, sending him a flirty smile.

„So you coming to Sean’s place tomorrow?“

*Seriously?* She was doing this now?

„Uhm...“ His eyes snapped back to Jane; the girl was turned away from them and was shoving stuff into her bag. The lights above their head flickered for a moment and Sara cursed, causing Jane to still and look at her sister, her eyes wide.

Where was he again? Right. Melanie. „No, I don’t...“ He watched, confused, as Sara grabbed a hold of Janes arm and dragged her away for the second time that day. Dustin, Will, Max and Lucas took one look at each other and as soon as the girls had rounded the corner, took off after them.

„Mike?“

Mike wasn’t even listening anymore, hurrying off after his friends. He caught them just as they were creeping behind the next corner, waiting to follow the girls unnoticed. Sara dragged Jane into a secluded hallway ending with an exit into the schools backyard. The rest of them waited for a moment before risking a careful peek.

Sara and Jane were standing in the middle of the corridor, facing each other, Sara muttering furiously and Jane looking frustrated, trying to explain something; their voices were too low for Mike to make out the words.

Until they started getting louder and louder and single words started to make sense. His heart constricted as he heard his name amongst them.

„Jesus Christ Jane!“ Sara exclaimed at one point, having lost control. „Do you have to be such a social retard?“ Mike felt the others wince beside him at the harsh words, just like he had. „Can’t you just act normal for once?“

„Normal?“ Jane was yelling now, too. „Like you, normal? People are saying you’re a slut, Sara!“

The slap that followed echoed through the space so loud and sharp Mike felt like he’d been he one who got hit.

„Shit.“ Max whispered in the quiet, the only one of them not speechless.

Mike watched, unable to move, as Jane slowly turned her face back towards Sara, who was now panting, enraged, her hands on her hips. Waiting.
And then something in the atmosphere changed. A subtle shift of a leg. A slight balancing of bodyweight. A hand forming a fist. And suddenly they weren’t looking at two angry sisters anymore; it reminded Mike more of some scene from the fantasy books he so liked to read. Jane, all dark and sinister, lowering herself into a crouch as if getting ready to bounce. And then Sara, standing there, all righteous and proud and light versus Janes darkness. Fucking hell. What was this?

What followed was like something out of the Street Fighter game. Jane actually did bounce, throwing a punch towards Sara but the other girl was ready and easily deflected it, guiding Janes punch right past her and answering with her own punch instead. Jane didn’t quite manage to avoid it and the fist connected with her side, making her grunt, but she recovered quickly and hooked a leg behind Saras to send her toppling over. Sara should’v’e fallen, hard, but somehow she turned it into a roll and was back up in a flash, just in time to jump up as Jane aimed a low kick at her. It had only lasted for a few seconds when Dustins voice interrupted it.

„Holy shit!“

The scene in front of Mike froze, as the sisters became aware they were being watched. El saw them first, as she was the one facing them, and while Sara was turning away from her to look, she sprinted off towards the other end of the corridor, to the doors leading outside.

Sara cursed, loud, when she noticed and took off after her.

„Jane! Jane! Oh no you don’t! Jane, get back here!“

The rest of them followed them as soon as Sara was on the move.

Jane had enough of a headstart and she managed to get to the door and wrench it open, tumble out and bang it back closed a millisecond before Sara reached it.

„Jane! Get back here! Jane!“

Sara rattled the door, but it wouldn’t budge, probably stuck from the force it had crashed closed with. Sara slammed her palms against the glass, frustrated and furious. Jane, clearly visible through the glass, backed away from them. She was breathing heavily, eyes wide and a trickle of blood beginning to seep out of her nose.

„Jane! Open this right now! You're not leaving me alone in this mess!“ Sara tried once more. „Jane!“ Jane turned away and Sara kicked the door. „Eleven!“

Mike could see Jane flinch but she didn’t turn back and hurried away, leaving them to the other side of the door.

Sara growled and slumped down to the floor, hiding her face in her hands.

„Shit.“

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the kind of cliffy :) 

Kudos? Comment? Thank you for reading!
Chapter 12

„Um.“ Mike watched as Dustin edged closer to Sara, crouched down next to her and extended his hand to rest on her shoulder, careful and slow, as if dealing with a wild animal. „Honey?“

Sara’s head snapped up and for a moment Mike was worried she would lash out. She didn’t; she grabbed a hold of Dustin instead and buried her face in his chest, her heavy breathing rasping over the silence.

Dustin relaxed and held her close, murmuring sweet nothings to her.

It lasted very briefly though and then Sara drew a final deep breath and pushed herself up from the floor. She looked at them, biting her lip, still angry, but also somewhat jittery and almost scared and Mike didn’t really know her well enough to read much more into her expression.

Lucas was the first to break the silence.

„Are you two secretly ninjas or something?“ He blurted out, crossing his hands over his chest.

Sara looked out the door, towards where Jane had disappeared and huffed in annoyance.

„We’ve had... self defense classes.“

„Self defense.“ Lucas raised an eyebrow.

Sara turned back to the rest of them, now clearly irritated. „The teacher was a black belt.“ She growled.

Lucas was about to say something more but Sara stopped him this time. „Can we not talk about this right now? What I wanna talk about is you.“

She pointed straight at Mike, her eyes flashing angrily again, and he suddenly wished he could take a step back. His back was already against the wall though.

„Now, I know my sister can be fucking mental, obviously,“ Sara’s voice had grown into a growl again and she took a pause to cool before continuing. „But even she is not that crazy.“ She shook her head before snapping her gaze back to Mike. „I’m gonna be blunt here; god knows Jane can be socially awkward and what not, but even she wouldn’t flip a switch just because she saw you talking to another girl. So, what am I missing here?“

Shit.

He’d considered telling Jane, but now it seemed he would have to explain to all of his friends. He gulped.

„Talk!“ Sara demanded and Mike sighed, letting himself slide into a sitting position.

He fidgeted with his sleeve, feeling his face grow hot.

„She saw me and that girl kissing last Friday.“

„Jesus Christ!“ Max exclaimed at the same time as Lucas went: „What the hell man!“
Will groaned and sat down next to him and Dustin was pacing now, shaking his head in disbelief.

Yeah, he’d known they would give him shit about it, hadn’t he?

Sara was staring at him like a madwoman.

„So you’re telling me you led my sister on for a whole fucking evening only to go and kiss another girl? ’Cause I so want to kick your ass right now.“

„And, apparently, she totally could.“ Dustin intersected.

„Dustin, baby, not helping!“

Mike raised his hands in a placating manner. „For the record, she kissed me and—“, „Seriously?!“ Dustin cut in again. „How does that even change anything?!“

„Alright, alright!“ Mike yelled. „Never mind!“

„No, okay. Let me rephrase then,“ Sara gritted her teeth. „You let my sister think you were into her and then went and made out with another girl? Why the hell would you do that to Jane?!“

Shit, it sounded harsh if it was put like that and Mike pulled his hands through his hair in frustration. „It’s... it’s not like that. I’d never do that to Jane. Never. She’s...“ Shit. „I like her. A lot. More than I’ve ever liked anyone.“ Mike gulped at his own confession.

Saras brows furrowed. „What the hell was this then?“

Where should he even start? From the beginning?

„It’s a long story.“

„I’ve got time.“ Sara barked, impatient.

Mike drew a long breath. „I thought I maybe knew this girl.“

His friends fidgeted, exchanging exasperated glances, already knowing the story. At least, they thought they did. Mike felt awkward as shit, but continued.

„Back in the summer, I...“ Okay, so maybe he didn’t need to be too honest. „We were out at the quarry one night with a bunch of guys, drinking and stuff and... well, basically, I almost drowned. But somebody got me out of water and... and saved my life. It was two girls.“

Sara was piercing him with her gaze, perfectly still and her face void of emotions.

„Go on.“ She huffed as the pause stretched too long for her liking. Mike felt like an idiot.

„I never found out who they were. They ran away before the others came. I don’t know why.“

„Uhuh.“

Shit. Sara looked wary. She probably didn’t even believe him.

„And I swear I’m not making this up just to cover my ass!“

Dustin sighed and jumped in, helping, for once. „It probably is true.“ He explained to Sara.
Although none of us saw any girls, but the gist of it, true. Somebody did drag him out and gave him CPR before the rest of us even made it to him.

Sara let out a long breath.

Okay, this story is very fascinating and all, but what does it have to do with this mess?

I’ve been trying to find them since then.

Okay. Sara nodded slowly, as if trying to think along. And this girl at the party, she was one of them?

Damn it.

No.

Sara blinked, looking more confused than angry now, thank god. And now you lost me again.

I thought she might be!

So you kissed her.

Hey, she kissed me, and-

Alright, enough of this already! Will shouted over the bickering, startling everybody into stunned silence. For fucks sake! Can we just get to the point? Where does you making out with this girl fit in?

That’s exactly what I’ve been wondering. Lucas agreed, sending Mike a pointed look. What the hell dude?

Fuck. They certainly weren’t making it any easier. Mike pulled himself together.

I thought if she kissed me I would know. If she was that same girl.

He was met with four sets of blank stares from his friends. Sara was the only one who wasn’t looking at him, her gaze unfocused and brows knitted together.

I didn’t tell you guys. One of the girls, at the quarry... well, she-

Kissed you. Sara cut in, sounding awed.

Mike was impressed; Saras deduction skills were obviously way better than that of his friends, who were still staring at him, speechless.

Until they weren’t anymore and all the boys started talking at once.

And you didn’t tell us?

So that’s why you were so hung up on this!

Shit, man, I thought we were your friends!

You guys thought I was nuts when I told you there were two girls there in the first place! How as I supposed to tell you about this?!?

That shut his friends up again and Mike drew a breath, trying to collect himself before he turned back
to Sara.

„So... that’s it, basically. I thought she could be that girl, so... so we kissed. And Jane saw. “

Sara let herself lean back against the wall, some of the tension leaving her.

„So you’ve been running around kissing frogs, hoping that one of them could be the princess.“

Lucas and Will had the audacity to laugh and Mike shot them a glare.

„No! Jesus.“ He felt his ears heat up from embarassment. „That was just one time!“

Sara smirked and Mike was relieved; the worst seemed to be over. But then she had to go and ruin it again.

„And what would you have done if this was the girl you’d been looking for?“

Why was she so intent on torturing him?

„Well she wasn’t.“

„But what if she was?“ Sara insisted. „Would you have blown Jane off then without any regrets? You’re saying you like Jane, but...“

Mike groaned. How was he supposed to answer that? If he was completely honest with himself, he wasn’t sure what he would have done. He hadn’t thought that far. Sara didn’t budge.

„No, seriously. What if there’ll be another girl who could potentially be this... mystery girl? Will you just run off again? Because, I will not allow you anywhere near Jane if-.“

„No!“ Mike cut her off, not wanting to hear anymore. „No! I’m done with this, I swear! No more looking for the mystery girl! I just... I just want Jane to talk to me again.“

Sara exhaled and pushed away from the wall, taking a couple of idle steps. Mike hesitated.

„Do you think she will give me another chance?“

Sara threw her head back and laughed; it was hard to tell if she was amused or hysterical at this point. „Did you even see her this week?“ She demanded, cocking an eyebrow at him. „You’re both idiots.“

Mike was about to take offense when Sara elaborated.

„For thinking you could possibly stay away from each other.“

A spark of happiness shot through Mike; something he hadn’t felt for almost a week now. Sara sounded so sure.

The admission seemed to have broken most of the tension and Mike could see his friends beginning to relax. Will slowly got up, rolling his shoulders and Lucas uncrossed his arms to run a hand over his hair.

„Sara.“ Max inquired, filling the silence once more. She’d been quiet for most of the time, watching the exchange, brows furrowed, lost in her own thoughts.

„Hmm?“
„What’s eleven?“

Sara looked thrown by the question. „Eleven?“

„Yeah. You know, you yelled eleven. Before.“

Sara nodded, rubbing her forehead, remembering. „Oh, that. It’s... it’s this thing we do. On a scale of one to ten. I was so angry at her I wasn’t even in the ballpark anymore. So it was eleven.“

Something about that explanation and overall situation tugged at Mikes memories but his brain was too fried to follow this inkling.

Sara let out a long sigh and ran her hands down her jeans. „I need to get going. Still grounded.“ She smiled sadly, pulling Dustin in for a hug. And a kiss. That lasted and lasted and Mike was beginning to get uncomfortable, feeling as if he was invading their private moment, and apparently he wasn’t the only one, because Lucas was already rolling his eyes too.

They didn’t interrupt though and waited it out. Sara was the first one to pull away, to catch her breath.

„I guess I’ll see you on Monday then.“ She murmured sadly, and now it was Dustins turn to sigh.

Sara pulled away completely and sent them all a small smile, waving goodbye as she pushed the door open and walked down the path Jane had taken earlier.

It only registered a couple of minutes later, when Mike was back at his locker; the door had opened without any problems.

El had regretted her actions the second she was out of that door and looking at Sara on the other side of it, enraged, but also frightened. But it was too late; Sara was in there with all of the rest of her friends, and Mike, and she was too much of a coward to face them right then.

Plus, even though she had been asking for it, Sara had slapped her! They’d had fights before, sure, and they practiced fighting every week for gods sake, going up against each other a fair amount of times, but this... this was personal. No punch had ever stung as bad as that slap. And crap, did they have to be so foolish and get into a real fight then? This was so stupid, their dad would ship them straight out of Hawkins and Hawkins High if he ever found out.

El sat down on the curb beside their car. She was angry, yes, but she couldn’t just abandon Sara in school; she was going to wait until she showed up.

If she even did show up, of course, after all that went down. And it was all Els fault. She wanted to kick herself. Her being moody over that stupid drama with Mike had led to this. Sara had been right to be mad; if El let her emotions take over like that and lost control, letting her powers seep out... This just couldn’t happen.

Apparently, easier said than done, because the moment she’d seen Melanie cut Mike off and heard her ask him about his plans on Saturday, all sensible thoughts and self control had left her. To make
things worse, Melanie reminded her so much of that girl from Fridays party; the blond and pretty type. *Mikes* type, obviously. And, as irrational as it had been, she’d resented Sara so much that moment for being that type also, she’d lashed out at her with more malice than she’d ever expected from herself.

Damn it. What was *wrong* with her?

The tears came suddenly, the first few fat drops splashing against her knees surprising her. And then she was breaking, deep, convulsive sobs ripping through her insides.

How could she have done this to Sara of all people? Sara was more than a friend. More than a sister, even. Their circumstances had led to a bond between them that had no parallels. No other person, even those who were otherwise intimate with Els whole life, could completely understand what she was going through. But Sara, she was in the same boat with her, all of the crazy stuff and powers and all. And now here they were, falling apart because of stupid boy problems. El felt rotten.

So that’s how Sara found her, curled into herself, with snot beginning to drip from her nose, crying like she was a kid who’d just lost her favorite teddy bear.

Sara took one look at her and rushed to her side, pulling out a handkerchief and going full mom mode in a matter of seconds.

„Oh, El!“ She crouched down beside her and gave her the hanky, before pulling her in for a hug and patting her hair. „Shhh. Don’t cry! It’s okay!“

„No, it’s... it’s not.“ El blew her nose, the sound loud and wet. „I’m ruining everything.“

„Shh, no, it’s okay! Everythings okay! Come on, let’s get in the car.“

El let herself be pulled up and pushed into the passenger seat, Sara gently, but firmly taking the carkeys from her and getting behind the wheel herself.

„I’m sorry!“ She blurted out once she was sure she could speak without her voice breaking into sobbing again. „I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have run.“

Sara looked angry for a moment but then her face stretched into a grin and she let out a bout of laughter.

„My god, this was ridiculous! Running was a good idea, actually. Just, next time, don’t leave me behind, okay?“

„I promise.“

Her sister smiled at that and the tightness in Els chest lessened considerably.

„So, what happened?“

„Oh you are *not* gonna believe what I have to tell you.“ Sara shook her head, her eyes going big. „I figured attack is the best defense so I confronted Mike instead of letting them corner me. And you, missy, have some serious explaining to do! Why didn’t you tell me? That you saw Mike kissing that girl!“

„Oh.“ El shrunk into the seat, her cheeks feeling warm all of a sudden. They’d talked about *that*?

Sara sent her a pointed look. „Yeah, *oh*. Mike told us everything. And here I was, thinking you’d
completely lost it."

El didn’t know what to say and Sara sighed.

„Just... you’ve never kept a secret from me before. We usually keep them together. From the rest of the world.“ She sounded so small and El felt awful again.

„I’m sorry! I didn’t know how to tell!“ El hid her face in her hands. „It was so embarrassing."

Sara snorted. „No. If anybody should be embarrassed, it’s Mike.“ El dared to peek at her sister and saw her shaking her head, but then a megawatt smile broke through her somber expression. „I swear, you are not gonna believe this! This is absolutely ridiculous!“

„What is?“

Sara laughed and pushed the gas pedal to go faster. „No, I’m gonna tell you when we get home! There’s no way I’m gonna miss your reaction to this. No way!“

El stared at Sara, her mouth slack, hanging open, too stunned to even blink.

Sara had, and this was so becoming an annoying habit by now, been right. Again. Because this was indeed ridiculous. And stupid. And, possibly, the most romantic thing El had ever encountered in her entire sixteen years of life.

„He’s been trying to find me?“

The smug grin on Saras face got even more smug.

„Yes. Seems you left quite an impression on lover boy."

„And he thinks he will know its me by... by kissing me?“

Sara nodded and wiggled her eyebrows, looking so silly El had to chuckle before the absurdity of the situation was overwhelming her again.

„I thought... I thought he wouldn’t even remember it.“ She could feel the telltale blush creeping up her neck. „It’s been months!“

„You haven’t forgotten.“ Sara remarked nonchalantly and El knew better than to even try to deny it.

Yes, she still remembered. Although she wasn’t sure how much of that memory was real anymore, or if she had kept adding to it in her mind each time she called it forth. Did Mike really think he would recognize her by a kiss? It seemed so nonsensical.

Damn it. But what if he would? And would link them to that night? She and Sara had agreed long ago to keep it under the wraps, especially since they started school and began to hang out with that particular party. It wasn’t like they could expose themselves or even explain.

Of course, fearing Mike would know it was her by kissing her was completely bonkers because that
would assume that he would, at one point, actually kiss her; and, she was so not ready to go there right now or her brain might just explode.

El groaned and let her forehead slump against the kitchen table. „This is making my head ache."

„Which part of it?“ Saras voice was amused and light. „Is it that Mike has been pining for you on two completely separate levels or that you were, basically, just jealous of yourself, or is it the fact you two are both such dumbasses?“

„I was not jealous of myself.“ El argued. „Mike kissed another girl."

„Whom he thought was you, kind of."

„And that’s completely crazy. That girl was nothing like me.“ The thought triggered another. „By the way why did he think that girl was me, from that night?"

Sara furrowed her brows. „I don’t know. I didn’t ask. But I don’t think it even matters. Not anymore. He promised me he was done with hunting for that mystery girl."

So he would just give up? Els face twisted at the thought and Sara, being Sara, of course understood perfectly what was going on in Els mind and burst out laughing.

„El, you can’t seriously be annoyed at that! The girl he’s giving it up for, is you, too!“

Jesus, this was so fucked up. And also, so right. If only El had any idea where to go from here.

„What does that all mean, Sara? What happens next? I can’t just tell Mike the truth. We’ve kept it from him, from all of them for so long! Or even worse, what if they find out on their own? Or what if Mike will-„, Her voice caught. „What if he will kiss me and know it was me and oh god Sara what will we do then?"

„Breathe, El, breathe! You really think he will know? I doubt it. But, even if he will, we’ll... We’ll deal with it when it actually happens, okay? No need to over complicate this. And besides, they’re our friends. And more. They won’t bite our heads off, they care. I mean, they let todays incident go pretty easily. Seems they were more worried about us, than the fact that we are, and I quote Lucas here, ’secretly ninjas or something’."

El burst into giggles; she could definitely imagine Lucas saying something like this.

And maybe Sara was right about this, too. Maybe she should give their friends some credit. Even though El felt she and Sara had hardly earned their trust, with all of their scheming and secrets, but it wasn’t like they had any alternatives; it was either that or they’d have to leave. And god, did she not want to leave! Not now.

Mike.

Her heart, instead of shrinking in on itself, like it had every time she had thought about him for the past week, swelled instead. Until it exploded into a thousand butterflies rummaging around in her stomach, fluttering against her ribcage and making her breaths come short. Her mind was suddenly flooded with all the possibilities she had thought were lost to her. There was still a chance for them. Considering what she now knew, the next time they would meet... everything would be different. She would be different. Her nerves twisted into a tight bundle.

„Oh my god Sara, this is so crazy.“ She squeezed her eyes shut and took long, steadying breaths. „What will I even say to him?“
„Aw, El, relax!“ Sara patted her hair as if she was a baby. „At this point, it doesn’t even matter. He’ll be happy you’re talking to him at all, trust me. And you have until Monday, you’ll figure it out by then.“

Monday. That left her almost three days to come to terms with this. Before she would see him again.
The time seemed way too short. And far too long.

Mike threw his biology book to the side and ran his hands through his hair, making it stand up at awkward angles. He really needed to study, he was already falling behind on his homework, considering he’d gotten almost nothing done last weekend and had barely made a minimum effort during the week.

But how could he, when Jane was all he could think about?

Had Sara already talked to her? She must’ve, it was Saturday, and he seriously doubted Sara would be capable of holding this information to herself for any extended period of time. Most likely she’d told Jane as soon as they saw each other again, even if they had been fighting earlier; girls were like that.

And that meant that Jane now knew. He couldn’t keep himself from stupidly hoping she would maybe call him. Or seek him out. Whichever. His brain went through different scenarios of how she might’ve reacted, of what she could have thought about all of this.

If she would forgive him.

He pushed away from his desk, frustrated, resigning to the fact that he would not get any work done right now. He’d read one page for three times or more and nothing stuck. Maybe he should call his friends instead and see what they had planned for today. There was always tomorrow to catch up on his school stuff.

He was halfway downstairs when the doorbell chimed. Before he could stop himself, his mind had already jumped to a crazy conclusion that it might be Jane and he almost tumbled down the stairs, his heart doing weird things in his chest.

„I’ll get it!“ He yelled, hurrying to the front door and yanking it open, maybe with a little bit too much of enthusiasm, hoping he would see a certain girl standing there.

„Oh.“

Well, there was a girl alright. But not the one he had been expecting.

„Oh?“ Max mocked. „Well hello to you too, Wheeler.“

Lucas cocked an eyebrow, smirking. „Who were you waiting for?“ He asked, amused, making Mikes face heat up.

„Never mind. What are you two doing here?“
Max’s expression turned serious and she and Lucas exchanged a glance before looking back at him.

„We want to talk to you about something.“ She finally said.

Lucas nodded, „We wanted Dustin and Will here too, actually, but Will is busy and we couldn’t get a hold of Dustin, so...“

Mikes initial disappointment was giving way to intrigue and he motioned them in.

„Come on, let’s go to the basement.“

After the traditional round of pleasentries with his mom and waiting, until she made them a platter of sandwiches to take down to the basement, they were finally sitting down around the old table they usually had their D&D campaigns at.

Max and Lucas were exchanging animated glances again and Mike wanted to roll his eyes.

„Well? Get to it! What did you want to talk about?“

Lucas gestured for Max to speak and the redhead pulled a deep breath before beginning.

„Have you ever considered Jane and Sara might be the girls?“

Mike blinked. „What?“

Max sighed and reiterated, slower this time.

„Have you ever considered Jane and Sara might be the girls?“

„What girls?“

Max looked at him like he was an idiot and Lucas snorted.

„Jesus, man, what girls... The girls from the quarry, you wanker.“

Mike burst out laughing. He came to an abrupt stop when the others didn’t join in, staring at him with annoyance instead.

„You’re serious!“ He realized.

Max only raised his eyebrows and Mike cursed.

„Of course I did. “ He ran his hands through his hair and wished he had something to fidget with. „The very first time we saw them, at that ice cream shop. I mean, how often do we happen upon two unknown girls in Hawkins, of course I wondered. But.“ He sent his friends a pointed look. „Like you may have already noticed, neither of their names is Elle. “

Mike was surprised his friends were asking this. Lucas was usually way sharper, their groups main conspiracy theorist; it was strange of him to overlook this big of a flaw in a case. And still, his exclamation did not seem to have the sobering effect he had expected it to. Lucas only nodded for Max to go on.

„We have a theory.“ She spoke slowly, hesitating. „Well, I have a theory but I ran it past Lucas and he thinks it might actually be worth considering, so...“

Mike was so on edge it was hard to sit still at this point, so he grabbed a sandwich and stuffed it into
his mouth, just so his body would have something to do.

„So, Jane has this tattoo on her-.“ Max was cut off as Mike choked on his mouthful.

It took him a while to dislodge a piece of bread from his windpipe and stop the coughing.

„What?“ He finally managed, his eyes wet and throat still stinging.

„Jesus, man, get a grip.“ Lucas ordered. „Jane has a tattoo. Now stop interfering and listen!“

Max waited patiently for him to settle down before continuing.

„As I said, Jane has a tattoo.“ She paused and looked at Mike as if to see if he would choke again. „I just found out yesterday. She keeps it hidden, so no wonder you never noticed. It’s small, on the inside of her left wrist.“

„The bracelets and stuff.“ He nodded. He’d thought she just liked to wear things around her wrists.

„Bingo.“ Max nodded appreciatively. „And long sleeves. I think I’ve even seen bandaids on that spot. Anyway, there’s a small tattoo. It’s a number: oh-one-one.“


Max and Lucas were watching him closely, expectation clear on their features, and Mike felt pressured under their scrutiny. Eleven. When was the last time he heard...

Sara. Sara, rattling the door, yelling. Her name. Jane. And then eleven.

„Eleven.“ He said out loud, just to hear the word. Mikes confusion was beginning to fade, and the understanding must’ve been visible on his face because Max slowly started nodding and cracked a smile.

„Eleven.“ She confirmed.

Mike swallowed, his throat too dry, but he still needed to say the name out loud.

„El.“
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the love in the comments and kudoses, it is pure fuel!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mike had shot up from his seat as soon as his legs carried him again and now he was pacing, pacing in the small space of his basement, his mind overloaded and heart doing it’s best to burst out of his chest.

Max and Lucas remained seated around the table, watching him with amused expressions. Of course this would be funny to them.

It was nowhere near funny to Mike. This was... could this be? Shit. Fuck. This was... Shit.

His brain raced, pulling out random fragments that suddenly twisted into a whole new vantage point. The first time they’d seen the girls, how he had thought it strange that Sara acted almost as if she already knew them and Jane had avoided his gaze at all costs; he’d written it off to their personality traits later on, but what if his first instinct had been right? Or Sara yelling ’Eleven’ the day before; he could definitely draw a parallel to that girl calling out ’El’ back in the quarry. Or...or Jane, smiling down at him as he laid on his front lawn last Friday, trying to get air back into his lungs. How he’d thought this reminded him so much of that evening back in the quarry. Maybe it hadn’t been the situation; maybe it had been her.

Fucking hell.

He stopped to stare out the window for a few seconds, not really seeing anything. Was this all just his wishful thinking or were they really on to something here? Because, he couldn’t deny; the thought of Jane and that girl being the same person... his knees went week. He needed to sit.

Mike slumped back down to his seat behind the table, letting his head rest on his hands.

„This really plausible?“ He asked sharply, snapping his head up to look at Lucas.

His friend nodded solemnly, his face all business now. „Yes. You didn’t think we’d come to you with some half arsed concept, did you? We did some investigating first.“

Max pulled out an actual sheet of paper and smoothed it onto the table before them. Mike could see ELEVEN - EL? written in bold letters behind the first agenda point. Jesus, they truly were prepared.

„Okay.“ Max took over the leader role once more. „So, first point to support this idea – the name. Eleven. Now I know Sara offered us this excuse of from one to ten yesterday, but, sorry, it just didn’t ring right to me. Not after I had just seen the tattoo on Janes arm. It just fit too well to be a coincidence.“

Mike had to agree. It had sounded off to him too. And he hadn’t even seen the tattoo.
„And if Sara does call her Eleven sometimes...She might also use El for a short version.“ Max concluded the first point. „Which, ding-ding-ding, fills one of the requirements. Point two – they are two girls, who none of us had ever seen before. Again, a perfect fit.“

It was. It absolutely was and Mike felt like he was going mad.

„Now, point three: the timeframe.“

Mike stilled. „That doesn’t match, does it? They only came to town once the school began!“

„As far as we know, yes, but.“ Lucas let the pause carry. „I did some investigating and you know Mrs Ellison, the real estate agent? Well, she was the one who found the house for the police chief. My mom runs in the same circle as her, and according to the gossip, Jim Hopper came to town, guess when? On that very same weekend we were out at the quarry.“

Mike felt excitement taking over again. „So you think Jane and Sara might’ve been here with him, too?“

„It is definitely a possibility, I think.“ Lucas nodded. „I tried to get my mom to ask Mrs Ellison, but she said that would have to wait until Monday.“

Mike grimaced. Typical grownups, always failing to understand the importance of things.

„Exhibit four.“ Max continued and Mike brought his attention back to her. „Sara and Jane are obsessed with taking runs in the woods. And I mean obsessed. They run like, every day I think. Tried to invite me with them a couple of times. Like, hell no. But, the important part is: they go out there often. And, what do you think they wear during those runs?“

„Sports clothes?“ Mike shrugged.


„Jesus Christ Max why haven’t you shared any of this before?!“ Mike jumped up again, too pumped to just sit there. This was getting more real with each passing second and he felt high from all the adrenalin coursing through his veins.

„Because it didn’t really click before yesterday!“ She defended herself. „I thought I was going nuts when I started to put all of these pieces together. But, as you can see, it all matches.“

It did. It certainly did, and, damn it, now that the idea had been planted into Mikes head he was not able to shake it off anymore. This felt so right. So right, that he couldn’t understand why it hadn’t come to him before.

„What else do we have?“ He asked, looking from Lucas to Max and back to Lucas again.

„Well, that’s basically it.“ Max huffed, crossing her arms. „If we won’t count the fact that Jane had this... weird instant crush on you the moment you two met, which I think-.“

„Max, we talked about this!“ Lucas cut in, whining. „This is not a fact! We have no way of knowing that for sure!“

„Which I think,“ Max stubbornly continued. „Would make way more sense if Jane and Mike had already kissed previously! Just because you didn’t notice Jane had a thing for Mike right away, doesn’t mean it’s not a fact! Me and Will bet on them before we even had a bet on Dustin and Sara!“
Mikes face couldn’t decide if it should heat up from embarassment or stretch into a sappy smile. Max was saying Jane had a thing for him. From the very beginning. He very much liked the idea.

He came to a snap decision. „I’m going over there right now and ask her.“

That stopped Lucas and Max from bickering amongst themselves and they turned on him as one.

„Are you nuts?“

„No! You can’t do that!“

Mike stopped in his tracks, his foot on the first step of the stairs.

„Why not?“

„Come on man, use your brains!“ Lucas demanded. „You really think they would tell you? If our theory is right and it was them... They’ve probably known it was you they saved all along. And they’ve had plenty of chances to tell us. Especially yesterday. Let’s face it: they’ve kept us in the dark deliberately."

Mike took his foot off the step. Lucas was right; they were definitely interested in hiding it. And, damn it, if Saras poker face yesterday was any indication, they were fucking good at it, too. *If* it was them. It’s not like they had solid proof yet, only hunches.

„Besides, they wont be at home tonight.“ Max said, looking at the clock on a shelf. „They’re supposed to have dinner at Wills place today. That’s why he was busy. The chief and Mrs Byers are some kind of old friends or something.“

Mike felt himself deflate. Until an idea came to him.

He ran up the stairs.

„Mom!“

Two hours later, Mike was standing in front of Wills house, knocking on the front door while trying not to drop the dish with the Shepherds Pie his mom had conjured from somewhere when he’d said he was going to visit Will and would be staying for dinner. Usually her habit to try and send food each time he ate at a friends house bugged the hell out of Mike, but this time, knowing he was about to crash a preplanned dinner party, it was more than welcome. He didn’t want to put Mrs Byers in a bad situation; Wills mom was always so nice.

The door opened and he was met with Wills stare. Which was, for some reason, uncharacteristically cold today and Mike smiled sheepishly. Will looked like he was gonna shut the door into his face so he quickly put his foot between the door to stop him.

„You’ve got to be kidding me.“ Will deadpanned, rolling his eyes at him.

„What?“ Mike tried to look apologetic but failed to swipe the grin off of his face. „Is that any way to treat a friend who just wanted to come and visit on a Saturday night? Look, I brought food!“
Will cursed but stepped aside never the less and Mike pushed past him, shoving the dish to Will until he reluctantly accepted it. The door slammed shut behind him and Will stomped off towards the kitchen, muttering under his breath all the way.

Mike understood his friends mood a lot better once he saw Dustin waving back at him from the living room. He laughed and walked over, slumping down to the couch beside him.

„Mike?“ Mrs Byers was peeking out of the kitchen, cleaning her hands against the apron. „Hello!“

He jumped up. „Hi Mrs Byers! I hope it’s okay, I didn’t know Will had guests coming over tonight!“ He lied smoothly. Will flipped him off from behin his mom, clearly not fooled.

Mrs Byers smiled, looking at him as if she wanted to pinch his cheeks for being cute and Mike felt like a two-year old who’d been naughty.

„Oh, it’s okay boys.“ She smiled warmly. „The more the merrier, right? I’m sure Jim won’t mind and the girls will probably be so happy to see their friends. Thank your mother for the food for me, okay dear?“

She disappeared into the kitchen again and Dustin mouthed: „Jim?“

Will snorted and strolled over to them.

„You two realize this is my family dinner and not some episode of fucking Love Boat, right?“ He pinned them both with a stare. „My mom is way too kind to you two.“

„Come on man, have some mercy!“ Dustin begged. „It’s the only chance I have to see Sara this weekend! Besides, isn’t it nice to have friends over during otherwise boring social obligations?“

„Who said it would be boring?“ Will shot back. „I like hanging out with Sara and Jane. “

„Talking about Sara and Jane, guys, listen.“ Mike cut in, motioning for them to come closer, on the edge of his seat about what he had to tell them. The others leaned in.

„Max and Lucas came to see me today.“ He drew a deep breath. „We think Sara and Jane might be the girls.“

„What girls?“ Dustin’s brows furrowed together and Mike felt a whole of a lot better that he hadn’t been the only one not to get it right away.

Will, on the other hand, looked at him closely and gave a small nod. „Can’t say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind.“

„What girls?“ Dustin demanded, louder this time.

„The girls that saved Mikes ass in the summer.“ Will explained, exasperated.

Dustin’s mouth fell open, his gaze unfocusing. „Holy shit.“ His eyes snapped into focus again and landed on Mike, squinting in suspicion. „You better not tell me it was Sara you kissed with, or I swear to god I will-.“

„No! No.“ Mike quickly jumped in. „I actually have reason to believe it was Jane.“ His voice hitched in the end, his stupid heart going into frenzy from the thought alone.

Dustin visibly relaxed but remained serious, contemplating.
„Any idea why they wouldn’t tell us?“ He finally asked, obviously bothered by the idea that his girlfriend would be keeping something like this from them. From him.

Mike shook his head.

„But it doesn’t matter. I’m gonna find out tonight if it was them, and then we can ask them. And I will find out, even if it kills me.“

Will cursed quietly.

„Damn it, Mike, as much as I support this, just promise me you will not mess this evening up, okay? This dinner is important to my mom! She’s been nervous all day.“

Before Mike could reassure him or ask, why Mrs Byers would be nervous about this, there was a sound of a car pulling in outside, and all the boys were up and at a window in no time.

The engine stuttered to a stop and once the headlights shut off, they could finally see the car itself.

Will let out a string of curses so colorful it drew Dustins and Mikes attention back to him and they exchanged a worried glance. But then Wills shoulders slumped in resignation and he walked over to the door, opening it before there was even a knock.

„Okay, what the hell are you two doing here?“ Will ground out instead of a hello and Mike could see Lucas wince. Max didn’t seem the least bit perturbed, though, and just waltzed right past Will, patting him on the shoulder patronizingly.

„Oh take a chill pill, Will. Where are we supposed to be then? All the rest of you are here! Besides, there’s no chance in hell I’m gonna miss this!“

„Sorry man.“ Lucas apologized, handing him a big white box. „I tried to talk her out of it.“

Will didn’t even say anything, just stared at Lucas until the other boy felt embarrassed enough to give in.

„Yeah okay maybe I didn’t.“ Lucas confessed and Will just sighed. „Come on man, how were we supposed to resist! Did Mike tell you already?“

„Yeah.“ Will opened the box and groaned. „Donuts! Really guys? Is this supposed to be funny?“

„Hey!“ Max yelled from her place on the couch. „I know this looks stereotypical but the chief really loves these things! I’ve seen him eat half a dozen without blinking an eye.“

„What does the chief love?“ They hadn’t even noticed Mrs Byers before she spoke.

„Mom, I swear, I didn’t invite any of them tonight!“ Will quickly explained, waving his free hand across the room that was now full of his friends. Mike kind of felt bad for him. Not bad enough to make him leave though.

„It’s okay, don’t worry about it.“ Mrs Byers just smiled at them fondly and brushed it off, grabbing the box from Will and taking a peek inside. „Besides, we could use the extra food. I’m afraid the chicken will be a bit on the crispy side.“ She whispered to them conspiratorially before disappearing back into the kitchen again.

Will looked like he was about to chew them all up anyway but his mom called out to him before he could.
Will, honey? Can you add more places to the table?"

Will exhaled. "You guys owe me big time for this. Big time."

It would’ve sounded more threatening if Mike hadn’t seen the corner of his mouth lift up before he turned away from them.

El kept twisting the bracelets around her wrists, her gaze on the trees rushing past outside the car window, wondering if Sara had really been right about this. Then again, Sara didn’t get things wrong. And still it seemed kind of far fetched.

Would the rest of the gang really be there? She’d seen the doubt on dad’s face when Sara told them, explaining she didn’t want this to look like it was planned; probably a wise idea, considering dad would definitely accuse them of going behind his back and secretly organizing a get together with their friends while they were grounded if he wasn’t told otherwise.

But Sara had been adamant.

"I swear, dad, it is not our doing. That’s why I’m warning you now, so you wouldn’t flip once we get there. Dustin is going to be there, as well as Max, Lucas and Mike. And don’t ask me, I have no idea why, or how. I just saw that they’ll be there, okay?"

El had taken one look at Sara, looking all pretty and put together in her sundress and cardigan, and then at her own clothes and darted back to her room; the random sweater and corduroy pants she had grabbed from her closet before suddenly seemed like such a horrible choice. And her hair was looking like a birds nest and she hadn’t bothered with any make up and couldn’t have Sara told her about this earlier?!

And that is why they ended up late, with their dad basically forcing El out of the house at one point, threatening to leave her behind if she didn’t get to the car right this instant.

El smoothed down her cream colored sweater dress, still doubting, wishing she could’ve had more time to come up with what to wear. But as much as her stomach lurched at the thought, there was no way she was gonna miss out on a chance to see Mike.

Her breathing turned shallow as he filled her thoughts.

What would he do? Would he try to talk to her and apologize? Would he even get a chance to, with her dad and all of their friends there? Would he do anything at all? Maybe he wasn’t even there and she was letting herself get worked up over nothing. Her mind spouted up scenario upon scenario of how it could go. Or not.

She had been so enraptured by her imagination she didn’t notice they were there before the car came to a stop. The short walk to the house had a dream like quality, her mind playing tricks on her, and then they were in. They were in and Mike was there, standing awkwardly in the middle of their friends, his dark eyes on her and her alone and El couldn’t tear her own eyes away from his.

She was pulled out of it by Mrs Byers, who was greeting her and Sara now and wrapped El into a
hug that reminded her of their mother.

„So nice to finally meet you!“ The woman pulled back and looked back and forth between Sara and her. „You’re daughters are so beautiful Jim!“ She gushed, and El felt her cheeks tinge pink from the compliment. Mrs Byers was very nice.

The safety of the grownups being there was shortlived, and after a minute Mrs Byers had invited their dad into the kitchen with her, leaving her and Sara alone with their friends.

Which would’ve been completely okay any other time, but today, after all that had happened yesterday, El felt awkward and unsure. Were they watching her with wariness today or was it just her? Her gaze kept flicking back to Mike and away again, as the boy was still staring at her as if she was the only person in the room, and it was doing her head in. She took a deep breath.

„Hey.“ She decided to grab the bull by it’s horns. „Um. Sorry about yesterday?“

Her friends took one look at each other and their stances relaxed, the room suddenly filled with various assurances she had nothing to apologize about and that everything was okay and El felt a little bit overwhelmed by the show of support.

Dustin walked up to Sara to plant a kiss on her cheek and even though she wasn’t even looking his way, El was very aware that Mike was now standing in front of her, biting his lip as if trying to figure out what to say.

„Hi.“

El gathered her courage and turned to look at him. „Hi.“

God, she hoped it didn’t sound as breathless as she thought it did.

Mike was silent, letting his eyes, all sharp and full of intent, roam over her face and El had a crazy notion he was looking for something. It felt weird. He was acting weird. And as her gaze wandered away from him, she was suddenly aware of all the other eyes that were on her. Inspecting. Calculating. Expecting something.

She almost jumped when she felt a hand encircle her forearm and her first instinct was to pull away. Her second instinct, just as she realized it was Mikes hand and that he was now moving closer to her, was to melt into a puddle right there.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, she didn’t get to act in either of those instincts, as at that exact moment dad, who had come back from the kitchen, let out one of his signature coughs and Mike jerked away from her, shoving his hands back into his pockets before quickly taking a step away. And then another, as dad was glaring at him with his, what El liked to call, bad cop expression. She felt her face heat up.

„Sit down. Dinner’s ready.“

Everybody hurried over to the table and after some shuffling, pushing around and angry hisses El found herself seated down between Max and Mike; with four of them on one side of a table, it was a tight fit and Mikes warmth washed over her, making her regret her choice of clothes. She was so hot suddenly. But then his thigh brushed against hers under the table and a shiver ran down her spine instead.

Jesus. This must be what a menopause feels like.
And as if she wasn’t disorientated enough, Max and Mike simultaneously tried to start a conversation her, which ended with the two of them arguing over her head, furiously whispering for the other one to back off. Lucas was trying to get Max to stop, Sara and Dustin had obviously caved and were kissing now and poor Will looked like he was about to pull his hair out, begging for everybody to quiet down and behave.

The clamour around her was cut off as her dad bellowed from the kitchen: „Hey! Everything okay in there?“

Everybody settled down in a flash and El was kind of greatful for the silence and order that ensued. She heaved a relieved sigh, using the break to gather her wits.

Her moment of clarity lasted for a whole two seconds, until Mike leaned in to whisper into her ear, his breath hot on her neck and then she was lost again.

Despite of all of his anxiety over Jane possibly being El, and the frustration of not being able to do anything to find out with Mrs Byers and Janes father there, Mike was enjoying himself. The dinner turned out to be fun, with Mrs Byers telling them about the time she and the chief were still at school. She’d gotten the chief all flustered at one point, and the table full of teenagers had watched, fascinated, as the big mans face flushed scarlet as he tried to defend himself against the embarassing segment of his past. Mikes opinion of Wills mom rose considerably after that, despite it being very high already. This lady absolutely rocked.

And it was actually quite fun to have all of his friends there and loads of food on the table.

But nothing topped the fact that Jane was there, sitting right next to him, laughing and joking and finally, finally talking to him again. She still seemed cautious and nervous around him though, and Mike was pretty sure it was because the story he’d told Sara had been familiar to them. And Jane was the one who’d kissed him at the quarry and knew now he’d been looking for her, and that was what was making her all jumpy.

And then there was always a chance he was a dumbass and they weren’t the girls and the story meant nothing to them and she was careful of him simply because he’d kissed another girl and had a very strange explanation for it.

Shit. Not knowing the truth drove him absolutely nuts.

But he was almost sure. Janes face, her smile, even the feel of his hand around her arm; now that he knew what to look for, he could actually see and feel the resemblance.

Jane laughed out loud again at something he had not heard, too lost in his own head, and the sound reverberated through his body. One thing was for certain, he wasn’t going to let Jane leave here tonight without getting somewhere with this... thing they had going on, no matter what conclusions or consequences it brought along.

If only he’d get her out of the chiefs sight; he wasn’t really bothered about his friends anymore, they’d already witnessed a shitload of drama between them anyway, but that man was scaring the hell out of him with his piercing glares.
Besides, he didn’t want to start it off on a wrong foot with his future girlfriends father.

So Mike hatched a plan and waited for the perfect moment to execute it.

El was feeling drunk. Absolutely drunk. And it wasn’t like she had actually had anything to drink; dad would never agree to that, always the responsible parent.

No, it was the overall heightened mood in the room, all the laughing, happy people around her. Her family. Her friends. Mike.

She was drunk on Mike. And at the same time, she felt so on edge because of him. Every glance he sent her way, every question he asked; it all seemed loaded with alterior meanings and motives and she found she didn’t know how to be around him today. Something felt off, but not necessarily in a bad way. She just wished she would know what was going on in his head. She wished she could talk to him.

Alone.

Her heart went into a frenzy at the thought.

But dad was watching them like a hawk, very much aware something was going on here and El doubted they’d get the chance. She already felt she was overstepping some unfathomable boundary by sitting so close to him and dads eyes squinted into slits every time Mike tilted his face closer to talk to her.

All the pressure left El winded, as if she had just ran a marathon.

So it was a relief, when Wills mom finally declared they should take a little break before they moved on to dessert, and everybody got up to stretch their legs in the meantime. Dad and Mrs Byers disappeared into the kitchen again and the rest of them moved into the living room, having decided to watch a movie later and figuring it was the perfect time to pick one.

Turned out choosing the movie was the real challenge of the evening. Max insisted on a horror movie, Sara demanded they watch something romantic and boys grimaced at both of their requests. They ended up sitting in a pile of VHS cassette cases, Will having brought out every single one they had at home, trying to find something they were all okay with.

„What’s wrong with Gremlins?” Dustin whined. „I thought you wanted a horror movie.“

„That’s not a real horror movie!” Max sounded offended by the suggestion. „That’s a kids movie! We might as well watch Ghost Busters and call it horror.“

„Can we watch Ghost Busters?” Mike cut in. „There’s rumors they are considering making part two, would be good to watch the first one again.“

„Uhm, let me think: NO.“

„Come on Max, nobody wants a horror movie besides you!”
“Okay, it doesn’t have to be a horror movie! But I still say no to Ghost Busters. And don’t even think about offering Star Wars.”

The boys groaned in unison and El couldn’t help but laugh at them. She was beginning to relax, now that there was more than three feet between her and Mike for a change. The group resumed their search and for a while everybody was quiet, shuffling through the options.

“Hey El? Can you hand me the one on your left?”

El grabbed the box, not raising her eyes from the description she was reading and reached it out towards Mike.

He didn’t take it.

El stilled, her hand still hovering with the cassette.

The living room was suddenly so silent, she could’ve easily heard what dad and Wills mom were talking about in the kitchen, if the rushing of blood in her ears wouldn’t have drowned it out.

El.

He’d called her El.

The cassette case tumbled from her hands and her gaze snapped to Mike. He was grinning from ear to ear, looking almost manic, and the triumphant, exhilarated look in his eyes told her she had just given him exactly what he’d wanted.

Els turned to look at Sara, bewildered, and the two of them jumped up at the same time, declaring they needed to go to the bathroom, but Mike was up only a fracture of a second later and grabbed her hand, dragging her away. She cast a desperate look towards Sara, just in time to see Dustin tugging her stunned sister back down to the couch and snaking his arms around her, locking her in place.

Mike pulled her along, and, after checking they weren’t visible to the adults, rounded the corner, darting into one of the bedrooms. He let go of her hand to quietly shut the door and El took a couple of steps back, her mind racing, trying to understand what was going on.

El. He shouldn’t have known this name. He shouldn’t have-. 

Mike had crossed the space between them and then he was cupping her face, tilting it upwards. El gasped, as the feel of his hands on her jaw cut off her thoughts, her breaths, and every single connection between her brain and muscles. So she just stood there, dumbfounded, unable to move and only subconsciously aware that he was going to kiss her.

Even with her out of it, her body knew exactly what to do and her eyes fluttered closed on their own accord just as his lips brushed against hers, and her hands rose to grab a hold of his arms for support.

The first kiss was brief and soft like a whisper and El chased his lips as Mike pulled back for a moment to catch a shaky breath before leaning in again. This time he brought his mouth down with a purpose, applying pressure, moving his lips against hers in the most delicious way and El felt her knees grow weak at the sensation. She could tell the exact moment his mouth stretched into a wide smile and then he moved away again, leaving her gasping for breath.

El took a couple of moments before she slowly opened her eyes.

Mike was positively glowing, looking down at her with an amazed look she had never seen on his
face before and her mind still refused to work.

„It was you.“

And suddenly it all made sense. El. The kiss.

The quarry.

He knew.

El swayed from the force of the realization and Mike slipped his hands around her waist to hold her up. He used the opportunity to draw her in, and, just as she was about to start panicking, crashed his lips down on hers once more, making her forget about everything else.

Chapter End Notes

So... finally, there it is :)


It was her.

Mike was absolutely sure now. The way her lips moulded against his, the way she sounded when she let out a small gasp, even the way she fucking tasted.

It was her.

The two concepts he had in his mind of the girls, of El, the mystery girl he’d been pining after for months and then Jane, a constant in his life since the school had started, who’d somehow managed to get so deep under his skin it was scaring the shit out of him, aligned and merged into one perfect whole. The wave of emotions that washed over him caught him offguard, leaving his nerve endings raw, intensifying every sensation.

It was really her.

Mikes heart was beating so fast, too fast, making him feel so light he was surprised he didn’t lift right off the ground. But the girl in his arms, Jane, _El_, kept him grounded and strong and real and he could hardly believe he was kissing her.

Shit, he was going to pass out if he didn’t breathe. He pulled away but didn’t let go.

„It was you wasn’t it?“ He asked, his voice so throaty he barely recognized it. „Why didn’t you tell me?“

He had so many questions. And even though he was ninety nine point ninety nine percent sure, he still wanted to hear it from her.

El gaped at him, dazed, trying to find the words, and Mike couldn’t help but lean in again.

„I-“ Was all she got out before his lips cut her off.

Jane whimpered and it made Mike so irrationally happy he chuckled, making El, Jane, even more flustered. And what should he even call her? El? Jane?

„Can I call you El?“

„I... I don’t really-.“ She sputtered, trying to think.
She looked so cute while confused that Mike stole another kiss. Why hadn’t he done this earlier? If he’d only manned up last Friday he could’ve avoided all of the shit that went down last week.

„Do you even realize any of this mess would never have happened if I’d known?“

„Well, I-.“

Just a quick peck against her lips. Because, obviously, he lacked any self restraint and couldn’t stop.

„You have no idea how badly I wanted to find you! Why did you run that night?“

El bit her bottom lip and that was all it took for him to lean again, but she stopped him this time, bringing her hand up to his mouth to keep him away.

„Mike, you’re not even letting me speak.“ She sounded just as winded as he felt, but he could also detect slight amusement and Mike’s face stretched into a grin. Now that he thought about it, he kind of did keep interrupting her with all the kissing. But could you really blame him? He’d been waiting and wanting to for so long. He took her hand in his and lowered it, intertwining their fingers.

„Yeah I guess I’m not.“ But even as he said it, he leaned in again, capturing her lips, losing himself into the touch once more and she responded by sinking further into him. Holy shit, he could stay just like this for the rest of the-.

„Jane!“

They startled at the sudden shout and jumped apart, leaving at least a foot between them.

„Shit!“ They whispered at the same time.

The chief. Mike was a moron. As if the man wouldn’t notice them both missing and start wondering. Shit, he was screwed! So much for leaving a good impression.

„Shit-shit-shit.“ He kept chanting to himself, panicking, his mind blank, until El stepped forward and clutched his face, forcing him to look at her.

„Mike, stop. It’s gonna be fine.“ Her hazel eyes pored into him and Mike melted, captivated by the way her mouth curled up into a smirk. „Wait a little before you follow.“

She was gone before he could steal that one last kiss he had been meaning to.

Jim was about to go and search every damn room in this house when Jane appeared from around the corner, looking only mildly concerned. It could have fooled him, too, if she wasn’t flushed like a tomato and playing with those damned bracelets of hers, like she did every time she was nervous.

„Yes? What is it?“

„Where’d you get to?“ He grunted.

Jane rolled her eyes. „The bathroom?“
Jim's jaw tightened.

„Uhuh. And where’d the Wheeler kid go?“

„Oh my god, dad, how am I supposed to know? Ask them!“ She waved her hand towards the other teenagers, who all stared at them with wide eyes, heads bobbing from one to another as if this was a damned tennis match or something.

He turned to them, glaring.

„Well?“

The kids looked at each other, mouths opening and closing, until Joyce’s kid finally spoke up.

„He went to my room, said he wanted to...“ he halted, his eyes darting to were Jane was standing and suddenly his stance relaxed. „Get the comic book he wanted to borrow.“

Jim sighed. Sure enough, when he turned, the damned boy was standing next to Jane, with a stupid comic book in his hands, looking so innocent Jim could’ve sworn he saw a glint of a halo for a moment there.

Jesus Christ these kids were going to be the death of him. Like he didn’t know he was being played right here. But did he want to call them out on their bullshit? Hell, he was enjoying the evening too much to let it be ruined by him overdoing it. And what choice did he have anyway? If these punks didn’t want to tell him, they wouldn’t, no matter what he’d do. Let them have it, then, their own little victory, as far as they knew.

And Jane was big enough to make her own decisions, damn it, even if he didn’t like it.

„Okay then.“ He relented, but not before staring the Wheeler kid down, just so he’d know he would damn well be keeping his eye on him for the rest of the evening.

He made his way back to the kitchen, where Joyce was still sitting behind the ridgety table, cradling the coffee cup between her long slender fingers. The understanding smile on her face reminded him of the night they’d sat on the hood of his car, smoking cigarette after cigarette, talking about school, home, life in general and how he’d opened up like a sappy fool, under the spell of that very same smile, and told her things he’d never told anyone else. Until then or since.

Yeah. Joyce had that effect on him.

„Don’t worry Jim.“ She soothed. „Mike’s a sweet boy.“

Jim grunted, not wanting to say out loud what he thought about that.

„And so is Dustin.“ Joyce continued, sipping on her coffee. „And I know I’m a bit biased because I’ve known them since they were little, but seriously, they really are good kids.“

Jim sighed.

„Yeah, I’ll have to take your word for it. I’m just not good at this... stuff.“ He took the seat opposite her and let his hands run over his face. „The girls have been in school for only a couple of months and already I am out of my league with all of this. Boys. Parties. Suspension. I had to ground Sara and now she’s mad at me, blaming me for not letting her spend time with his... boyfriend.“ Damn he hated the word. „And then there’s Jane, who is free to go out but refuses to leave the house, wants to skip school, and, damn it, asks me to lie she’s not home so she could avoid this Wheeler kid.“ He
chuckled at the ridiculousness of it. „And to be honest, I’m not sure which is worse."

He was rambling again, spilling his guts out to this woman and damn it, he didn’t know how not to.

Joyce let out a tinkling laugh and stood, letting her soft hand rest on his shoulder for a second as she passed him and walked over to a cabinet at the far end of the kitchen. She’d been teasing him with small touches the whole evening, and a part of him thought it was deliberate. The other part kept on insisting that this was just who Joyce was and he was letting his damned imagination run wild if he thought it was anything more.

It would’ve been nice if he could speak that language, too. But he didn’t. If he’d touch her, it would definitely not be soft, or brief, or playful, and so he kept his hands to himself.

God damn it, his daughters were probably getting more action tonight than he did and it made him feel old.

He watched, unabashed, as Joyce stretched herself on the tips of her toes to reach the bottle on the top shelf. Her body, although softer and more curvy now, still looked every bit as good as it had back in high school. She was one of those women who would always be beautiful, no matter their age.

The bottle teetered dangerously for a moment, but then she got it and turned with a victorious smile.

„Whiskey?“ She gave the bottle a shake, making the amber liquid swirl inside, and Jims mouth stretched into a smirk.

„Yeah why not.“ He agreed. „Jane can drive us home.“

Whiskey sounded pretty damn good right now.

El watched dad walk away, his face not exactly happy but not angry either, and she let her shoulders relax. The relief only lasted for a brief while though, until she felt Mike’s hand entwine with hers and she remembered all of the shit she was still neck deep in. She had a hunch her friends would not be as easily deterred as her dad had been.

Mike navigated her to the couch and gently pushed her to sit down, he himself taking the armchair next to it, pulling it so close, that when he sat down, their knees were almost touching. For a moment he just looked at her.

„Is the theory confirmed?“ Lucas asked, keeping his voice low as if discussing top secret stuff.

Mikes face slowly lit up and Els heart gave a jolt at the sight. Lucky for her she was already so flushed in the face the extra blush she felt creeping up her neck probably didn’t even show.

„It was her.“ Mike grinned. „It was her and Sara that night.“

Sara looked up at hearing her name, her eyes jumping to Els, exasperated.

„You told him? I thought we agreed not to!“ She hissed.
Damn it, there went their last chance to still deny everything. El took a calming breath so she wouldn’t start cursing like a sailor in front of all those curious gazes.

„I didn’t tell him.“ She sighed and Saras face fell. „But you sure as hell just did.“
Sara looked confused.

„Then how did he–. Oh.“
To Els horror Sara started giggling and Max let out a low whistle. The boys caught on a second later and Lucas wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

„Nice, Wheeler, didn’t think you had it in you!“ Max raised her hand for a high five.

Mike swatted the hand away, the tips of his ears turning red as he muttered: „Shut up.“

El was so hot now she tugged at the collar of her dress, wondering if this was a good time to go and get a glass of water or something. She was saved by Will, of all people.

„What are we, in kindergarten?“ The boy asked, amused, shaking his head at the others antics before turning to look at Sara and her. „What happened at the quarry that night? That’s what I wanna know.“

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

„Not now.“ Sara turned somber, casting careful looks towards the kitchen. „We’ll tell you some other time, okay?“

„Oh come on!“ Lucas groaned and others seemed to start protesting as well, but Sara quickly shushed them.

„Please guys, I’m serious here!“ She begged. „Unless you want to see me and Jane on the first plane back to our mothers place we have to do this another time!“

The threat was enough to shut everybody up almost instantly. Dustins arm tightened around Sara, the prospect of her possibly leaving Hawkins obviously bothering him and El melted a little at the sweetness of the gesture.

Her gaze involuntarily travelled to Mike, to gauge his reaction. He was looking at her, brows furrowed, his dark eyes unreadable but smoldering nevertheless and she had to look down, not knowing how to face him. His hand twitched and for one crazy moment she thought he might extend it and grab hers again; he didn’t though and El felt a little disappointed. She missed the contact. Too bad she was too much of a coward to initiate any.

Besides, was she even entitled to? It’s not like they’d gotten anything straightened out. They’d just... kissed a little. Or a lot; depends on the vantage point, one could say. But that’s not really something to tell her where they now stood.

Well, this was awkward.

And why on earth did she have to use going to the bathroom as her excuse earlier? She now wished she could do exactly that, just so she could hide out for a little while and gather herself.

She hadn’t even noticed she’d completely zoned out until Mike nudged her knee with his.

„Jane?“ He asked, half amused, half worried and all affectionate and Jesus, was she ever going to be
able to be normal around him or would she always be reduced to this mumbling mess each time he so much as looked at her?

„Is it okay with you if we watch Alien?“

Everybody was watching her expectantly.

„Sure. I haven’t seen it.“

Max whooped loudly, drowning out Lucas’s and Saras groans. „Yes! That’s a majority people, the choice has been made!“

Mike could hardly keep up with the conversation during the dessert, his hands itching to touch the girl sitting beside him. But one look towards the end of the table, where the police chief was sat at, and he could control himself again.

Max hadn’t been joking about the chief’s love for the donuts; he’d already destroyed three, to the great amusement of Dustin and Will for some reason, and the two were basically choking from trying to keep their laughter down as he reached for yet another one.

Mike grabbed another donut, too, just to spite the man, even though he’d already had two and was approaching his limits, fast. He could’ve sworn the chief sent him a glare when he took it and the sickly sweet treat suddenly tasted much better.

By the time he was finished there was only one more left. And, fuck it, he could not fight the temptation to take it, stupid little shit with a tendency to undermine himself that he was, when he saw the chief basically lunge over the table to get his hands on the last donut.

Neither of them got it, for Janes hand closed around it first, leaving both of them with their hands hovering nearby awkwardly. The girls gaze flickered between them, hesitating, as she drew her hand back.

„Sorry, you wanted it?“

Mike quickly retreated his hand.

„No!“ He blurted, earning himself a guffaw from Will, who was beginning to crack. „No. You can have it.“

Even if he really had wanted it, which was not the case, he still would’ve gladly sacrificed it to her. That, and so much more. He sent her an encouraging smile, which only managed to make Dustin laugh, too, making him think he probably looked more like a fucking idiot than encouraging.

Those shitheads.

Jane turned to her father and for a moment Mike thought the man would still want the donut, but then he pulled back too and mumbled something about having one too many already, letting Jane have it in the end.
He watched with fondness as she sank her teeth into the pink glaze, feeling like a creep when she caught him in the act and froze for a second, her cheeks flushing slightly. And still he couldn’t look away until the chief coughed loudly, startling him out of it.

The chief looked as if he was gonna say something, his lips pursing and jaw working, but then got up instead and to Mikes relief, the two adults soon retreated out the back door, grabbing an ashtray and their glasses with them along the way.

The party decended like sharks the moment the door closed shut.

„Okay, can you tell us now?“ Lucas demanded, looking from Jane to Sara, halfway up from his seat.

„They won’t hear a thing from outside.“ Will assured them. „It’s safe to talk.“

Sara looked uncomfortable and Jane just froze, placing her half eaten donut back on to a plate before swallowing her mouthful slowly, as if having trouble getting it down. Good news was, her father was now out of the room, so nothing stopped Mike from taking her hand that rested on her knee under the table. His heart soared when she eagerly accepted it, intertwining her fingers with his and giving them a squeeze, grateful for the support.

He didn’t want to pressure the two sisters, but then again, he was probably the most curious about this. They’d saved his life, for fucks sake.

As always, Sara took the lead.

„Okay, yeah, so it was us.“ The blond girl sighed in defeat.

„Why didn’t you tell us yesterday?“ Max looked confused.

„Never mind yesterday, why didn’t you tell way back when the school started?“ Mike wanted to know. „You recognized me back at the ice cream shop, didn’t you?“

The girls exchanged a worried look and he pulled back, berating himself.

Shit, he sounded like he was attacking them, when he should be thanking them instead.

„I mean... shit. Sorry.“ He grabbed Janes hand with both of his, idly playing with her fingers, trying to figure out how to say this. „Just that you two saved my ass that night. I never even got to thank you.“

The room fell quiet, and when he chanced a look, he could see his friends strangely emotional and Saras face softening into a small smile. But it was Jane that surprised him the most, giving him a tender kiss on his cheek and shit, he just died a little inside. Out of all the kisses tonight this was the one that would be his undoing? Son of a bitch, he was in deep.

„Or, it all wouldn’t have even come this far if you two hadn’t run away that night.“ Dustin pointed out, breaking the silence and getting back to the topic. He was keeping his eyes on Sara the whole time and it was actually funny to see the usually confident girl squirm under her boyfriends gaze. Something told Mike these two had a serious conversation ahead once Dustin got the chance.

„We shouldn’t have been there that night.“ Jane finally answered, her voice quiet but strong. „If dad would find out... we’d get in trouble. Like Sara already said earlier, it might end with us being sent back to our mothers.“

„Okay.“ Max nodded. „So we’ll keep it a secret from him, easy-peasy. But why didn’t you tell us?“
Jane sighed. „We didn’t know you at first. And later, it was just... weird. To suddenly bring it up. Especially considering I...“ Jane hesitated. „Considering I... crap. You know, the... thing.“

„You mean you taking the mouth to mouth a little too seriously?“ Max wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, lacking any social filter like always.

Jane bit her lip and Mike suddenly, irrationally, wanted her to bite his lip.

„Yeah, that.‟

It actually made sense, to think about it; Mike would’ve felt awkward, too, if he was in her place.

„How did I get out of the water?‟ He blurted out the question that had bothered him the whole time. „I only remember falling in and then I woke up on the beach with you two there.‟

„You managed to get close enough to the shore so we could drag you out.‟ Sara shrugged.

Mikes brow furrowed. He had no memory of this. Was it possible he had and just didn’t remember any of it? Sara cut in before he could voice his confusion.

„How did you fall in anyway?‟

Shit.

His friends, the dipshits that they were, bursted out laughing and Mike felt his face heat up.

„Yeah Mike.‟ Will grinned. „Tell them how you fell in.‟

He would not be telling this to Jane, fuck no.

She looked at him, eyes glinting, expecting and shit, he felt like she owed it to her anyway.

Okay, he would not be telling her this now, with all of these assholes watching.

„I’ll tell you later okay?‟ He told her privately before turning back to the others. „Can we just go and watch the movie now?‟

The others started to protest and he was sure they were about to rat him out anyway, but they stopped as one when the back door opened and Wills mom and the chief walked in, laughing over something.

And for once, Mike was glad to see the man, as it effectively cut off all further talk about that night in the quarry and he’d escaped the embarassment.

For now, at least.

The music was turning creepy again and El just new something was about to jump out of the shadows.

They were probably nearing the end of the movie now and she still hadn’t made up her mind if she
liked it or not.

The storyline was so and so, but she really digged the main character, Ripley. And the gory scneses were done really well, that was good. The whole setting was actually done really well, almost too well, the endless dark corridors calling forth her own memories of being stuck in a limited space, cut off from outside, with nowhere to escape, and that was the part she wasn’t too crazy about, to be honest.

She probably would’ve freaked out a lot more if Mikes side wasn’t pressing into her, his hand engulfing hers, drawing lazy circles on the back of it with his thumb.

He seemed to be determined not to let her out of his vicinity for the rest of the evening. He hadn’t let go of her hand, not even when dad had at one point raised his eyebrows at the sight and El could quite literally feel how his palm got slightly sweaty from how much it probably frightened him. El was quite impressed, she had to admit; dad could be scary, if he wanted to.

And when they’d settled down to watch the movie, Mike had gently, but firmly, guided her to sit on the couch and claimed the spot next to her, without even the slightest hesitation or second guessing. That’s something El absolutely envied about him. How could he be so sure? Not that he had anything to worry about. She was almost embrarassed by how badly she wanted to be right there next to him. He was warm and smelled good and it had taken her a good fifteen minutes to calm her erratic heartbeat down enough to be able to concentrate on anything but his presence beside her.

By the time the ending credits of the movie started rolling, she was so comfortable and warm and safe she could’ve just fallen asleep right then and there. Of course, that was the exact time that dad announced they should get going now and she sighed, slowly getting up and stretching her tingly limbs out. The rest of the gang came outside to send them off and, to her surprise, Mike pulled her aside.

„Can I see you tomorrow?“ He was clutching at her arms, almost as if he wanted to pull her into a hug but then thought better of it.

El felt a pang of dissapointment. They’d scheduled a whole day at the Lab on Sunday.

„No.“

Mikes face fell, and oh god, his eyes totally looked like a puppies and El was dangerously close to reaching her hand out to stroke his hair to comfort him.

„You’re not still mad at me, are you?“

„No! No.“ Well... „Okay, a little, maybe, but that’s not the reason. I just can’t. I’ll be busy. With something.“

Damn it. It sounded awful. El sighed. Her brain had an irritating tendency to turn to mush when he was looking at her like that.

„I mean, I already have plans that will take the whole day I’m afraid. Sorry. I’ll see you on Monday?“

Mikes face morphed into a smile.

„Yeah that sounds good, too.“

El didn’t even register she was slowly beginning to lean in, but all of a sudden his lips where a lot
closer than they were a moment ago.

„Jane!“

God damn it. Dad.

„Come on, let’s go. It’s time.“

El sighed and pulled away, now aware of all the other eyes on them too. Sara and dad were already at the car, doors open, waiting, so she quickly made her way over and took the keys dad was holding out to her and climbed behind the wheel.

The car roared to life, the sound the jeep made so different from the quiet purr of the Volkswagen El was normally used to, and she took a moment to adjust. Her eyes got caught on the porch of the Byers house, where all the others were still standing, waiting to wave them goodbye and she felt warmth spread in her chest her at the sight. It was kind of magical how these people had come to mean so much to her in such a small span of time.

It was with a tinge of regret that she put the reverse gear in and took off, wishing she could somehow extend the evening. It had felt so incredibly nice. And made her feel all fuzzy inside.

She was given a whole minute to enjoy it, before dad just had to go and ruin the quiet car ride.

„So... what’s up with you and this Wheeler now? He your boyfriend or something?“

„Dad! Please don’t start!“ She begged, trying to hold on to the fuzziness that was already receding to make way for the onslaught of butterflies.

Boyfriend was an awfully Big Word and totally uncalled for.

„What? I’m just asking.“

„Well, don’t.“

Because she had no idea how to answer that.
Chapter 15

El pushed the magazine into her pistol with a click and pulled the slide back to load a bullet. She had a strange love and hate relationship with her Beretta M9. On one hand, she quite admired the small, unassuming gun; it wasn’t much of a looker, but the cool sleek metal surfaces somehow called to her and the way it fit her hand felt just right. And she couldn’t help but feel a morbid sort of comraderie with the thing, considering how much damage it could do with such a small effort.

She sometimes felt the same way about herself.

But on the other hand, while shooting the thing at a firing range was all fun and games, she couldn’t really imagine herself ever pointing it at a living soul, even though she was perfectly aware that this was always a possible outcome. She’d been having controversial thoughts about it ever since she and Sara had most definitely not been issued with the service weapons, because they did not exist in the system for that matter, back in the spring, once they were both sixteen.

She stalked back to her aisle and raised the gun towards the target at the far end of the room before taking the safety off. It would be her only fill up; even after almost seven months of constant practicing how to relax her wrists enough to take some of the edge off the recoil, her hands still quickly grew tired of this. Two magazines worth of bullets was the most Doc ever allowed them to go through during one session; so they wouldn’t hurt themselves, he’d said.

A stray thought raced across her mind before she could stop it: what would Mike say if he ever saw her like this?

Mike.

Mike, Mike, Mike.

Damn it.

She hadn’t been able to go more than three minutes today without thinking about him and it was beginning to tick her off. She couldn’t concentrate, and the target sheet, sporting only a few random holes, a sorry echo of her usual performance, was a sure testimony of that.

She aimed the gun and pushed the trigger.

A miss.

And again. And again.

She took a deep steadying breath and lowered the pistol for a moment, trying to clear her head before giving it another shot. Twelve more tries.

What was she even thinking getting involved with a boy? Was she even allowed to?

A miss.

It’s not like she was a normal, usual teenage girl.

The target jerked and a new hole appeared near the edge of it. El felt a tinge of satisfaction. It’s something.
She relaxed her hands for a second before taking aim again.

Had Sara ever had any reservations about Dustin? She hadn’t voiced any, not to El at least. But then again, Sara was in a way better position anyway; her powers weren’t potentially lethal.

Yes. El was perfectly aware of what she possibly could do. And nothing had ever scared her more.

A miss.

But then again, did that mean she couldn’t have other, normal things in her life? Things like high school and friends and boyfriends? Not that she had boyfriends. Or even a boyfriend.

There was only an option that she some day could have, if everything went right.

A bullet hit the figure of a man on the target.

And then another hole in the white part.

She had a crazy, haywire idea that maybe, just maybe, she should discuss this with Doc; she dismissed it even before she’d finished thinking about it. No, damn it. This was her life. She would not be letting others decide for her or manipulate her decisions. They had no right to do that. Unless she was foolish enough to give them that right.

A miss.

Damn it.

Usually the firing lessons were a good way for her to let some frustration out, but this time, it only added to it.

The second target two aisles down jerked into motion and started to glide towards the front of the room. Sara was done.

El clenched her teeth and took aim again.

A miss. Shit, why was this so impossible today?

If Sara had managed to make this whole boyfriend business work somehow, why couldn’t she? They were in the same boat after all, with all of this crazy stuff they needed to somehow hide. If there was a chance for Dustin and Sara, there was a chance for her and Mike, too.

Her and Mike.

Her stomach did a crazy sommersault as the images flashed through her mind, of the two of them dating, doing normal couple things, being together.

Her breath hitched.

She shot the last five bullets out one after another, making the bullets hit the target exactly where she wanted them to.

The slide locked back, indicating she was out of rounds, and El slammed the button to bring the target sheet in. It arrived at the same time as the Doc did. She took off her earmuffs and gouged out the plugs.

Dr. Owens took one look at the target and then at her, a smile threatening to break through his
carefully composed strict demeanor.

„You’re supposed to practice shooting here, Jane, not using your powers.“

El wiped her nose with her sleeve, leaving behind a faint wet trail barely visible on the black fabric.

„Does it really matter?“ She asked, smiling mischievously. „As long as I get it done?“

Dr. Owens sent her a stern look.

„Yes, it matters. What if you need to manage without your powers?“

„Why? It’s not like they’re going anywhere.“ She turned somber. „I’ll aways be stuck with it. So I might as well make it work, don’t you think?“

The Doc didn’t answer, only sighed and collected her target sheet before leaving her to put away her stuff.

Yes, she’d always be stuck with it. And with her... circumstances. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t make it work, El decided.

She would make it work.

She would make her and Mike work.

If he wanted that, too, that is.

El got her answer first thing on a Monday morning. Well, not exactly first thing, but as soon as she arrived at school and found Mike hanging out in front of her locker, his face lighting up with a bright smile when he spotted her.

Was it normal that her heart still started pounding in her chest every time he looked her way? Because at this rate it had to be unhealthy, El was sure.

„Hi.“ Mike bounced on the balls of his feet, looking like a kid on a Christmas morning and it was overwhelming to think she was the reason behind it.

But then he leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers in a chaste peck and even the trivial, shallow thoughts fled her mind.

„Hi.“ Her voice sounded weak even to her own ears and she cleared her throat, fighting hard against melting into a puddle. She had classes to attend and she needed to be coherent during them, preferably. This was no time to get lost in her fantasies. Or in Mikes eyes. His deep, dark, beautiful puppy eyes, surrounded by lashes so thick and long it should have been criminal on a boy.

The reality crashed in in the form of Max, who appeared out of nowhere and slung her arms around hers and Mikes shoulders, cooing loudly.

„Well well well good morning my two little love birds!“
Mike groaned loudly. „Don’t you have anywhere else to be Mayfield? Go bug your boyfriend or something.“

„Ha-ha, very funny. No. Suck it up Wheeler. I still need to pay you back for all of those times you gave me and Lucas shit for the PDA.“

El could see Lucas nod approvingly from over Max’s shoulder; suddenly all the rest of the party was there, too.

„Really?“ Mike sounded exasperated, but El could see by the way the corners of his mouth turned up that he wasn’t really angry.

„Yeah, really. And, speaking of boyfriends, are you two like boyfriend and girlfriend now?“

Jesus Christ how could she just ask that! Talking about pressure.

„No!“ El let out a startled denial, at the same time as Mike confidently declared: „Yes."

What?

„Yes?!“ El asked, incredulous, just as Mike looked at her, all confused and a little offended: „No?“

Their friends stilled and somebody chuckled, interrupting the otherwise loaded silence. El was too busy trying to comprehend this whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing to notice who it was.

„Geez. “ Max retracted her arms. „You two obviously need to talk this over."

El wholeheartedly agreed.

Seemed that Mike did, too, because the next moment he had grabbed her hand and was tugging her with him, towards somewhere with less people, she sincerely hoped; this was a topic she would have rather discussed privately.

They ended up in the same hallway she and Sara had had their fight on Friday. God, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Her heart was going crazy by the time Mike finally stopped and turned her towards him, keeping his hands on her shoulders for a second before awkwardly shoving them into his pockets. El felt cold at the sudden lack of his touch.

He must’ve been a mind reader, for just as the notion flickered through her thoughts Mike took a deep breath and stepped closer, bringing his hands back to rest on her waist this time.

El wasn’t sure if it was meant as a hug or just means to keep her in place. She didn’t mind either way; all she knew was she wanted them there.

„I’m sorry.“ Mike blurted out, his eyes searching hers. „I guess we never got to that part.“

„Yeah.“ El nodded. „I’m sure I wouldn’t have missed that.“

Mike grinned, but it faded into hesitancy again.

„It’s just that, I thought... With all that has happened, it was obvious.“ He gulped. „That... that I’d want you to be my girlfriend.“

His voice broke a little at the last word and El drew a shallow breath, the wave of emotions pulling
her under.

„I’m sorry.“ Mike continued, his gaze boring into hers. „I should’ve asked first.“

Yeah, he should have. For all she knows he might be going around kissing girls all the time, so, how could she have assumed, only based on the kisses and handholding from Saturday night, that he would want to go steady? Wasn’t that, like, rushing things a bit?

She must’ve been thinking out loud, because the pressure of Mikes hands suddenly intensified.

„Hey!“ He sounded agitated. „I do not go around kissing girls all the time!“

Yup. Thinking out loud.

„And... And it’s not like this started on Saturday.“ Mike sputtered on, his cheeks turning red. „I’ve been trying to ask you out at least since that evening in the arcade, which was, like, more than two weeks ago now. And, if we’re gonna be really accurate here, didn’t this start like, basically three months ago, at the quarry? And, and you were the one who kissed me first and-.“

„Mother of god not this again!“

And that would be Dustin.

„Seriously guys?!“ Mike bellowed towards the end of the hallway, and El turned just in time to see a couple of heads being pulled back to hide behind the corner. „How about a little privacy you dicks!“

„Hey, don’t discriminate!“ Max poked her head out. „There’s ladies here, too, you know.“

„Oh wow, I’m so sorry, you dicks and -.“

El slammed her hand over his mouth before he could continue, but couldn’t keep her giggles down.

„Mike!“ She laughed, shaking her head. „Don’t... go there. Or I might have to kick your ass for being rude to my friends. And I... I’d rather not.“

Her laughter died down as she was suddenly very aware of his lips against her palm.

„I’d much rather kiss you again.“ She ended in a breathless whisper.

She swallowed as Mikes eyes slowly darkened, the pupils flaring out as he was watching her, the irritation on his face giving way to an expression she had no name for.

„Okay, we’ll be leaving now!“ Dustin yelled. „So you two can talk. In private. Like you wanted to.“

„Dustin.“ Sara hissed. „Stop gawking and let’s go. I can’t believe you betrayed us like that.“

„What? It’s not my fault I can’t stand it when ...“ Dustins indignant voice faded into distance as the group left.

And then they were alone.
Mike needed to get his shit together and fast, because this was so not going the way he wanted it to. Well, except maybe for the part where she’d said she wanted to kiss him again. But definitely not the part where he’d shouted obscenities at their mutual friends instead of wooing the girl.

Jesus Christ he was using the word *woo*; now that was something new in his vocabulary.

But this was *important*. How could he even begin to explain it to her? That ever since the Saturday night he had not only thought of her as his girlfriend, but had spent most of his Sunday daydreaming and making elaborate plans about their future life together.

They’d be the typical high school sweethearts, annoying others with their PDA at school, holding hands under the lunchtable, stealing kisses here and there, getting reprimanded by the teachers and booed by their peers. They’d go together everywhere, always joined at the hip, and end up making out somewhere more often than not, he very much hoped. And he’d take her to the prom and his mom would force them to pose for hours as she would get carried away with her camera, and he would take it in stride, because Jane would look so beautiful, it’d be completely justified to take thousands of pictures of her.

And then they’d graduate and go away to college, and one way or another he would make sure they ended up in the same one, even though he was certain he wouldn’t have to worry about that because Jane was bright enough to get into any school he’d want to go to, and they’d rent their first crappy apartment together.

And, somewhere along the way, many many years from now, they’d get married and settle down and buy a house, white picket fence and all, maybe back in Hawkins, maybe not, and have children. Two, or maybe even three. Even though the thought of children made him wince right now, he was sure he would end up wanting them later, because that’s the way life went. And it would be Jane he would be having them with.

Because, at this point, he could not imagine himself with anyone else. Was it weird? It probably was.

It was also completely useless, if he couldn’t even get her to be his girlfriend.

But, she’d said she wanted to kiss him again, and that was a good start, wasn’t it?

His gaze jumped to her lips, his insides coiling tight like a spring, tempted to take her up on her offer; unfortunately, what they really needed right now, was to talk this out. So he gathered whatever willpower he had left and pushed the want down.

Jane lowered her hand from his mouth, leaving his lips tingling in its wake.

Now where were they before they’d been interrupted?

Right. He’d been in the middle of mindless ramble, not making any sense what so ever. Maybe not the best thing to go back to.

„Anyway... I’m sorry.“ He fumbled to get back to the topic. „I guess I should’ve asked you... to be my girlfriend, first.“

Janes face softened into a small closed-lip smile that made her dimples stand out more than usual and Mike was glad because it made him too distracted to be embarassed about this situation.

„Yeah, you should have.“ She bit her lip before continuing in a teasing voice. „I have high
expectations you know. In all of the soap operas I’ve seen, this is like, a big deal. I mean, I would have expected flowers and chocolate and a Mariachi Band playing a serenade, at least. And lots of balloons. Definitely balloons.

Mike couldn’t help but laugh. Jane didn’t join in, but was looking at him with that same small smile, her eyes glinting with humor and he couldn’t resist pulling her closer, his fingers splaying out over her lower back. Her body subtly curled into his touch and his laughter died down into deep breaths.

„Do you really want all that?“ He asked, seriously interested. Because, he probably could do all of that, if it came down to it. For her. Even though he had no idea where he would find a Mariachi Band in Hawkins.

„No!“ She quickly dismissed it, giving her head a shake. „No. God, no. I’m not really into all of that over the top stuff. I mean, it’s fun to watch on TV, but...“

Her voice trailed off and she shuddered, as if horrified at the thought.

Good. That meant Mike didn’t have to worry about planning a special event instead of asking right now.

He swallowed.

„So... would you?“ He pulled in a breath before continuing, feeling lightheaded. „Be my girlfriend?“

There. He’d said it. No biggy. Although he should probably go and see a nurse later about his abnormally high blood pressure.

For a moment Jane just stood there, and Mikes brain helpfully provided him with all the ways she could say no, but then her face broke into a brilliant smile and that had to mean she wasn’t about to reject him, didn’t it?

Jane wrinkled her nose and it should’ve looked stupid, but it was the cutest thing he’d seen instead.

„Yeah, well.“ She finally answered, her voice slightly shaky. „I did kiss you first, didn’t I.“

Mike grinned.

„Is that a yes.“

If she made him ask she sure as hell was going to give him a straight answer. Janes cheeks slowly turned pink.

„Yes.“

„Finally!“

„About fucking time.“

„Ha! You owe me ten bucks!“

„Damn it. But I’m not even mad. Honestly. It was beginning to get painful to watch those two.“

„Woohoo!“

God damn it why had he ever thought those nosy shitheads would actually leave them alone?
He would’ve more than likely started shouting at their friends again, but Jane seemed to have other ideas, as she slowly but surely slid her hands up his chest, around his neck and into his hair, eventually pulling his face down to hers and closing in on his lips. Not that she needed to pull; Mike was sure he more like melted into the kiss.

It felt so different this time, more sure and languid, not hurried like all of their previous ones had been and holy shit how was he supposed to stop anytime soon.

As if on cue the schoolbell went off.

If Mike had thought that things would somehow be different, now that they were like officially dating, he’d been quite wrong. Of course, there were definitely some perks, like the fact that he could go and wrap his arm around her whenever he wanted to and kiss her as much as it was appropriate in the crowded school building, which, unfortunately, wasn’t nearly as much as he would have liked to, but, all in all, it was pretty much the same as it had been earlier. And it was frustrating.

He wanted more time with her. He’d had this wild notion there would be a lot more sneaking off and spending all of their spare time and afternoons together, preferably just the two of them, out on the town or in his house or her house or wherever, talking and messing around and making out, and that just wasn’t the case. Turned out Jane was busy like all the time. And he would’ve seriously began to doubt it was just some bullshit if Dustin hadn’t told him it was the same with Sara, and Jane wouldn’t have looked as bummed out about it as he felt. The only time they’d actually gotten to spend together this week outside of classes was on the day that he had a basketball practice right after Sara’s cheerleading practice. Him, Jane, Dustin and Will had spent the time between in the library, trying to get some homework done. Or, at least Dustin and Will did; he and Jane had wandered away to look for a book for their history assignment and had ended up flirting and kissing in the biology section, until they were interrupted by a couple of scoffing girls telling them to get a room.

And so here he was, geeking out in his room on a Friday night, doing homework of all things. Not how he had imagined their first Friday together would go. He sighed and let his head slump onto the paper he was writing. He wanted to see her.

Today.

Even though he knew he would see her tomorrow. It was one of those rare occasions when Halloween fell on a Saturday, and the whole party had made plans to spend most of the day and evening together. Jane and Sara had invited them all over, saying they had the house all to themselves for the day, since their father would be working a long shift.

But then everybody would be there.

Fuck this. He pushed himself up from the table and grabbed his hoodie from the bed before exiting his room.

„Mom? Can I borrow the car?“
The police chief stared back at him and Mike felt just as awkward as he had the first time he was met with the man at his front door.

„The girls are out.“ He finally answered.

Mike felt stupid. Why hadn’t he called first? Of course it was a possibility that Jane wasn’t even at home, she’d said she had stuff to do today.

He bit his lip.

The chief cast him a pitiful look and glanced at his watch.

„They should be back soon.“ He added almost kindly.

„Oh.“ Hope flared in Mikes chest. „Thanks.“

The man hesitated. „Do you want to come in and wait?“

He sounded as uncomfortable offering this as Mike would’ve been accepting it.

„No, it’s okay,“ He quickly declined, pointing over his shoulder where his mothers station wagon stood at the curb. „I’ll just wait in my car.“

„Thank you.“ He added as an afterthought and the man grunted something in response, before turning around and closing the door.

Mike sighed and strolled back to his car. He could wait for a little while. Or for a long while, because really, who was he kidding; he would not be leaving here without seeing Jane first.

Fortunately for him it was only ten minutes later when he saw the girls approach, Jane and Sara on foot and, to his surprise, Max on her board beside them. A jolt of jealousy ran through him at the sight of the redhead; how come she got to spend time with Jane when he didn’t? It passed as suddenly as it had come.

Jane and Sara were in sports clothes, both of them, ironically, wearing sweatshirts with their hoods up and god damn it, if Mike had seen them like this earlier, he would’ve recognized them from the quarry right away. It still baffled him how he could not have understood it was them sooner.

The girls stopped on the driveway and exchanged a few words before Sara headed inside, while Jane stayed behind, talking to Max about something. The redhead was fidgeting with his board that she had propped up against her leg and Mike wondered what the topic was; Max was hardly ever bashful, but now she kept looking down and to the side. He couldn’t see Janes face, she was standing with her back to him.

Whatever it was, it didn’t take long and soon Max’s face lit up with a smile, and, to Mikes further surprise, she pulled Jane in for a hug. Now that was something new. Max wasn’t exactly the hugging type.

And now he was beginning to feel like a creep, watching them like that, without them knowing he was there, so he quickly got out of the car.

Jane still had her back to him so once he saw Max notice him, he put a finger to his lips to tell her to
keep quiet; he snuck up behind Jane, his heartrate already picking up at the proximity, and gave his best to startle her.

What followed was a blur; as soon as his hand touched her shoulder she swirled around, pushed it away, hooked her leg behind his and then he was falling backwards with a startled yelp. Janes eyes, cold and foreign at first, widened in surprise and horror as she recognized him and somehow she managed to slow down his fall, so instead of the hard slam he was embracing himself against, his back touched the ground with a soft thud. Janes hands where still gripping the front of his hoodie and she fell to her knees beside him. The two of them stared at each other, shocked.

„Jesus Christ Mike!“ Jane found her voice first. „Are you okay?“

Max burst out laughing, her guffaws echoing down the otherwise empty street.

Mike opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out as he watched as Janes face slowly lost its seriousness and then she was smiling, smiling brightly enough to block out the sun and giggling along with Max and he would’ve laughed, too, if the wouldn’t have been so awed by her.

„I think you just like seeing me on my back.“ He muttered with more cockiness than he felt and it paid off, as Janes gaze softened into something more affectionate.

That was all the encouragement Mike needed and he slithered his hand behind her neck, pulling her down and raising his head up to meet her half way.

„Ew, gross.“ Max sighed before Mike heard the skateboard drop to the ground. „I’ll see you tomorrow love birds.“

The sound of the board rolling down the street faded into a distance, but Mike wasn’t even paying attention anymore.

Jane was slowly sinking to the ground next to him and melting into his embrace, hugging his lips with hers and it filled his whole world. And when she brushed her tongue against his lips, he was a goner. He wasn’t even sure how he managed it, but somehow he turned them over, pinning Jane to the ground. Her hands wound around his neck, slender fingers combing through his hair and massaging his scalp as she opened her mouth under his lips and Mike took the opportunity to slip his tongue inside.

The soft whimper this elicited from Jane worked like a splash of gasoline over a flame and suddenly Mike was feverish, needing to be much closer, kiss her even deeper.

It was enough to make him pull back, this new level of intensity freaking him out.

Janes eyes snapped open just as his did, her pupils blown and all traces of earlier laughter gone, buried under the same half elated, half frightened expression he probably had on his face right now.

„I’m sorry.“ He blurted out. „I didn’t mean to attack you like that.“

To his relief Janes face slowly stretched into a smile and then she was laughing again, effectively dissolving the tension that had built up.

Mike chuckled along and got up, offering a hand to Jane, which she took. Mike helped her up and then dug his hands deep into the pockets of his hoodie.

Jane tilted her head, eyeing him curiously.
„What are you doing here?“ She inquired.

Mike shrugged. „I wanted to see you.“

„You would’ve seen me tomorrow?“

„I wanted to see you today.“ He felt like a creep again. „If that’s okay.“

Jane bit her lip to try and hide the smile that was threatening to take over her face, Mike could tell.

„That’s... more than okay.“ She answered after a pause. „I’m glad you came.“

They ended up sitting on the front steps, talking about everything and nothing in particular for over half an hour, before Mike remembered he had promised his mother to bring back milk; he made it to the grocery store with just five minutes to spare.
Els eyes snapped open as the front door closed. It must’ve been nearly eight; dad never left more than five minutes before his workday started.

She slowly stretched herself out, enjoying the slight soreness in her legs from the yesterday’s run. It had been one hell of a week, that’s for sure. She and Sara had been working their asses off, spending most of their afternoons in the Lab, and late nights doing homework, all of it for just one single purpose: to get the whole weekend off, for once.

A wide smile took over her face, as she let the thrilling sensation of no responsibilities for the next two days wash over her.

She planned to make the most of that freedom.

And even though she loved to sleep in whenever she had a chance to, she doubted she would manage to fall asleep again now that her eyes were open and her mind racing. She might as well get up. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling, her gaze unfocusing.

Mike. She would get to spend the days with Mike.

Her... boyfriend.

The word still sounded funny in her ears. Even when just thinking about it, let alone saying it out loud.

The urge to giggle and laugh was so overwhelming she had to hide her face in the pillows to muffle the sound.

She was giddy. Jesus. It should’ve felt stupid.

But it didn’t.

It felt... happy.

Mike. He was the first thing to cross her mind when she woke up. The last thing she’d been thinking about, when she’d slowly drifted to sleep last night, playing the pictures of his visit over and over again in her head.

She’d been so ashamed at first of her reaction when he’d surprised him. But Max and Mike hadn’t made a big deal of it, so she just tried to forget it. And then the kiss. God, the kiss. Her breath still hitched at the memory.

El wanted to kiss him like that again.

Only this time she wanted to be all pretty while doing it, not sweaty and gross and in sweatpants; it had been a wonder he’d wanted to kiss her at all.

But he had and he did and it was perfect. The whole evening had been perfect, really.

She couldn’t wait to see him again.
Mike looked around, taking in the light pink walls and the matching bedding set, the two combined giving the room it’s main color scheme. He hadn’t expected it to be pink, although he didn’t know why; many girls liked pink. Hell, Nancy’s room was pink. Ad he didn’t even know what he had been expecting, to be honest.

The second thing that caught his attention was the decent sized bookshelf, taking almost two thirds of the wall opposite the bed; the rest was filled with a small wardrobe. His eyebrows rose. Another surprise. Most girls he knew, which, admittedly, weren’t that many, would rather have a bigger closet than waste room on books.

He turned to look at Jane.

„You like to read.“

Jane was still standing by the door, awkwardly shuffling on her feet. She wasn’t meeting his eyes, even though Mike knew she had been staring at him just a moment ago. A small blush colored her cheeks as she shrugged, her gaze flicking to his and then away again.

Mike grinned; suddenly he liked her even more than he already had. He stepped forward to browse the shelves.

He had recognized the Lord of the Rings and Hobbit books from afar; he had the very same set at home. That fact alone made him irrationally happy for some reason. There were plenty of classics, like Orwell, Salinger, a couple of Hemingways. Alexandre Dumas. Agatha Christie. Terry Pratchett, a name he also recognized. A whole set of Jane Austen books. And almost a shelf full of what looked like romance novels. No surprise there; girls loved that shit. And, if his mom was any indication, they never really grew out of it.

But, overall, the variety of books amazed him a great deal. Jane seemed to have a little bit of everything there. And he’d thought he liked to read.

He crouched a little to see the bottom shelves. Dictionaries. *Dictionaries.* Damn. Three shelves full of dictionaries and different encyclopedias.

His gaze travelled further down and a whole row of smaller, paperback booklets caught his eye. He tugged one out and opened it. His brows furrowed in confusion.

It was a comic book. Well, kind of; it wasn’t like what he was used to. It was black and white, and the speech bubbles were filled with hieroglyphs. Also, the sequence of the pictures made no sense whatsoever.

„What’s this?“

Jane finally stepped fully into the room and pushed the door closed, walked over to the bed and sat down. Mike didn’t even have to look to know she was fidgeting with her bracelets.

„That’s...manga.“ Her voice was nervous. „It’s a kind of-.“

„Yeah I know what manga is.“ Mike cut her off absent mindingly, flipping through the pages before turning to look at her. „It’s in Japanese.“

Jane’s face flushed a full scarlet, her mouth opening and closing as if she wanted to say something but didn’t know what. Mikes eyes widened as the realization dawned on him.
„You know Japanese.“ He blurted out.

Janes gaze snapped to him, more frightened than uncomfortable now and Mike cursed inwardly. Shit. What was he doing? Here she was, trusting him enough to let him into her room and he was being a complete wasteoid, going through her stuff and prying.

It’s just that he didn’t know anybody who knew Japanese.

He was about to apologize when Janes face settled into an almost imperceptible wariness.

„Just a little.“ She said, looking down at her hands. „Enough to understand the comics.“

Something about the way she held herself told Mike she wasn’t exactly lying, but not being completely truthful either. It bothered him, but not as much as him putting her into this situation in the first place did. Above all else, he wanted her to feel good around him. Wanted her to want to be around him.

He carefully tucked the comic back into the bookshelf and stood up.

„That’s cool.“ He said as nonchalantly as he could, moving on to take in the rest of the room.

Janes shoulders lost some of the tension in them and Mike had an urge to go and touch her. He fought it down; invading her personal space after making her feel uncomfortable would probably be a douche move.

He let his gaze wander instead. It stopped on the door, the poster on it visible now that it was closed and Mike couldn't resist rolling his eyes at it.

Tom Cruise? Really? How the hell was a guy supposed to live up to Tom fucking Cruise?

Sighing, he went to sit down on the chair behind the small tidy desk, such a contrast to Mikes own, that was constantly littered with comics, homework and other random drabble.

Jane seemed to like order.

He was just trying to come up with a safe enough topic to lighten the mood again when Max’s guffaws carried even through the closed door and he remember last night. He’d never asked what the two had been talking about.

„What was up with Max and the hug last night?“ Mikes mouth was, once again, a second quicker than his brain. It only came to him after he had asked, that maybe this wasn’t the best thing to bring up when he wanted to make her feel at ease.

Shit.

But, now that it was out, he couldn't take it back anymore. And he wanted to know, anyway.

So Mike watched as Jane worried her bottom lip between her teeth and waited.

El wanted to hide her face into her pillows like she had done this very morning.
Damn it. Mike and his uncanny ability to get under her skin. How could he just so easily dig out the fact that she knew Japanese? Max had been in her room many times before, so she'd thought it was all safe. Thank god she didn’t have any literature in Russian, at least. Jesus. Her knowing the two unusual foreign languages was not supposed to get out. She hoped Mike would just forget this bit of information.

She hadn’t thought this through properly, had she? Letting Mike into her room. She’d figured it would be harmless enough, but in retrospect, she really should have known better. Mike was always so curious, so perceptive.

But he’d asked, his warm brown eyes taking on a softer quality as they held hers and his hand gently squeezing hers, if he could see it, and how could she not. And she had kind of wanted to, anyway. To share another piece of herself with him.

So, was she willing to share a bit more?

El bit her lip, thinking.

Well, what the hell.

„Max... Max wanted to apologize.“ Her voice was too soft and she forced herself to raise the volume. „For telling you about the tattoo.“

He chanced a look at Mike. She couldn’t read his face.

„She kind of promised me not to tell anybody.“

Mike nodded slowly.

„Well, that was kind of shitty of her. Even though I can’t exactly say I regret she told.“

His eyes were all intense again, making her feel self conscious.

She had avoided all talks related to the name El and that night in the quarry. It had been hard, because she really wanted to ask Mike about how he had ended up falling in and how he had connected the dots about her being the girl. But, since Mike would more than likely have his own questions about that evening, she had kept hers at bay.

At least the name mystery was finally solved when Max had come clean yesterday. She’d suspected at first that Sara calling her Eleven that one time in front of their friends had given her away; she hadn’t even thought about Max and the tattoo being mixed in on it.

„Max was feeling real bad about it.“ El continued. „So she was happy when I said it was okay.“

„Of course she was. She lied to you. Friends don’t lie.“

Mike sounded judgemental and El suddenly had a fierce instinct to protect Max. It’s not like she was any better. She squared her shoulders and met Mikes eyes.

„I lied to her first.“ She took a deep breath. „About how I got it. What it means.“

She could see all the different questions run over Mikes features, but to her relief he ended up picking an easy one.

„Can I see it?“
Els face stretched into a smile as she almost laughed at the childish curiosity in his voice.

„Sure.“

Mike reciprocated her grin and jumped up, coming to sit in front of her on the bed. Els nimble fingers expertly opened the intricate clasp on the wide leather cuff she had on today to cover the tattoo, and she let it fall to the bed.

Mikes gaze was zoomed in on her wrist, and once the cuff was off, his hands were already there, hesitating for only a brief while before making contact. He gently cupped her arm with one hand and let the index and middle finger of another slide over the small simple numbers.

Els heart jumped into her throat at the feel of his fingerpads running over her skin. There was something sensual about it; somehow this small contact seemed more intimate than that kiss last night had been.

She almost missed Mikes quiet murmur.

„Would you tell me the real story behind it?“

He hadn’t raised his eyes from the tattoo, but his hands had stilled, still holding her wrist, with only his thumbs gently stroking the sensitive skin, causing her senses to overload.

And maybe that was to blame for the weakness that overtook her, inch by inch, until she had no wish to fight it.

She couldn’t lie to him. She didn’t want to lie to him.

But she couldn’t tell him, either.

„Can we make a deal?“ She asked, hesitant.

Mike finally looked up, his face only a few inches away; she hadn’t realized they were so close. She could’ve counted the freckles on his nose, if she wanted to. She took a shallow breath and continued before she was sidetracked.

„That if I can’t tell you the truth, it’s okay if I don’t say anything at all?“

His brown irises kept her captive, and she held her breath, waiting for an answer.

The silence stretched.

One of these days Jane was gonna fry his brain completely, Mike was sure. A very huge part of him just wanted to lean forward and kiss her. Push her back against the bed and kiss her, like he had last night; he’d had a long, long lonely evening to replay it in his head a thousand times.

But for the first time a girl wasn’t just a... a pretty thing. And what she had asked tugged at the strings somehow deep down inside him, confusing him to no ends.

Of course he didn’t want her to lie to him, that went without saying. He hated when people lied to him. But then again, would he actually be okay with not getting an answer from her at all?
He always needed to know everything. He could literally drive himself nuts if some things went unanswered. More often than not he got the information he wanted anyway, one way or another. And here she was, asking him to respect her silence, if she so chose.

The two ideas clashed against each other in an unpleasant way.

If it was anyone else asking, he would’ve told them to go to hell and demanded they stop this bullshit.

But this was Jane. El.

And that complicated things even more. On one hand he was inclined to give her whatever she asked for, as corny as that sounded. And then on the other, he very much hated the idea that there might be things she wouldn’t or couldn’t tell him.

Fuck.

The door slammed open and Mike jumped a little, until he saw it was just Dustin standing there, trying to look strict but failing miserably.

„Hey, now what’s this? Don’t you know there’s an open door policy in this house?” He asked in, what Mike could only assume, was meant to be an imitation of the chief’s voice.

And even though it was just Dustin, Mike still felt like he should explain himself for some reason.

Sara appeared in the doorway next to Dustin, before he could say something, most likely, awkward.

„Dustin! Can’t I leave you alone for one minute?” She asked, laughing, before turning to Mike. „There is no such policy in this house, and Dustin,” Sara pushed Dustin away from the door. „Knows that very well! Sorry! Carry on.“

Sara reached out to close the door again, reprimanding Dustin for messing around with them.

„It’s not like I interrupted anything.“ Dustin sounded way too amused. „They were just sitting there holding hands.“

The door clicked shut.

Neither he nor Jane had even moved throughout this whole interaction, or said anything, too caught up in their own private moment to go along with the easy mood of Dustins teasing.

Mike ran his fingers over the tattoo for one last time and then picked up the cuff, carefully placing it back around her delicate wrist and closing the clasp.

Jane was so still she was barely breathing at this point and suddenly the answer came to him easily.

„We can do that.“ He said, sounding way more confident than he felt about it. „I mean, I can at least try to do that.“ He added quickly. If she was going to be honest with him, so should he. He grinned. „I can’t promise you I won’t throw a hissy fit over this one day though.“

Jane watched him, her gaze flicking from one eye to another, and Mike was happy to see her features slowly relax into a smile as the anxiety faded away. Her eyes regained their spark and then she was leaning in, catching his lips with hers. All the complicated thoughts flew out of his head, effectively replaced with the need to hold her closer.
If Dustin would come barging in again, at least he wouldn’t be able to scoff about the two of them just holding hands this time.

The day ended up being a blast, with the party playing different board games they had brought along for hours. Max kept complaining about their dorky ways, but that didn’t stop her from owning all of their asses in Clue, Monopoly, and, even though it was like a contradiction in itself, Go For Broke; Mike laughed along with the others when Lucas, always competitive when it came to boardgames, kept groaning about never playing money related games with an accountant’s daughter again, because that was just cheating. Max kindly told him to shut it and stop being a sore loser.

By six o’clock, being the teenagers that they were, and thus, always hungry, they had destroyed most of the food in the house that didn’t need cooking; despite the fact that they’d ordered pizza earlier. And when a little later the girls also ran out of candy, because they kept giving away insane amounts to most of the trick or treaters, they decided to head out and see what was going on around the town instead and replenish their stock.

The streets were still full of people and kids in costumes and most of the houses were lit up, open and inviting, and the whole thing made Mike miss the times he was still young enough to go trick or treating. It had always been fun; the four of them, or five, once Max joined their little party, used to love dressing up for Halloween.

But then Jane fell into step beside him, snaking her arm around his waist and he put his around her shoulder to pull her in, and he wouldn’t have traded it for anything, let alone for a chance to get treats.

The evening was going so well, too well, and really, Mike shouldn’t have even been surprised that it wouldn’t last.

Him, Will and Dustin had decided they didn’t want to go in to the grocery store and were waiting for the others behind the corner of the building instead, when it all went awry.

“Hey Frogface!”

Mike froze, groaning inwardly.

Troy. Fucking Troy. And James was with him, as always.

Will tensed up beside him.

„Son of a bitch.” Dustin muttered under his breath, sighing heavily. „What do you want Troy?”

„I wasn’t talking to you Toothless!” Troy’s voice was slurry, and Mike realized to his horror that the guy was drunk.

Fucking great. If there was anything worse than Troy, it was a drunk Troy. They were screwed.

„That was literally years ago you dickhead, or did your brain stop developing back then and you’re unable to comprehend anything that has happened since?” Dustin shot back, still sensitive of the subject.
Mike wished he hadn’t provoked Troy. Suddenly the dead end alley they were at seemed awfully secluded and dark.

„Let’s just get out of here.“ He muttered to Dustin and Will, pushing away from the loading platform he had been sitting on. He had every attention of just pushing past the two bullies and leave, until he heard a click and swish that made his blood run cold. He stopped dead.

Troy had a knife.

He hadn’t even realized he was retreating until he bumped into Will.

„Shit.“ Dustin had finally seen it, too.

„Like I said,“ Troy growled. „I wasn’t talking to you, Toothless. You see, I had business with your homey Mikey here, but... since you so nicely asked... I’m more than happy to play dentist with you.“

He sprang into motion and the three of them backed up, but not fast enough; James surged forward and caught Dustin by his arm before they could really do anything. He slammed Dustin against the wall, pinning him to it by the throat and Mike winced at the grunt of pain his friend let out. Mike and Will halted their escape and jumped closer again to help, only to be stopped by Troy, who was now between them and Dustin, waving his knife around, keeping them at bay.

„Wait for your turn, ladies.“ He mocked.

All of the hair on Mikes body stood on ends as he watched Troy move towards Dustin, raising the hand he held his knife in, the blade inching closer and closer to his friends face.

Shit. He had to do something. Anything.

„What’s this about Troy!“ He yelled, to get Troy’s attention away from Dustin. His voice was shaking. „You still embarassed about rolling around the cafeteria floor with James?“

It was a desperate try but it struck a nerve and served it's purpose; Troy halted and turned away from Dustin. The bad news was, he was now coming towards Mike again, and this time he was more angry than just messing around.

This shit was getting out of hand fast and Mike could feel cold sweat break out all over his body. Troy could beat the shit out of him even without the knife; he had no chance against him with it. He backed up towards the opening of the valley, wondering if he could make a break for it and perhaps call for help, but one look at Will and Dustin, still pushed up against the wall despite his struggles, and he couldn’t bring himself to leave his friends.

He racked his brain for a way out and felt cheated, when nothing came to him. He was always so good at making plans, why had his wits abandoned him now, when he really needed it?

Troy got closer and closer and Mike braced himself for the inevitable impact.

The surprise on Troy’s face as his glare moved away from Mike and onto something behind him was Mikes only warning, before he saw from the corner of his eye as Jane slithered past him, between him and Troy, not stopping for a beat as she grabbed the wrist of Troys out stretched armed hand, giving it a twist that sent the knife flying to the ground; it slid a good distance away from them, ending up under a dumpster. Before Troy could recoup, she had twisted his arm behind his back, forcing him to fall forwards, face first onto the ground. Jane landed on top of him, her knee on his upper back and still twisting his arm to keep him down.
It all happened in a matter of seconds and all Mike managed to do with this time was blink. James was the first to recover, as he let go of Dustin and jumped forward with a shout, no doubt to help his friend. The thought woke Mike up from his daze and he knew he had to do something to stop James, but, once again, he was outdone, this time by Sara.

The girl barely moved as she blocked James’s path, slamming her foot down onto James’s toes and the heel of her palm upwards, into James’s face, where it contacted his nose with a sickening crunch. The boy fell onto the asphalt with a groan, his hands on his face, and Mike could already see the blood pouring through his fingers. Sara took a step back and smoothed down her skirt before walking over to Dustin.

Mike was rooted to the spot, his mouth hanging open.

There was nothing fancy or elaborate about this show of force, as opposed to what they had seen when the girls had been fighting last Friday. No, this here was percise, almost clinical, wasting a minimal amount of effort to get maximum results.

„My nose! Fucking bitch broke my nose!“

James’s whines brought him back to the present moment and his gaze snapped back to Jane. Troy had stopped struggling, trying to catch a glimpse of his friend instead and Jane slowly let him go and got up, taking care to keep out of Troys reach.

She shouldn’t have worried, for Troy scattered away from her, his head whipping around frantically, probably looking for his knife. He crawled over to James, who was still on the ground clutching his nose.

Sara guided Dustin and Will past the two bullies, towards where the rest of the party was now standing.

„Is everybody okay?“ She asked, once they reached them, looking from Mike to Will to Dustin.

Mike nodded, still not able to find his voice.

„Okay, let’s get out of here then.“ Sara sighed in relief and turned to leave.

„You freaks!“ Troy yelled after them, not ready to give up. Nobody paid attention to him.

„Your girlfriend’s a fucking freak, Frogface!“ He shouted again in rage and this time Mike did stop and looked back, because it was once thing when he was insulting him, but Jane was a whole another deal.

Troys face morphed into a sneer, satisfied for having gotten a reaction. He stood up, swaying on the spot, leering at Mike.

„That’s right Wheeler. She’s a freak, isn’t she?“ He snickered. „Has to be, if she’s dating you. No normal girl would ever date you.“

The others had stopped too, but Mike barely noticed through the haze of anger running in his veins now. Janes hand coming to rest on his arm was the only thing that stopped him from going back.

„Mike.“ She said in her soft voice. „It doesn’t matter.“

But Troy wasn’t done yet. He laughed, obviously delighted by the look on Mikes face and continued.
„I mean, didn’t you like have to jump off a cliff just to get into Melanies pants in the summer?“

Mikes world filled with white noise as Janes hand slipped off his arm.

„Why couldn’t you have just fucking died, Frogface, huh?“

He watched, in slow motion, as a blur of red hair stormed towards Troy; how the boy jerked and fell to the ground, cupping his private parts; Max’s face when she swiveled back around, furious and worried and looking at something to the right of him; Jane.

When he turned she wasn’t there.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the kudoses and awesome comments I have received. I appreciate every single one of them, they are what keeps me going ;)

„Jane!“
„Jane!“

El clenched her eyes shut and tried to keep her laboured breathing down, just in case somebody passed close enough to hear.

Not an easy task, when you’re about to cry.

Scratch that. When you are crying; a tear rolled down her temple and into her hair.

She swallowed a sob and pushed her back firmer against the bed of the truck she had jumped into. Her flight instincts had kicked in as her emotions crash over her head, after hearing everything that mouthbreather Troy had said.

Too bad it was all true; she didn’t doubt it was. The way Mike and her friends had reacted was enough to tell her that. And it was either run or face it, and how could she face it? She wanted to kill Troy.

For what he’d done. And said. For him wishing Mike would have died.

Mike.

Her eyes welled up.

„Jane!“

Her friends were still yelling for her. She could hear the panic in their voices as they made frantic plans on how to find her; a spark of yearning shot through her, only to be drowned out by the need to be alone even for a minute right now.

„Jane!“

Mikes voice was cracking.

„El!“

El squeezed her hands over her ears as the tears in her eyes spilled over.

How could have Mike risked his life for a... Her mind refused to go any further.

Melanie. The girl who’d stopped to talk to Mike last Friday. The one who’d made her flip back then.
She knew there’d been something about the way she and Mike had been interacting. But how much must’ve Mike cared for her to be ready to jump off a cliff? And what kind of a girl would let him do something like that?

What if her and Sara had not been there that night?

Jesus Christ. This was so messed up. And she was messed up in it, too.

Did Mike still like that Melanie?

Had he loved her?

Els heart constricted painfully and she bit back another sob.

And what was she then? A rebound? Somebody, who’d just been there, available and eager?

No.

No, she couldn’t believe that.

El drew deep breaths, trying to calm herself down. She was letting her hurt speak instead of logic. She knew Mike wasn’t like that. She knew him. She was being unfair.

Damn it, she shouldn’t have fled. She should’ve at least given Mike a chance to explain, he deserved that much.

But what if she wouldn’t like the explanation? What if it was just as bad as her worst fears and Mike was, like, completely in love with this Melanie and El was just a plaything because Melanie had turned him down?

El cursed and dropped her hands from her ears, letting the outside noises flow back in. Why was she doing this to herself? Making up different scenarios designed to hurt her? It was no use. She needed to talk to Mike; all else was mere speculation.

Wiping the remaining tears from her face she willed the crying to stop and laid there for a while longer, until her breathing evened out.

She perked her ears; the street was quiet. Her friends were gone. El was glad; she could just sneak off and go home. She could talk to Mike tomorrow, when she was more emotionally stable. Even though a part of her missed him already.

El sighed and slowly got up into a sitting position.

And froze.

A pair of brown eyes stared straight at her, amused, but also worried and wary.

Not the same brown eyes she had grown used to lately, though.

„Lucas.“ She blurted out in surprise.

The boy smirked, although the worry in his eyes stayed there.

El awkwardly shuffled to her feet and jumped off the truck. She couldn’t stop her curiosity.

„How did you know I was here?“
Lucas pushed off the lamp post he had been leaning against, grabbed the bag of groceries they had bought before and stalked closer. El suddenly realized the two of them had never really been alone together; it was kind of funny to see him without Max or one of his friends at his side. He stopped a couple of steps away.

„You didn’t have enough of a headstart to get away too far.“ He explained. „Figured you’d probably hide out somewhere.“

„Uhuh."

„The other’s would have realized this, too, if they’d taken the time to think instead of running around like headless chickens.“ He looked at his watch. „You have about seven minutes, by the way.“

El blinked, confused and Lucas rolled his eyes, albeit good naturedly.

„Before the others are back. I offered to wait here with the stuff.“ He pointed to the bag. „They said they’d meet back up here in fifteen.“

„Oh."

„Yeah.“ Lucas hesitated but then seemed to come to a decision. „Look, I’m not gonna stop you if you wanna leave. It’s up to you. And I’m not gonna adress the shit Troy spewed out, because that’s really none of my business. Besides that, what he said about freaks and not being normal and all... That’s something he always does. Don’t take that personally. You’re perfectly normal.“

El nodded and swallowed down the crazy urge to laugh; Lucas had no idea how ironic this was.

„But, and hear me out about this, okay? You really should let Mike explain. It was a stupid stunt he pulled back in the summer. And he knows it, trust me, he knows it. So, just give him a chance, alright? Don’t judge him too harshly. He’s so much better than that.“

The fact that it was Lucas, the always level headed and no bullshit attitude Lucas, who was saying those words, added a great deal of value to them. El was floored by the boys loyalty to his friend. Lucas continued before she could say anything.

„And... Shit. How do I say this.“ He ran a hand over his short hair. „Don’t hurt him, okay?“

And El thought she’d been confused before. Hurt him? Wild thoughts about Lucas somehow having found out about her skills or powers and now being worried about Mike raced through her mind, one more ridiculous than the other, and all of them absolutely terrifying.

„Hurt him?“ Her voice was two pitches higher than normal.

„Yes. Hurt him.“ Her befuddlement must’ve been obvious because Lucas sighed heavily, and elaborated. „I don’t think he has realized it yet, but I think he’s falling for you. So don’t break his heart, okay?“

The words bounced back and forth in El’s mind like an echo, blowing holes into every wall on their way and rearranging the way she saw her world.

She’d been so stuck on her own feelings, or the feelings Mike could have for other girls, she had never stopped to consider. That she wasn’t the only one in this equation who might get hurt.

Lucas was watching her, eyebrows raised, waiting for some kind of reaction.
She didn’t get to give any; they were out of time, even though she still should’ve had a couple of minutes. Running footsteps closed in on them and then Mike was there, engulfing her into a hug so fierce he almost lifted her off the ground in the process.

„El.‟

Mike’s soft and desperate voice was almost lost as he muttered the name into her hair.

Mike indulged himself and held on to her for a little longer, probably squeezing her too tight, but she didn’t protest or push him away so it was all good. Part of him was relieved, part of him bewildered she was actually there, which meant he didn’t need to search the whole town to find her; he had planned on doing just that when he came back here, to tell Lucas that he was gonna head home and take the car to widen the search perimeter.

He knew that any second now he had to pull back and face the music, but for right then, everything was right in the world. She was in his arms.

And fuck if he was gonna let this dipshit Troy fuck this up, or his own idiocy for that matter, for not telling her sooner. On his own terms.

It didn’t even mean anything. He’d been drunk and a moron and the only reason he even cared to remember that evening was because it had brought El into his life.

El.

He ghosted his lips over her brown locks before loosening his embrace and stepping back a little. He should really be begging her for forgiveness right now, and the sooner he got to it, the sooner they could leave this shit behind them.

His heart sank as he finally raked his eyes over her face. She had been crying, the red on the tip of her nose and the slightly smudged mascara around her eyes a dead giveaway. A totally inappropriate thought about how beautiful she looked despite it crossed through his mind before he could stop himself.

Shit.

He felt like scum. He’d made her cry. And he was a dumbass, who obviously knew nothing about her; he’d been ready for her to be pissed, not hurt.

She was looking back at him with those big doe eyes of hers, and the expression in them confused him. She looked upset, yes, but frightened too and there was also a hint of affection in there and it was the latter that completely threw him off.

Suddenly he didn’t know what he should say; all the apologies he’d had at the ready seemed inadequate. He swallowed and searched for something meaningful, as he let his hands slowly slide down her shoulders and towards her hands.

„El, I-.“

He stopped, frowning, as El gasped when his left hand hit something wet on her forearm.
Tears? Was his first wayward thought, but then he pulled his hand back.

It started shaking, badly, right under his eyes, and a drop of the red substance fell off. Blood. His hand was smeared with blood.

But his hand wasn’t injured, he thought absentmindedly. And then it clicked.

Not his blood.

El’s blood.

He looked from his own hand to El’s arm that she had now brought in front of her. The striped sleeve sported a big red splotch and Mike could see a tear in the fabric where something had cut through it.

Her right arm. The hand she’d grabbed Troy’s hand with before. The knife.

His breathing grew rapid and shallow as his mind put two and two together.

El was... El was...

Oh god.

The world faded to grey.

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El’s gaze snapped up from her arm to Mike as she heard the boy begin to hyperventilate; his face had gone all sickly pale under his freckles.

„Mike!“ She wanted to grab his shoulders and shake some sense into him but it was already too late; the boy collapsed right before her eyes.

Lucas dropped the bag he’d been holding and lunged forward with a loud shout.

„Shit!“

He didn’t quite manage to catch Mike, but he did break his fall somewhat and the two ended up in a heap on the ground. Lucas tried to wither out from under him without letting his head hit the asphalt and El rushed forward to help.

„God damn it, Mike!“ Lucas cursed, as they carefully settled him down. „Mike! Come on buddy, wake up."

She could feel the cold tendrils of panic begin to spread, but lucky for her they didn't get very far; Mike's eyelids started flickering only a few seconds later and then he stirred.

Lucas let out a relieved guffaw and turned to her.

„See? Fallin’ for you."

El stared at him for a beat before the ridiculousness of the bad pun got the best of her and the laugh started bubbling inside her, at first small, but then gaining momentum, breaking all the way through
to the surface, and then she was laughing, loud enough to earn a confused and somewhat amused look from Mike who had finally opened his eyes again.

For a moment he looked dazed, as he watched her, but then his brows furrowed up again and his gaze turned darker, guilt and worry overtaking his features and the laughter died on El’s lips. Mike sat up, his eyes searching for her hands.

Right. The cut on her arm.

She had felt the sting of the blade earlier, when she’d confronted Troy, mentally cursing herself for being so sloppy and not approaching the armed hand at a right angle; she’d just been so scared for Mike and too angry at the stupid jerk for playing around with a weapon, like it was a children's toy, to completely control her movements. She’d also been too pumped to think of holding the knife away with her powers; it would’ve been a small enough breach, nobody would’ve noticed. Absolutely stupid of her.

Thanks to all of the adrenalin and heightened emotions, she’d been able to ignore the dull pain until now. Which, in turn, meant that it couldn’t really be that bad, even though the wound had bled enough to make a mess of her sleeve.

Mike scurried onto his knees in front of her and his face paled again, his breath hitching as his gaze zoomed in on the red. Jesus.

„Mike, breathe!“ She commanded, taking his face in her hands and forcing him to look at her instead of the cut. „Are you afraid of blood?“

His eyes focused on hers and she could detect slight indignation in them.

„What?“ He scoffed. „No!“

El pulled back, confused.

Mike sighed and got up, pulling her along with him, careful not to touch her right arm, but keeping one of his hands around her waist never the less, his fingers curling into her sweater, as if to anchor her to him.

„You’re injured.“ He muttered under his breath, his voice low and packed with unsaid words and El wanted to swoon right then and there as it clicked.

He was freaking out because she was hurt.

That was... overwhelming.

She suddenly couldn’t breathe, let alone think straight in his vicinity, and she carefully extracted herself from his embrace to take a step back.

Mike let her but she could see from the way his eyes drooped and his hand fell, defeated, to his side, that he didn’t want to. For a moment he looked like El had kicked him, and she was seriously considering stepping back into his arms again, but then his face steeled in resolve. He pushed his hands into his pockets.

His eyes still kept burning holes into her though.

Lucas cleared his throat awkwardly and Mike snapped out of his staring.
„We should go to the hospital.“ He demanded. „To check this out.“

„To check what out?“ Max panted, coming to a stop next to Lucas and doubling over, Will right at her heels. „Damn it Jane, can you just stop with the disappearing acts? I’m so not up to this shit.“

Shame washed over El as she took in her friends, looking all worried and relieved and, all in all, caring. It had been selfish of her to run away like that, not considering other peoples feelings.

She was about to apologize but didn’t get to it, as Max straightened herself up and walked over to give her a hug.

„You okay?“ She whispered into her ear and all El could do was nod.

If she opened her mouth she would just start bawling like a baby.

Before Max could let her go, a second pair of hands wrapped around the both of them and when El turned her head she got a mouthful of blond hair; Sara was there.

„I am so gonna kick your ass for this when we get home.“ She muttered instead of a greeting, her words in stark contrast with how gently she was embracing her and El just wanted to cry even more.

When had she become such a crybaby?

„Hey, watch out guys!“ Mike’s irritated voice broke through their fuzzy bundle. „Don’t hurt her arm!“

It was enough to get the girls to back off and bring their attention to her wound and god she wished Mike would not have said anything, because now everybody looked even more worried. Sara wasted no time and the next thing El new, her sister was inspecting the cut already.

„Shit.“ She wrinkled her nose. „The knife?“

El nodded.

Sara squinted her eyes, trying to assess the thing through the caked blood.

„It’s not deep, thank god.“ Was her verdict. „We still have to go home. Clean this up.“

„Shouldn’t we go to the hospital?“ Mike cut in. „Maybe it needs stitches. Or it could get infected. Or-.“

„No it’s okay.“ Sara soothed him. „It’s really not that bad. Just needs to be cleaned and bandaged."

„Really?“ Mike deadpanned. „You a doctor now?“

The whole Party halted at the sudden outburst, looking at Mike with confusion on their faces. He had a temper, El knew, but this seemed a bit much. She had a crazy urge to walk over, wrap her arms around him and smooth down that crease between his eyebrows.

Mike cracked under their stares and swore.

„Shit, I’m sorry.“ He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even more than it already was. „I just... never mind.“

The stances around El relaxed and Dustin walked over to Mike, slapping him on the shoulder.

„Have some faith, man.“ He said to him. „They saved your ass in the summer. I’m sure they know..."
what they’re doing."
Sara wrapped her arm around El’s left, unhurt one, and pulled her along.
„Come on. Let’s get you home.“
El let herself be towed away.

Mike was so mad.

At himself.

How could he be such a moron?

El had every right to push him away and not want to have anything to do with him.

He watched the girl, walking a couple of steps in front of him, squished between Sara and Max, with longing; it was hard not to be the one next to her.

But really, he deserved every bit of his suffering. El had gotten hurt because of him. He’d stood there like a jackass while his girlfriend had tackled a guy with a knife. And gotten hurt in the process, did he already mention?

Fucking hell. And it’s not like he was a great boyfriend or something, considering she had to hear from that same knife-wielding dick that her boyfriend had jumped off a fucking cliff to get it on with another girl.

And then he’d yelled at her sister for no other reason, really, than his own insecurities.

For fucks sake, could he sink any lower.

Apparently, he could, for despite all of this he still couldn’t make himself to leave her alone; no, he was gonna stick to her like a gum sticks to the bottom of a shoe for as long as she would let him. And god, he hoped she would let him and maybe he could redeem himself, over time, somehow.

She hadn’t even looked at him throughout the trip home.

But once they arrived at the Hopper’s house, neither El nor Sara told him to fuck off, so he took it as a good sign and stepped in with the rest of the gang. He followed the two girls into the kitchen, hovering there awkwardly, as Sara manhandled the sweater off El, before pushing her arm under the streaming tapwater.

Sara hurried off towards the bathroom and the rest of his friends backed off into the living room, leaving him alone with her. Mike swallowed, not knowing what to do. But he wasn’t about to go away, either, because that somehow seemed even worse.

El had her back to him, her shoulders raised and muscles, clearly visible now that she was clad in only a tank top, tense.

Mike ventured a step closer, before halting again.
Shit.

He couldn’t even keep his distance.

His movement had caught El’s attention and she turned to look at him over her shoulder. Her eyes roamed over his face, finally settling on his eyes. He looked away, feeling like a stalker.

„Mike.“ Her voice was soft again, like it usually was when she called out his name and he let it caress him, selfish prick like he was. „I’m sorry.“

His head snapped back to her.

What?

„What are you sorry for?“ He blurted, cursing when El flinched.

Shit, that came out way too brash. Why was he being such a douche?

„For running away earlier.“ El looked down, hesitating. „For getting hurt.“

Mike needed to sit down. Was she being serious? She was sorry? For getting hurt? He slumped onto a chair, his body suddenly as tired as his mind was.

Sara waltzed back into the kitchen and dumped a choice of medical supplies onto the table, before going to help El get cleaned up. Once she was satisfied, she guided her sister to sit behind the kitchen table and began to bandage her arm up.

Mike watched as El winced when the gauze pad touched the wound and swallowed. El’s whole body was tense again, and this time he could see the goose bumps popping up all over her skin; she was cold.

It was enough to break down his final barrier of self control and he scooted his chair closer, so he could sit behind her, before unzipping his hoodie and taking it off, draping it over her shoulders instead. He let his hands stay there, resting on the fabric, not able to break the contact now that he finally had it. Hoping against all odds El would let him just stay there.

El sighed and Mike completely choked. He felt as the tension left her body and she leaned into his touch, bringing her left hand to rest on his. He let his forehead fall onto her hand, in turn, and swallowed down the prickling high up in his nose. He didn’t quite succeed.

He didn’t even try to move, not until Sara was done and gone from the kitchen and El squeezed his hand under his.

„Come on.“ She murmured, her voice tired. „We can go to my room.“

El was so tired, and Mike had looked so sad, she didn’t even care if it was proper or not, she just made a beeline to her room with Mike in tow, not even stopping to say goodbye to their friends; they’d understand, she was sure.

Her arm throbbed, the wound irritated from the treatment, and she cradled it to her as she sat down onto her bed, resting her upper body against the propped up pillows. Before she could pat the bed
beside her to indicate to Mike he could sit down, the boy was already there, lowering himself onto the bed; instead of sitting, he laid down, snaking his hands around her waist and burying his face into her side, his eyes clenched shut.

If she wasn’t so drained she might’ve jumped at the contact and intimacy, but somehow, it didn’t matter right now. She lifted her left hand to his hair; it always called out to her and this was as good a time as any to give in. The dark mass was just as silky and soft as it looked and she let the strands run through her fingers.

Mike sighed, the sound a bit broken, and curled into her touch like a cat, pressing himself even closer.

El suddenly understood why girls sometimes called guys cute.

His lashes were wet, she noted. She sort of wanted to touch those, too. But she didn’t want them to be wet.

Mike shouldn’t cry.

She didn’t want him to cry. Ever.

He was the one to break the silence this time.

„You know you have nothing to be sorry for, right? I’m the one who should be apologizing. It’s my fault you ran away.“ He squeezed a little tighter. „It’s my fault you got hurt.“

El giggled, the sound more exhausted than merry, but still.

„I’m pretty sure that was all Troy. You can’t seriously be taking the blame for that mouthbreather.“

Mikes jaw set and El knew he was about to disagree. She didn’t want to argue. Not now.

„Can you promise me something?“ She asked instead.

„Whatever you want.“

El couldn’t help but smile at that but then she turned serious.

„That you’ll never do anything as stupid as jumping off a cliff again?“

Mike tensed and sat up this time, his gaze boring into hers and she stared back, hungrily; she’d missed looking into his eyes. Her face stretched into a grin again at her own silliness. What exactly had Sara given her? Painkillers? Sleeping pills?

„About that night, El, I’m so sorry, I was just so drunk that night and she dared me to and it really didn’t even mean anyth-.“

„Shhh.“ El cut him off, placing her fingers onto his lips. They were so soft. God, she was tired. „Don’t. I understand.“

Even if she didn’t necessarily like it.

Mike grabbed her hand before it could fall and pressed a kiss against it, and at any other time, she would’ve blushed or looked away but now she just watched, fascinated. Mikes lips were so beautiful.
„I promise.“ Mike finally answered. „Can you promise me something?“

She ran her index finger over his cupids bow, making him catch for a breath. It made her giggle again.

„Can you promise me not to get hurt like that again?“

El let her hand drop away. He wasn’t seriously asking her that, was he.

„Mike...“

What could she say? That, considering who she was, what she was, she was more than certain she would get hurt again?

„I...“

No. She had no answer.

His eyes darkening up with discontent was the last thing she saw before her eyes fell closed.

It had been only ten hours since Mike had promised her he would be okay with her not telling him anything if it couldn’t be the truth, and already he hated it. He hated the silence. Maybe he was lucky and she had just fallen asleep, not avoided answering him.

Something told him that wasn’t the case.

Shit.

He sighed as he took in the now sleeping form; she looked so fragile. And yet she had tackled a what, two hundred pound jackass with a knife today? Fuck.

He didn’t know whether the controversy gave him whiplash or just made him admire her more. What he did know was that he was definitely not letting her go, no matter what.

He settled himself down onto the bed again, taking her uninjured hand and wrapping it in his. He’d just lay there for a while longer, and then he’d go.

He woke two hours later, with Dustin shaking his shoulder.

„Mike! Come on, we need to go. The chief will be here soon. I’ll take you home.“

He passed out again in the car, but not before he asked Dustin a question.

„Do you think there’s something weird going on with Jane and Sara?“

Dustin didn’t answer. He also didn’t laugh. He just kept driving, lost in his thoughts.
Mike was too sleepy to ask again.
I'm sorry, I know it's been a week since I last updated! Basically twice as long as it usually takes. I'm gonna be honest here, it took so long because I just ended up rewriting this chapter for three times, before I was finally happy with it; I am simply incapable of posting something I myself don't feel one hundred percent sure about.

Thank you for all the love!

El couldn't keep back the sigh as she dialled the phone number, carefully written in her notebook with large, almost childlike round numbers, the name decorated with a heart to dot the i.

Dad had taken one look at her bandaged arm this morning and his always brooding face had somehow managed to distort into an even gloomier one, making him look like a feral grizzly bear. And he definitely sounded like one, when he finally decided to speak.

„What's this?“

El shuffled uncomfortably on her feet and Sara made herself busy in the kitchen, scrubbing the already clean pan; she took great care to do it quietly enough not to drown out the conversation.

„I had an accident.“ El mumbled under her breath.

Dad didn’t even speak, just sat her down at the kitchen table and carefully untangled the bandage. The silence that followed made her stomach sink.

People always thought he was scary when he lamented and El had never understood why; when dad was still coherent enough to curse and shout, it meant things weren’t that bad.

It was when he turned all quiet that she knew she was in real trouble.

His voice could have cut through stone. Or, more likely, smash right through it, breaking the whole thing to crumbles, not just slice it in two.

„What happened."

The deal El had made with Mike about lying? It wasn’t anything new to her; she had been doing it with dad for years now. Each time things were so serious she couldn’t possibly lie to him, she’d clam up. And this time was no exception.

„How did you get it?“ He demanded, his jaw clenching with anger.

El could feel her ears heating up in shame. It wasn’t enough to make her confess though.

„Sara?“ Dad growled out.

Sara sighed heavily but remained quiet, too.
From the corner of her eyes El could see dad’s knuckles turning white from how hard he squeezed the edge of the table.

„Alright.“ His voice took on an icy tone. „I take it you didn’t go to see Doc.“

El shook her head, not daring to raise her gaze to his.

It had been so late neither she nor Sara had even considered going to the Lab. But that was the only place she ever got herself checked out; El had never been to a regular doctors office in her whole life. And it was going to stay this way. For security and confidentiality, mostly, but also because she really didn’t need to, with loads of professionals always ready at her beck and call.

That was also the reason why visiting the hospital last night, like Mike had suggested, had been out of the question anyway.

„Then get going.“ Her dad demanded.

El opened her mouth to weakly protest but dad had had enough.

„Now!“ Was all he barked out before jumping up, grabbing his pack of cigarettes and a jacket.

He was almost out the door when he dealt the final blow.

„And no going out today! Either of you!“

And that’s how she ended up sitting on the couch next to the phone, defeated, dialling Mikes number with a shaky hand; she’d never called him before. Somehow this small thing managed to get her way more nervous than her dads wrath had.

The phone barely started ringing when it was picked up and a cheery voice blasted through the headpiece.

„Wheeler residence this is Karen speaking!“

El’s mouth refused to form words.

„Hello?“ The woman sounded impatient. „Hello? Is anybody there?“

„Yes!“ El finally found her voice. „Sorry! Hello.“

„Hello. “ Came a surprised answer. „How can I help you?“

„Can I talk to Mike please?“

„Michael?“ Did El imagine this or had the voice risen an octave or two? „Yes, of course! Just a moment dear. “

„Michael!“ She could hear the shout even through the obviously muffled microphone. „There’s a girl asking to talk to you!“

El gnawed on the inside of her cheek, her face positively burning. And it definitely didn’t help that Sara, nosy as ever, was giggling beside her, trying to listen in. El threw a pillow at her but Sara caught it and hugged it to her chest, not bothered the slightest.

There was a sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs and the phone being handed over and then a breathless yet excited: „El?“
El’s insides melted and a stupid grin took over her face; Mike had known it was her.

„Mike! Hi.“

Sara was making swooning motions next to her now and El pushed her shoulder into hers, to get her to stop. Jesus, since when was Sara so juvenile?

„Hi! What’s up?“ Mike asked, and El’s good spirits faded away, as she remembered why she had called in the first place.

„I just wanted to say that I can’t make it today.“ She bit her lip in regret. „I’m sorry.“

„Why? What happened? Is this because of yesterday? Because I can totally understand if you’re still angry and-.“

El cut him off.

„No! It’s not that.“ El sighed. „But it is about yesterday. Dad, he... kind of found out. That I got in trouble. So I’m not allowed out today.“

„Oh.“ Mike sounded sincerely disappointed, all of the earlier excitement gone from his voice. „I’m sorry.“

Suddenly El didn’t know what else to say.

„So...“ Nope, nothing. „I guess I’ll see you at school tomorrow?“

„Guess so.“ Mike sounded kind of distant. „See you tomorrow then.“

And even though El really wanted to hear more of his voice, she didn’t have any ideas how to keep this going, so she just hung up and slouched forward, hiding her face in her hands.

„Aw.“ Sara swung an arm over her shoulders. „I’m sorry.“

„No I’m sorry.“ El muttered into her palms, pouting. „I got you into this, too.“

Sara’s arm fell away as she sighed and reached for the phone.

„Yeah. I better call Dustin, too. Go get ready, okay? I’d like to be gone before dad comes back in.“

The line went dead and Mike’s shoulders slumped in defeat. Damn it. He wasn’t gonna see her today. And he couldn’t even talk to her properly, because his mom and Holly were standing right there, no matter how many times he had waved for them to get lost and give him some fucking privacy.

He could tell by moms face alone what would come next; she didn’t disappoint.

„So who is this El?“ She asked, more giddy than he had heard her in years.

He was so not gonna get out of this without telling them. And, to be honest, he didn’t really mind; he had every intention of inviting El over soon and then he’d have to explain anyway. Maybe it was
even better this way, his mom would have enough time to get all of the excitement out and then maybe, just maybe, she wouldn’t embarass him in front of the girl that badly.

„Well, El is more like her nickname, actually. Her real name is Jane. Jane Hopper.“

His mother gasped.

„Hopper? She’s the police chiefs daughter, isn’t she? The adopted one?“

Yep, Mike had definitely been right about this being a way better time to talk about her, as opposed to with El in the same room. It would be way worse if she was here, too, and they both would have to suffer though this awkward interrogation.

At least there was no question about where Mike had inherited his occasional lack of social filter from.

„Nice, mom.“ He deadpanned. „Can you please try and not bring her being adopted up to her in person?“

„Ooh, so you’re saying I will get to see her in person?“

Oh god, whatever had he done to deserve such a gossip hen for a mother?

„Is she your girlfriend?“ Holly giggled as she emphasized the last word.

Mike groaned. Damn it, his ears were beginning to heat up. He gathered whatever shreds of dignity and self confidence he had left.

„Yes, actually.“ Oh, great; he almost couldn’t tell his voice was shaking. „She’s my girlfriend.“

His mom jumped forward and hugged him, yelling into his ear as she tried to be loud enough to wake his sleeping father on the lazy boy.

„Ted!“ She shouted and Mike winced, trying to pull away, so he would not lose his hearing at such a young age. „Ted! Did you hear that? Our son has a girlfriend!“

„Jesus, mom, stop!“ He’d known she’d flip, but this was even worse than what he’d imagined.

„Is she nice? What am I saying, of course she’s nice! I bet she’s a sweet-sweet girl. When can I meet her?“ His mom asked, finally pulling back and letting him breathe.

„I don’t know mom! Maybe next week. I have to go now, okay?“

Mike started backing off, heading for the foyer.

„Wait, Michael, I want to know-.“

„Sorry mom! I need to go and see Dustin.“ He searched his brain for a reason. „I... It’s about homework. I’ll borrow the station wagon, okay?“

„Michael! Wait!“

Having successfully made it to the front door, he snatched up the car keys and, before his mom could intercept him, had already exited the house, high tailing it towards the car.
Mike hadn’t forgotten about his late night question to Dustin. And that’s why he decided, he should actually do as he had told his mom he would and give his friend a visit. After all, if El was grounded, again, chances were that Sara was too, since they’d gotten into trouble together yesterday.

His hunch proved to be right as Dustin opened the door, looking grumpy and bored. He brightened up somewhat when he saw Mike. They ended up going to town and grabbing a burger at Benny’s; Dustin said his mother was on a cleaning spree and that meant they definitely didn’t want to stay at his place, or they’d end up cleaning the shed out of years and years of accumulated stuff or something.

They’d kept the chatter light during the meal, but the question still burned on the back of Mike’s mind and once they were almost done, he decided to get to it.

„You remember what I asked you last night?“

Dustin’s chewing slowed down, and he took a sip of his soda before answering.

„About Sara and Jane. Yes.“

„And?“ Mike prompted, as Dustin had fallen silent again.

„Well, you don’t have to be a genius to figure out there is something different about them. I mean, come on, how many girls do you know who know kung fu?“

„Karate.“ Mike automatically corrected.

„What?“

„I think it was karate.“ He shrugged.

Dustin rolled his eyes.

„As a Bruce Lee fan, I insist it’s kung fu. But hell, they might know them both. And, probably, a whole other bunch of shit. The stunt they pulled yesterday, with Troy and James? That wasn’t even a martial arts thing, that was just... I don’t know, secret agent stuff, or something like that.“

Mike choked a little on his fries. Suddenly El fighting the bad guys, showing up at school in, what could, come to think of it, definitely pass for a military clothing, and knowing Japanese took on a whole other spectrum. But this was completely ridiculous, wasn’t it?

Shit.

Was it?

It was still way too out there for him to feel comfortable about sharing this with Dustin. Not yet, at least. But maybe his friend would like to share some of his thoughts.

„So you think they’re like, spies or something?“ He asked, trying to keep his tone neutral, so Dustin could either take it seriously or as a joke, whichever he chose.

Dustin didn’t laugh.

„I’m not saying they are anything. I’m just saying they definitely know stuff your average teenagers
usually don’t. And it’s not just the ninja stuff, either. Like, I know we’ve taken a first aid course also, but damn it, do you actually remember any of it? I know I don’t. But Sara and El can save a life. Bandage up a knife wound."

Mike nodded; seriously, he fucking fainted at the sight of the cut. Even if it was because it was on El’s arm, but still. Sara was her sister, and she had managed to keep a cool head.

„And in school, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but sometimes it seems they know more about certain topics than the teacher does. Sara got into an argument over some international political affairs with the Global Studies teacher last week, and, when I checked later, she was right, not Mr. Solomon. Or Geography, remember when we had that game at the beginning of the year and Sara and Jane could name the most countries, so the two of them kept going even after all of the others had fallen out? I think in the end they just stopped because it was beginning to look too impressive, not because they ran out of countries to name. They’re freaking smart. Whoever their home tutors were, they must’ve been really good."

„And then there’s the fact they are busy all of the time.“ Mike sighed.

„Oh man,“ Dustin groaned. „Don’t even get me started on this one. And I thought I was a busy person, with my constant science projects and extra credit researches and all."

„Have you asked Sara? What she’s doing?“ Dustin scoffed.

„Of course! It’s usually that she needs to study or work out. And you know what, I don’t even doubt it’s true, considering her grades and her physical form. This shit doesn’t just happen overnight, you know? No, I bet they’ve been training and studying for years to achieve this level and they’re still going strong at it."

Dustin shoved the last piece of his burger into his mouth and took his time before swallowing it.

„The real question is,“ He finally continued and Mike leaned in. „Does it all even matter?“

„What do you mean?“ Mike was taken aback.

„Exactly what I said. In the end, does it even matter if they’re not your average girls next door?“

Mike furrowed his brows, making Dustin roll his eyes at him.

„Come on, Mike. Would it really change anything? If Jane was a secret ninja or a government spy or... or an alien or something? Would it make any difference to you? To your relationship with her?“

Mike’s face slowly stretched into a grin as he contemplated this. Would this change anything? Would it mean anything to him? To him, who was a complete nerd; a fantasy reading, sci-fi watching, D&D playing nerd?

„You mean besides the fact that it would be totally awesome if my girlfriend turned out to be any of those things?“

At that, Dustin finally did start laughing.

„You see?“ Dustin said, once they quieted. „It’s not really a game changer anyway."

„Yes, but don’t you want to know?“ Mike couldn’t help but ask.
„Curiosity killed the cat, Mike. Don’t be the cat.“

„Oh come on!“

„Oh come on yourself, man!“ Dustin leaned forward on his elbows. „Seriously. Let it be. For now, at least. We’ve known them for like, what, a whole couple of months now? You’ve dated Jane for a week. Give her some room! Give her some time.“

Mike groaned. Dustin and his sensible point of views.

„You never know.“ Dustin shrugged. „They might tell us one day. If there even is anything to tell, mind you. We still have take into consideration that maybe we are just letting our imaginations run wild here and nothing strange is going on at all.“

Yeah. A girl whom he met while she was saving his life, who knows martial arts and Japanese, can take down an armed man, disappears on a regular basis and asks him to accept that she can’t tell him stuff? Yeah.

Nothing strange about that at all.

But Dustin was also right about one thing; it didn’t change anything. Not really.

Mike was still very much falling for her.

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It was by Wednesday that El finally cracked under the pressure. It wasn’t just the fact that each time she happened to see Troy and James, the latter with a huge plaster on his face, which still didn’t quite manage to hide all of the swelling and bruises a broken nose induces, the two boys couldn’t decide if they wanted to insult her or run away; it mostly ended with them shouting rude things at her while hurrying off.

The point was, somehow, parts of the story about Saturday night had gotten out. Even though all of their friends said they hadn’t told anybody and El really didn’t understand why those two mouthbreathers would tell, so she had no idea how. She also didn’t know in which capacity and thus, she also didn’t know if she and Sara should be worried about it or not. Some facts were obviously visible, like James’s nose and her arm; but otherwise, the story that mingled around the school was quite basic, only stating that she and Sara had had a fight with Troy and James.

There were definitely more stares that week than usual, making El feel like she had in the beginning of the year, when she was still a newcomer worth fussing over. It was tiring. To add to it, she and Sara weren’t the only ones who got attention; the whole Party was, once again, under heightened scrutiny.

El had it quite easy; she had a skill to look off putting if she wanted to, so she easily scared most of the nosy busy bodies away. And the fact that she had, according to rumors of course, beaten up Troy, was strongly in her favor, too.

And who did people turn to, when she wasn’t an option?

Mike.
Boys and girls alike.

El had been only mildly interested when on Monday morning three girls from a year below had watched them and whispered amongst themselves, one of them flipping her hair, as she pointed it out to Mike and he turned to look; Mike told her after school they had approached him later, when she wasn't there, to ask about the rumors.

She’d been furrowing her brows on Tuesday, when a couple of cheerleaders, all smiles and giggles, had accompanied Mike in the lunchline, while she was already at the table. The reason? They'd tried to fish information about the rumors, of course.

But when on Wednesday afternoon she saw Melanie, of all girls, stop Mike as he was walking over to his locker, she most definitely flipped a switch.

This just would not do. What on earth did that chick want with Mike? To ask about the rumors? Seriously? And, an even better question, why was Mike talking to her all civilized, and even letting her place her hand on his arm?

All of the hurt and insecurity from Saturday night bubbled up again, and El took a couple of deep breaths, trying to clear her mind.

Damn it all. She slammed her own locker shut and made a beeline for the talking couple, plastering a fake smile on her face before she got to them.

„Hey Mike.“

Jesus Christ could she sound any more fake?

El swallowed past the nervous lump in her throat and carried on, snaking her arm around Mike’s waist and reaching up to plant a quick kiss on his lips. Well, relatively quick. Okay, it might've lasted a few seconds. Or five. Oh god. She was practically making out in the middle of the school hallways. Shit.

She pulled back; Mike had yet to make a move. He was quite literally frozen on the spot, his eyes slowly opening and the dark depths of them made El feel all weird in the bottom of her stomach.

„You ready?“ She asked, but Mike was still looking at her all dazed, so she turned to Melanie instead.

„Oh, hi Melanie.“ She sent the girl, what she hoped was, a sweet smile.

To her relief the other girl had stepped back and looked somewhat bashful.

„Hi Jane.“ Melanie acknowledged her, just as Mike had finally seemed to recover; El’s heart soared as she felt his arm finally wrap around her, his breathing quickened by the kiss. Melanie looked away, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, but it didn’t reach her eyes. And now El felt kind of bad for the display she had given to the girl. Damn it. Why did she feel bad? Melanie should just leave Mike alone!

„I best get going.“ Melanie turned to leave. „See you two around.“

„Bye!“ El called after her, since Mike was still not talking.

The girl disappeared around the corner and El was suddenly very much aware that Mike was still holding her close, looking down at her with his face a mix of amusement and questions and
something else. Before El could do or say anything, he had closed the distance between them again and now it was El’s turn to gasp in surprise, as he pushed his tongue past her open lips to deepen the kiss. Despite the intensity, Mike kept it brief and she could feel him pull back only after a few seconds.

They didn’t usually kiss like this in school, and even though most of the students were already done with their day, there was still enough people roaming around to witness this. El felt a blush creeping onto her cheeks, as a bunch of seniors strolled by, sending them pointed looks.

Mike let her go and quickly grabbed a couple of books and a jacket from his locker, so they could leave. He stopped after putting the jacket on, looking at her all funny again, and El’s blush darkened.

„What was that?“ Mike asked, quirking his eyebrow.

El rolled her eyes.

„What was what?“

„That."

„The kiss?“ El crossed her hands over her chest.

„Yes."

„What about it?"

„It was just sudden, that’s all."

„What do you mean?"

„I mean you’ve never really kissed me in the middle of a conversation with someone before."

El clenched her jaw. What could she say? And why was he making a big deal of this, anyway?

Mike smirked.

„You’re jealous."

Something in El cracked.

„I am not jealous.“ She placed her hands on her hips, perfectly aware how ridiculous this must make her look, but what the hell. „For your information, jealous is when you want something that isn’t yours. I’m just being territorial."

Mike let out a low chuckle and for some reason, it only managed to upset her even more.

„Unless you mean to tell me that Melanie actually has you, and I don’t, of course.“ She spat out just to spite him.

„Jesus Christ, Jane!“ Mike rolled her eyes at her. He rolled his damned eyes at her. „Isn’t this a bit much?"

„I don’t know Mike, is it? I mean, you did jump off the cliff for her you know."

She knew she was dealing low blows now but she just couldn’t stop. All she needed was to hear Mike say that she was the one he likes, not Melanie, and for some reason Mike was not doing that and kept insinuating it was her who was out of line here.
Mike looked like she had slapped him, the hurt all too evident in his puppy eyes. But then his features glazed over, his expression suddenly unreadable to her.

„I thought you said you understood.“

The air left El’s lungs and suddenly she felt so small.

„I did.“ She nodded. „I do. Understand.“ She pulled in a breath before continuing. „She’s a beautiful girl. I get it.“

„El.“ Mike took a step towards her, sounding hollow, but she stopped him with an outstretched hand.

„It doesn’t mean I have to like it, does it? Because I don’t, Mike. I don’t. And I’m sorry if I interrupted your conversation today. I’ll try not to make that mistake again.“

„There was nothing to interrupt!“ Mike’s voice was urgent now. „She just wanted to apologize for what Troy said Saturday night! Said she’s sorry that this jerk had heard about it. She wasn’t the one who told him.“

El didn’t know weather to laugh or cry. Of course Melanie was this overall perfect person and now she was the one who’d been a bitch to her and didn’t understand Mike.

„Like I said, I’m sorry, okay?“ She repeated, more forcefully this time. She wanted to leave. „I have to go."

„El, would you just listen?“ Mike reached for her arm, but it just so happened to be the right one and El hissed, the small touch enough to hurt her healing wound. Mike jumped back. „Shit! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! But really, if you think Melanie has any-.“

„Can you just stop!“ She demanded, desperate to end this. Why the hell did he have to keep talking about Melanie? „I really don’t want to talk about Melanie right now! I need to go. Sara is waiting.“

She took off, walking towards the door at a brisk pace, but Mike kept up easily.

„You can’t just leave like that in the middle of an argument!“

El cocked an eyebrow.

„Really? Watch me."

„That’s really childish you know."

„Well you can always go and find someone more mature to talk to.“ El tried to bite her tongue but couldn’t stop herself. „I hear Melanie is a nice, reasonable girl."

„I thought you said you didn’t want to talk about her!“

„I don’t but you obviously do!“

„What’s that supposed to mean?“

Damn it. What was that supposed to mean? This stupid argument had gotten so out of hand by now El didn’t even remember the beginning anymore. Lucky for her she was almost at the car now; Sara and Dustin were already there, saying their goodbyes, and once Sara noticed her coming, she got into the car. Perfect.
El had a feeling Mike wasn’t gonna let this go so she did what every immature person, which she had already been branded as anyway, would do: she sprinted the last twenty yards, threw herself into the backseat and slammed the door shut, locking them up with her powers too, just in case. She felt smug, as she saw Mike had indeed run after her and *did* try to open the door.

„Jane! This is ridiculous! Open the door!“

El seriously contemplated sticking her tongue out at him, to prove her childish manners even further, but she managed to push the urge down. She sighed instead and climbed to the front seat, which was quite a challenge in the small car. Only once she was there did she turn to Sara, who was looking at her, baffled.

„Do I even want to know?“

El snorted.

„Probably. You always want to know.“

Sara’s face stretched into a grin.

„I do, don’t I. And this sounds like quite a story.‘‘

„Get me out of her first, okay? I’ll tell you on the way.‘‘

Sara complied, and started the engine.

El pretended she didn’t see Mike fuming next to her door, keeping her gaze on the front window until they drove off.
Somewhere between the towns sorry excuse for a main street and Pine Lane, Mike’s anger had simmered down into worried anxiety.

Which was good, actually, since he had demanded Will take him straight to the Hoppers house so he could continue his argument with El. His friends had taken one look at each other, Dustin’s head somehow giving a don’t-ask shake without him even really moving it, and then everybody had scattered; Lucas and Max to do their own thing, Will and Dustin to occupy the drivers and passengers seats respectively, and Mike was left standing there, boiling in his fury. With nothing to unleash it on, since the object of his frustration had so effectively fled the scene.

But Will did agree to take him, and so Mike figured it must’ve not been a too stupid decision; he sincerely hoped his friends would have stopped him otherwise.

Dustin let out a low chuckle over something Will had said, but Mike had no idea what it was about; Will and Dustin had ignored him ever since he got into the backseat, probably not wishing to get caught up in his drama. He didn’t really blame them.

Unfortunately, that left him plenty of peace and quiet for the thoughts to trickle in.

Like where the hell had it all gone wrong earlier.

At least he knew why; Melanie.

They had avoided each other like plague for months, so her seeking him out twice in the past few weeks and causing him trouble was a shitty luck indeed. She’d caught him by surprise with her apology about Troy, and so he’d stood there like the dumbass that he was, listening to her rambling instead of cutting the chat short like he should have, considering that El was right there and, most likely, watching. Not that he would have wanted to talk to Melanie even when El hadn’t been there.

Because he didn’t.

But, just like with the fucked up evening at the quarry, Mike selfishly couldn’t regret todays events either, because, once again, it had ended up with El kissing him and fuck if that didn’t make it all worth it and so much more.

This kiss had, quite possibly, been the hottest thing that ever happened to him in his short life.

Mike had been a downright nerd for most of his school career, and thus, not popular with the
opposite sex by any means. It was only in the past two years that this had changed, to some degree. He was still most definitely a nerd, of course, with his excellent grades and dorky hobbies, but, somewhere between him shooting up in height in the summer before freshman year, and gaining his footing on the basketball team last winter, he had begun to notice the girls didn’t exactly ignore him anymore.

Maybe it was because they had all grown and wisened up, and gotten far less awkward about the whole thing. Or maybe there was some truth in his mothers words, when she had gushed about how Mike had gotten so ‘tall and handsome’ lately. All he knew was that each time he looked in the mirror, he saw the same lanky lad as always, with a skin too pale and a nose he didn’t like, which in turn was dusted with stupid freckles he wished he could vanish. It wasn’t that he found himself ugly; he just didn’t think he was particularly good looking, either.

And so, a girl being interested in him was kind of a new and thrilling thing for him and that’s where Melanie came into play.

She had been there and interested and, according to most boys in Hawkins High, including Mike, pretty. Hanging out with her at the parties had lifted his ego and satisfied his curiosity of what it was like to be one of those guys that girls flirted with. It felt pretty sweet, he had to admit.

And he wasn’t gonna lie, the making out had been nice, too.

But that’s where it ended; their fling, as exciting as it had been when it was still a novelty, was barely even skin deep.

Melanie had nothing on El. Not in looks, and certainly not in substance.

El was nothing like a girl Mike had imagined he would one day fall in love with. Much like the night she had appeared into his life on, she was completely unexpected and definitely unconventional. And yet, it felt so right. She drew him in like no other person had before.

So when she had just walked up to him and kissed him right there, in public, in front of the girl he’d kind of had a thing with in the past, like she was staking a claim... It was petty, yes, and maybe childish and definitely possessive of El, but, fuck, it also meant she wanted him. Enough, to make her act so out of the character. Which, again, was all sorts of wrong and Mike really should’ve felt guilty that he had enjoyed it so much, but how could he? El had kissed him.

But he did feel guilty that he had been so stuck on cloud number nine he had completely failed to pay notice to what was behind all of this; El felt insecure. And then he’d teased her about it, damn it.

Mike sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

He really just should have kept kissing her, like he had wanted to, instead of opening his big mouth and ruining everything.

The irony was, El really had no reason to worry about other girls. Except, he completely understood why she would, considering all of the stupid shit he’d done in the past weeks.

This relationship stuff was more complicated than AP calculus; math, at least, had plenty of rules and formulars to go by. But this?

This he had to figure out on his own.

The car pulled to a stop.
El was almost halfway through the second pint of ice cream and twenty minutes into her favorite soap opera, of which she remembered maybe two minutes, because her thoughts kept straying, when the doorbell rang.

She ignored it. It was probably someone who wanted to sell something anyway. And she had no time nor patience for this today; even now, she actually should have been doing her homework, not trying to drown her melancholy into ridiculous amounts of delicious creamy goodness. She and Sara needed to head down to the Lab soon.

It was the last thing she wanted to do today.

All she wanted was to just stay curled up on the couch, wrapped up in a soft blanket like a burrito, destroy all of the ice cream they had in the house and then maybe move on to Eggos.

Definitely move on to Eggos.

And keep watching the TV, in the hopes it would distract her from thinking about Mike and Melanie.

Ugh. Which, admittedly, was not going very well so far. Her heart clenched painfully as her imagination ran wild with picturing the two of them together, kissing and hugging and she really should just stop now or she would make herself cry.

And, damn it, she was not gonna cry.

When the bell rang a second time, she could hear Sara getting out of her room to go and answer the annoying call.

El scooped out an extra big chunk of ice cream and swallowed it down, effectively banishing the lump that was threatening to form in her throat.

Ice cream always helped.

No matter if she was angry or sad or tired or sick or just feeling stupid; it helped. And right now she felt all of those things.

She hadn’t even realized how this stuff with Mike and Melanie had festered inside her these last few days, the doubts and fears gnawing holes into her confidence like maggots. Maybe she had been unfair when she’d accused Mike of wanting to talk about her. Maybe it was actually her, who wanted to talk about the girl.

Needed to talk about her, because, obviously, she was so not okay with all of this.

Not okay at all.

She had zoned out and didn’t even see Sara standing next to her until her sister gasped indignantly.

„Jane! That’s my ice cream!“

El’s gaze snapped to her in alarm as Sara grabbed at the container, trying to pull it away from her cold hands.
„I’m sorry!“ El whined, but refused to let go. „It’s all we had and I needed it!“

„What do you mean all we had! You bought yourself ice cream too yesterday!“

„Yes but I already ate it!“ El argued, stubbornly locking her fingers in place. „Can I please have this too? Please-please-please!?“

Sara pressed her lips together, resorting to prying her fingers off the ice cream one by one.

„No! Let go! You...“ She huffed as El still held on, despite her efforts. „You glutton! You can’t have mine! Go and buy your own! Or tell your boyfriend to go and buy you some!“

Hearing her mention Mike worked like a cryptonite and suddenly El’s hands lost their strength, letting the container slip away from her grasp. Sara let out a victorious shout and sent her a smug grin, before hurrying off to the kitchen.

It was only then that she noticed the boy in question was standing next to the couch and looking at her, his ever steady dark eyes a blend of amusement and worry and longing; it was the latter that made her stomach churn so badly she wished she hadn’t eaten quite as much ice cream as she had.

Oh god.

He was here.

She had thought she would have at least until tomorrow to recoup and get ready to face him. Damn it. But she also couldn’t push down the surge of pure happiness that ran through her like a bolt of electricity, because, oh god, Mike was here. And even though she had taken off earlier, she always wanted to see him.

Sara passed them on her way back, sending El a knowing glance.

„You have thirty minutes,“ was all she said before disappearing into her room and pushing the door shut, giving them some privacy.

Mike still hadn’t moved and El was suddenly painfully aware that she must have been looking like a train wreck, bundled up in a blanket and gorging on ice cream, watching the cheesiest show currently available on this side of the planet. She decidedly unwrapped herself, gathered whatever grace she had left and stood up to switch off the TV.

But then Mike finally did move and she was barely even off the couch when he was already there, crowding her personal space, his hands making contact as they gently slid over her jaw to tilt her head up.

She really should have been used to him kissing her by now, was her fleeting thought, as his lips lazily grazed over hers. Tentative. And yet, so needy. His warm mouth in stark contrast with her own that was chilly from all of the ice cream she had eaten.

Still the kiss caught her off guard, just like every other time, making her heart stumble and lose its rhythm, clogging up her airways so her breaths became short and shallow.

And just like that, she completely forgot she was supposed to be mad at him, or him at her, and her hands lifted with no permission from her brain whatsoever and wrapped themselves around him, so she could push herself closer. Mike sighed contentedly, almost as if in relief, and after a couple of seconds, ended the kiss. He rested his forehead against hers, his thumbs brushing over the sensitive skin on her neck, sending tinges down her spine.
„You can’t keep running away you know.“ He murmured quietly.

El released her breath in a huff and pulled away from him, irritated that he had broken the neutral silence and brought her back to the reality and their stupid fight.

„Why not.“ She pouted.

„Because that’s not how relationships work.“ Mike reasoned.

„Well excuse me, not all of us have previous experience with that.“

She walked away to the kitchen to get the ice cream out again; she would make it up to Sara later.

Mike tagged along, not letting her get more than three steps away from him, and when El plopped down behind the kitchen table, he took the opposite seat.

His eyes searched hers and El stared back, defiant, as she continued devouring what was left of Sara’s ice cream.

„I don’t have experience with relationships, either.“ He finally said.

El furrowed her brows and turned her glare to the container before her.

„If you say so.“

„No, really.“ Mike emphasized. „I’ve only had one actual girlfriend and that was, like, two years ago and lasted a month I think.“

The spoon that was half way to her mouth halted for a moment as El took in this new bit of information. Mike must have sensed he had gotten her attention for he continued.

„And the whole Melanie stuff... It wasn’t like that. I wasn’t, like, in love with her or anything.“ Mike’s leg was bouncing like crazy, making the whole table shake. „We never even went out. We just... I don’t know. When we happened to be at the same party, we hung out, I guess. You know, and stuff."

„And stuff?“ She raised her eyebrow, hoping it gave off a cynical vibe like she intended it to. The next words escaped her mouth before she could run them through a filter. „You mean sex?“

She stilled as Mike managed to choke somehow, even though he wasn’t even eating or drinking anything, and doubled over in a coughing fit, his face red from either embarrassment or lack of oxygen, or, most likely, both. El felt her own cheeks heat up too and she mentally cursed her occasional foot-in-mouth disease. A relic from her untraditional childhood she didn't seem to get rid of.

„No!“ Mike denied when he was able to speak again, his voice a pitch higher than usual. „We didn’t... I haven’t...“ He swallowed and buried his hands into his hair, before sighing and finishing his sentence in a defeated mumble. „I’ve never slept with anyone.“

El wouldn’t have minded if the floor opened up and swallowed her at that moment, but of course, it didn’t happen. So she took a spoonful of ice cream instead. When she finally did dare to steal a glance at Mike, she saw his eyes were fixed on the spoon in her hands, his face still flushed.

„We were having a party at the quarry that night too, you know.“ He guided the conversation back to it’s original tracks.
She knew. She remembered the music and the laughter and the distant glow of a fire against the midsummer night sky.

„And I guess I drank quite a lot that evening and as you may have noticed by now, I’m not exactly the brightest crayon in the box when alcohol is involved, and, I don’t know, the jump really didn’t seem that bad and she dared me. It wasn’t even that much about the, you know... Shit.” Mike ran his hands through his hair. „About wanting Melanie. I was just drunk and stupid and wanted to show off. It wasn’t that Melanie was something special. It could have been any girl, as awful as it sounds.“

It did sound awful. And so it was completely irrational, that El felt the corners of her lips twitch in an attempt to break out into a smile. She scooped up some more ice cream and shoved it into her mouth to stop herself from grinning.

„So, it wasn’t what you think. There’s really no reason for you to worry about Melanie beca-“

„Who said I was worried?“ El muttered, attacking the almost empty container before her with renewed ferocity.

Mike let out a muted noise that sounded dangerously close to a laugh, and El stopped her actions so she could squint at him. He was trying hard to keep his face straight, but the way his eyes twinkled as he pressed his lips together was a dead giveaway.

Was he seriously laughing at her right now?

El dropped the spoon and pushed the chair back in annoyance, making her way over to the sink to grab some water. Less because she was thirsty and more so it wouldn’t look too much like a strategical retreat, but whatever, it didn’t work anyway. Mike had obviously made it his mission to stay as close to her as possible, and if she wasn’t so freakishly aware about him all the time, she would’ve probably jumped in surprise, as she turned back around and found him standing right in front of her.

Looking at her in a way that made her want to either flee the room altogether or step forward and close the distance between them.

„I would jump off a cliff a thousand times for you El.“

Her breath caught so badly the sharp intake of air almost hurt.

„But then I’d have to save you again.“ The words flowed out of her easily, as if this was an everyday banter, and not the most dizzying conversation she had ever had.

Mike smiled, but his eyes stayed trained on her, hungry and bottomless. „And that would be the best part of it.“

„You idiot.“ El reprimanded weakly and raised her hand, meaning to shove him for being stupid.

But once her palm was against his chest, her movement halted.

His heart must have been going a thousand beats per minute, his pulse easily discernible even through his clothes, sending wave after wave of warmth rolling over her through the touching point. It was hypnotizing. So she didn’t even really register she was whispering her thoughts out loud.

„Like you’d have to jump off a cliff for me to want to be with you.“

And then it wasn’t just her hand in contact with Mike anymore, his arms pulling her into his embrace
and his lips seeking out hers. If you would’ve asked El a year ago, if it was possible to lose track of
time lost in someone else, with a sink edge digging uncomfortably into your backside and your legs
cramping up from standing in one position for too long, she would have scoffed.

Turned out, it was absolutely possible.

Mike had forgotten all about his curiosity about the Hopper sister's extracurricular activities, until a
chance encounter brought it back to his attention again, a couple of weeks later.

It wasn’t the only thing he had forgotten about lately, truth be told, and his first ever C in physics
should’ve made him rethink his decision to skip studying in favor of spending time with El, or,
alternatively, being lost in a daydream about her. But it didn’t. He couldn’t help it; the girl was
always on the forefront of his mind and everything else seemed more or less irrelevant in
comparison.

They’d finally gotten to go on a real date last Tuesday, and Mike had enjoyed every moment spent in
the secluded booth at Benny’s, eating burgers and fries and stealing kisses, and he had definitely
enjoyed the visit to the movies afterwards, which ended with the two of them making out in the back
rows of the half empty theater. The movie they’d went to see was awesome, even if he did end up
missing huge chunks of it, because kissing El was even more awesome. Way, way more awesome.

He couldn’t get enough of kissing her.

So when she’d pulled him in for a good bye kiss earlier that Wednesday, Mike had completely
ignored the fact they were saying their goodbyes in the middle of the schools parking lot, and kissed
her like nobody was watching. Letting his hands sneak under her blouse. Sliding his palms over the
warm and smooth skin on the small of her back.

Her skin was the softest thing he had ever touched. The fleeting thought, how it would feel to be skin
to skin with her, crashed into his mind, making his knees weak and his brain turn into mush.

Holy shit. He gasped into the kiss, not able to control his reaction.

El replied by pressing herself closer and tightening her grip on his neck, and, damn it, Mike was
sincerely regretting it was a good bye kiss, and not the potential beginning of a longer make out
session.

The girl sighed and pulled back soon after and Mike rested his forehead against hers, relishing in the
sensation of her delicate fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

„I’ll see you tomorrow.“ She whispered, and now it was Mike who sighed.

„Yeah. Tomorrow.“

Too soon she had untangled herself from his arms and then she and Sara got into the car, leaving him
and Dustin standing there. The grey volkswagen pulled out of the parking lot, with El giving him
one final wave, and Mike resigned himself to an afternoon without her.

It was good he had plans, at least.
In an attempt to get some actual studying done, for the test they had the day after, Mike had proposed to his friends they should do it together. Max had sent him a long look and declared she would not be pulled into their endless abyss of dweebiness, but the rest of the Party had agreed, with various levels of excitement.

Mike was somewhat glad that Max had decided not to come along this time. He had nothing against her; on the contrary, he appreciated her very much. But he also cherished the few times it was just the four of them, like in the old times. The Original Party, as he liked to call it. Although he never said it out loud, not wanting to offend anybody.

And later, when him, Lucas and Dustin biked their way over to Will’s place, since his mom was at work anyway and they would have the whole house to themselves, it felt like he was twelve again. They all still had bikes, but with Will having a car and the rest of them able to borrow their parents rides most of the time, they hadn’t taken them out that often anymore in the past year. Something they should really change, Mike thought, as they raced up the steep hill, pushing on the pedals, managing to laugh and daunt each other even through the panting. It was still fun.

The whole evening turned out to be fun, despite the fact that they studied most of the time, true to their plans. There was something cozy and comforting about the synergy of the group when it was just the four of them, joking and goofing around, with no girls to impress or watch out for in vicinity.

Mike seriously questioned why they didn’t do it more often these days, because they totally should. But then an image of El crossed his mind, and he also kind of understood why it was the way it was.

They ended up leaving only after eight o’clock, when Will’s mom finally came back home from a long shift at work and looked ready to drop on the spot. And even though she did try to put on a brave face and told them not to mind her, they still gathered their stuff and bid Will goodbye, before shuffling out the door one by one.

The evening air was crisp, the first tendrils of winter cold beginning to seep in, and the night sky above them shone with millions of star dots, making Mike feel like a speck of dust in the grand scheme of things.

„Why can’t we just take the big road?“ Lucas’s voice broke through and Mike turned his gaze back to his friends.

„You scared of the dark Sinclair?“ Dustin mocked. „Come on! It’s shorter! And I’m hungry!“

„You’re always hungry! I say we take the big road. “

„Okay, let’s vote then!“ Dustin rolled his eyes. „I say we go through Mirkwood. “

Lucas groaned but Dustin paid no attention to him.

„Mike?“ He turned to him instead. „Should we take the long road or the shortcut?“

Mike grinned. Mirkwood was their own code name for the stretch of forest between Will’s house and a barely used road; they used to play they were dwarves from the Hobbit there, back in the days, with Mike and Lucas constantly arguing who gets to be Thorin Oakenshield.

It also provided a shortcut to town, which they used to take all the time.


The whole evening had been so nostalgic, a trip through their childhood playground sounded like the
way to go, despite the late hour and eerie atmosphere the quiet night created.

Lucas cussed at them, but Mike could tell his heart wasn’t really in it. He could see him grinning as they mounted their bikes, switched the lights on and adjusted the backpacks, preparing to tackle the off road route.

They still knew the way by heart, so the journey went without hiccups, for the most part. They were almost out of the woods, the road already in sight, when Dustin hit a tree root from a bad angle and ended up crashing to the forest floor, making Lucas and Mike laugh so much they had tears in their eyes.

„Son of a bitch!“ Dustin cursed, brushing his pants to clean off the debris.

„I told you we should take the road!“ Lucas gloated, leaning on the handlebar, his teeth shining bright as he grinned from ear to ear.

„Yeah whatever.“ Dustin muttered, gathering up his bike and turning it back towards the road.

Only, the usually empty road wasn’t abandoned tonight; Mike raised his eyes to the road as he suddenly heard a car approaching. A few seconds later, a warm glow of the headlights broke through the darkness.

The car passed the spot visible to them soon after and Mike stilled.

Even though it was dark outside, he recognized the car perfectly well. He’d watched it come and go enough times to be absolutely sure.

It was a small grey volkswagen. The small grey volkswagen.

„That was the Hoppers car, wasn’t it?“ Lucas more stated than asked.

By the way Dustin had stopped in his tracks, he had come to the same conclusion.

„Yes.“ Mike and Dustin ended up answering at the same time, looking at each other warily.

„Where do you think they came from?“ Lucas looked from one to the other, his brows furrowed. „There’s nothing there. Only that Energy Laboratory or whatever it was.“

„Hawkins National Laboratory.“ Mike corrected by impulse. „Belongs to the Department of Energy.“

A memory swam to the surface of his consciousness, and he blurted it out.

„My father always used to say this laboratory is actually military’s. That they make weapons there.“

„Oookay.“ Lucas drawled out, his expression somewhere between skeptical and calculating.

„There’s also the woods.“ Dustin added slowly. „Maybe they went out there for a run?“

„At this time? In the dark?“ Lucas reasoned.

Dustin didn’t have an answer to that so he only shrugged.

They didn’t talk about it again that night, and Mike only noticed something glaringly obvious when he was jumping off the bike on his front lawn.
Not one of them had offered the most logical solution to their conundrum, which was that they should simply ask the girls.

And that told him one thing for sure; none of them really thought they would get a truthful answer.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and please leave a kudos or a comment if you liked it - I love hearing from you :)
Mike pulled the car to stop at the side the of the road as soon as the outpost in front of the heavy, barbwired gate came to sight. The road that continued beyond that, all the way up to the enormous ominous building further away, seemed gloomy and dangerous. Uninviting. Threatening, even.

Or maybe it was just the weather making it look that way; the dark, low hanging clouds rolling in the background, the strong winds, that kept forming little dust devils and chasing debris around. Whatever it was, this place gave Mike the heebie jeebies.

The small outpost was manned; he could see it even from this far. Mike swallowed and gripped the steering wheel, his hands sweaty and shaky all of a sudden, wondering what the hell he was doing there.

What was he doing there? What was he hoping to achieve, driving all this way, knowing full well he had no plan or even any solid ideas about what the hell he was looking for? And still he had come, unable to resist, driven by the curiosity that had kept the undercurrents of his thoughts on the grey little volkswagen passing them in the dark, three days ago now. Coming from this direction.

It hadn’t even been that much a consious decision and more like a natural flow of things, that when he’d noticed he still had at least half an hour to kill before he needed to pick up El, he had somehow ended up here, of all places. The car had driven this way almost as if on autopilot, he could swear, without much prompting or guiding on his part.

He had it that bad.

Was there any chance he could just drive up there and ask something stupid, like 'hey, do two teenage girls come through here often? One of them is my girlfriend, so I was just wondering, you know.'

Shit.

He felt like an idiot.

None of them, not him, nor Dustin or Lucas had touched the topic after that night. Not amongst themselves, and not with the girls, it seemed, because otherwise he figured he would’ve heard something about it. It’s not that they’d even explicitly agreed not to, they just didn’t, for whatever reasons each of them might have had.

Mike’s reason?

He was afraid. Afraid he would not get an answer. Afraid he wouldn’t be able to handle the loaded silence or the cornered look in El’s eyes that told him she wanted to bolt from this conversation.

From him.

It confused him to no end, these two very different vibes he got from her.

On one hand, he was most certain that she couldn’t stay away from him any more than he could stay away from her; they could barely keep their hands off each other these past two weeks, both of them craving physical contact one way or another. When they weren’t together, the sense of something
missing was always there, on the back of his head, lurking under the surface, pinching at his chest; and the way she seemed to sigh in relief each time they finally met again, her body relaxing into his embrace, he was pretty sure it was at least somewhat the same for her.

And then there was this other side. This easily frightened and yet strangely powerful side; like a wild animal at its prime, who needed to be free and independent, not answering to anybody, not needing anybody. This particular El was closed off and endlessly wary, always observing the rest of them from the sidelines, her eyes ever assessing and calculating, every muscle in her nimble body taut and ready to react at the slightest provocation.

Fight or flight.

Mike didn’t get this side of her; why it was so, where it had come from. What made it tick.

This El both fascinated and scared the shit out of him.

Because he had a sinking feeling that this El, he could easily lose. He had no idea how to tether it to him, and he desperately wished he did.

The door to the small cubicle of the outpost opened, startling Mike, and the security guard stepped out.

„Fuck.“ Mike cursed under his breath and eased his deathgrip on the wheel, his hands half numb from the pressure he’d applied.

To his relief, the man just stood there, watching him, but not coming closer.

Shit.

He had stayed there for too long, making himself look suspicious, no doubt. Just what he needed. Especially, if any of his wild speculations were even remotely true and this was indeed some sort of secret government facility, to which El and Sara were somehow connected to.

Damn it, it sounded nuts when he put it this way. So what the hell was he doing here?

Annoyed with himself, Mike clicked on the indicator light and turned the car around, heading back to Hawkins.

To El.

El pushed her hands deeper into the pockets of her oversized jacket, hugging her arms closer to her sides to keep the cold winds at bay and waited. She was early, she knew, but she just couldn’t help it; she hadn’t been able to sit still for the past half an hour. Unlike Sara, who was still inside, giving a final polish to her make up and hair.

They’d agreed to meet up with the whole gang at the arcade this Saturday, and Mike said he would drive her, Sara and Dustin, leaving Lucas and Max to Will.

And El couldn’t wait to see him again. It was almost unnatural, how the more time she spent with Mike, the more she wanted to. Needed to.
She was slowly beginning to understand, how people ended up moving in together and getting married. It had baffled her at first, once she’d been old enough to comprehend the concept, why a person would ever want to leave their parents and childhood home and start living with another person entirely. True, she had a lot of things that seemed stranger to her than to the average person, considering she only got to experience real childhood and family and having a home once the Hoppers had adopted her, but still; for years she couldn’t even begin to imagine anything could ever be better.

But the thought of seeing Mike every day, first thing in the morning, when she opened her eyes, last thing in the evening, when she closed them again; the intensity and newness of the emotions that washed over her imagining this were overwhelming.

She liked that thought very much.

The silly smile on her face stretched even wider, as she saw a familiar station wagon appear around a corner down the street. She looked at her watch; still seven minutes to go. Mike was early, too.

Practically skipping down the driveway, El was already at the side of the road when the car pulled in, fidgeting, impatient. She yanked the passenger door open as soon as it came to a stop, and then he was there, close enough for her to touch him.

Which she did, leaning in for a hello kiss, keeping it chaste. And still, by the time she pulled back, her eyes hungrily running over Mike’s face to refresh her memories of every single freckle on it, the boy seemed kind of breathless, his eyes stuck on her lips.

„Hello.“

„Hi.“ Mike breathed back, before his eyes focused and jumped up onto hers, his face stretching into an answering smile.

El just stared for a long moment, unable to help herself; It had been almost four weeks now, but the fact that they dated still seemed almost unreal. She expected to wake up any minute now, discovering she had been lost in one of her many daydreams, making up an elaborate life for herself where she could freely go and kiss Mike Wheeler whenever she felt like it.

And she felt like it much more often than she would’ve ever thought.

Mike peered over her shoulder towards the driveway and then the house. Before El could ask him what he was looking for, he unclasped his seatbelt and scooted closer, slipping his hands into her hair to gently right the angle of her head so he could crash his lips onto hers, going in for a much more heated kiss than her small peck had been.

El melted under his touch, forgetting her surroundings until she needed to pull away for a breather. Mike didn’t let go of her though, letting his lips travel on to her cheek, her jaw, her neck. God. It was a good thing her dad wasn’t home, for if he was, there was no doubt in El’s mind he would’ve been standing at the kitchen window right now, watching them through the curtains with his eyes squinted in suspicion and then they’d be in trouble.

Mike’s earlier behaviour suddenly made sense and El smiled, giddy and lightheaded.

„You were checking if my dad was home weren’t you.“

She could feel Mike grin against her neck.

„Maybe.“ He murmured, his breath hot on her sensitive skin.
Mike pulled back, trying to look indignant, but his eyes were stuck on the spot he had been kissing on her neck and El’s heart stuttered.

He leaned in again, his hand idly playing with the end of her locks, sending shivers down her spine each time his hand brushed against her skin.

He retreated from her entirely and El wanted to protest, but the words died on her tongue at the look he was giving her.

Suddenly he was serious, too serious, brows knit together and his eyes boring into hers, pulling her into their endless abyss like always, forcing the air out of her lungs.

„Don’t say that.“ He began, his tone having lost all of the earlier lightness. Mike’s brows furrowed further and he looked away. „I... I don’t want you to protect me.“

El blinked, not knowing how to react to that.

„I want to protect you.“ Mike continued, his hands looking for something to fidget with.

Her mouth opened and closed for a couple of times, as she pondered over what to say.

„That’s... nice?“ She cringed the moment she said it out loud; it sounded so lame. Even though she kind of meant it. It was nice of Mike. A part of her was over the moon to hear him say those words. To know thats he felt the need to protect her. It meant he cared.

The rational, ever pratical part of her brain, however, lunged head first into a very long and detailed list of reasons why she was so much better equipped to protect him than he ever would be to protect her, and that part suggested that Mike was sounding more like a pouty five year old, than a chivalrous knight who wanted to protect someone he... liked.

Mike’s gaze snapped back to her, his tall frame suddenly overbearing, filling the space in the car, making her want to shrink back or lean forward to close the distance between them and El gulped. There was nothing childlike in this Mike; not in the way he loomed over her, his eyes smoldering, and definitely not in the way he sounded when he finally opened his mouth to talk.

„Nice?“ He deadpanned, and El could detect the offended undertones hidden beneath the amusement. „You sound like I’m a kindergartner who just showed you a drawing he made.“

El’s eyes flitted around in the car and then back to Mike, as she was trying to read the situation and failed miserably.

„I mean it, El.“ His voice was low and full of emotions she couldn’t pinpoint. „I’m supposed to protect you, not the other way around. Promise me you’ll let me, next time.“

„Why can’t it be the other way around?“ She asked, annoyed.

„Because I’m a guy.“

She wanted to answer, but her mouth kept opening and closing as her mind shot down one answer
after the other. Was this about his pride?

„And?“ Was all she finally came up with.

„And... And you’re a girl. And, normally, guys protect girls?“

El’s stomach plummeted and she turned away from him, wrapping her arms around herself.

She wasn’t the smartest person around, she knew, but she was quite sure she understood what was written between the lines; she wasn’t like girls usually were.

If only he knew. If only she could tell him. Tell him all of it. But, hearing him speak like that, she couldn’t imagine how; it would ruin everything. What Mike probably wanted, was a traditional relationship. What he needed, was a normal girl. And she was not it. The unfairness of it left a bitter taste in her mouth, making her clam up and shut herself off.

She stared at the windshield.

Mike let out a frustrated sigh but didn’t push and El felt even worse. She couldn’t even talk properly, it seemed, opting to back out of an uncomfortable conversation more often than not.

She should say something. Anything.

But then the chance was gone, as the backdoor opened and Sara climbed in, all happy go lucky, the scent of her perfume filling the car almost instantly along with her chirpy voice.

„Hi Mike! I’m sorry I took so long!“ Sara either didn’t notice or chose to completely ignore the gloomy mood in the car. „I didn’t see you were already here or I would’ve come out earlier. You could’ve called me Jane!“

„Sorry.« She answered automatically.

Mike was still looking at her, she could see from the corner of her eye, and for a moment El was worried that he would want to continue their conversation in front of Sara. But then the boy let out another sigh and turned back to the steering wheel and started the car, telling Sara it was okay.

El let out a breath she had been holding and grabbed the seatbelt, feeling small and stupid.

Wishing, not for the first time, that she could be more like other girls.

Maybe then Mike would be happy with her.

Mike had had every intention to continue their conversation as soon as they reached the Palace, but, as usual, his luck was shit and the fates had no regard for his plans whatsoever.

They had barely pulled in to the parking lot when Max appeared next to the car, holding two boards and looking ready to murder someone. She handed one of the boards to El and exchanged a brief hug with Sara. The girls put their heads together, whispering something, and Mike used the time it took to get over there before Max whisked El away from him.

The girls broke apart and Max sent him a small nod, not really meeting his eyes. One look at Lucas,
brooding and frowning beside Will as they leaned against Will’s car, and it was more than obvious; the two were having a fight.

El didn’t really meet his eyes either, making him wonder, if they were having a fight too. But when she and Max were getting ready to leave, saying goodbye to Sara, and Mike caught her by her arm and pulled her in for a hug, she reciprocated, wrapping one of her delicate hands around him.

„I’m not running away, okay?“ She muttered into his shoulder and Mike couldn’t help but smile a bit at that. „We’ll be back soon.“

She kissed his cheek and then the two girls were already rolling down the street, their hair whipping in the strong wind. El had gotten much better since that first and last time he’d seen her do it; she must’ve had practiced in the meantime.

Mike wished she hadn’t gone. The weather was horrible and he really, really wanted to talk to her and explain, that he hadn’t been mad at her before, but at himself. El was... amazing. It was him that was seriously lacking as a boyfriend; the fact that El was able to stand up to the bullies better than him made him feel like a whimp. And what if El came to the same conclusion one day? That he was a whimp and a complete wastoid? He felt like he should prove himself to her or something, as silly as it sounded.

„Mike!“

His friends were already heading inside and Mike hurried over, slipping in before Will who was keeping the door open.

The arcade was warm and cozy, the colorful neon lights and the sounds from the machines creating a familiar and homey atmosphere, making Mike relax a bit as he looked around. Dustin and Sara were already at the digdug game, Dustin obviously wanting to get a head start before Max came back. The two shared a small kiss before the game started and Mike felt a tinge of irritation; he had never seen Dustin and Sara even so much as argue, let alone anything worse. He envied them.

But then again, at least Lucas was way more miserable than him tonight, he thought, as he made his way over to the machine next to his. Lucas had already inserted a coin and when the game began, he punched the buttons with a vengeance, his lips pressed together in anger. Will settled in on the other side of Lucas, and Mike sent a questioning glance to him behind the other boys back. Will gave his head a minute shake, indicating he was not yet aware what was going on.

Mike started his own game before picking up a conversation.

„Trouble in paradise?“ He finally asked, getting straight to the topic.

„Damn MadMax.“ Lucas gritted through his teeth, just as he Mike was beginning to think he wouldn’t answer at all.

Mike fought to keep back a laugh.

„That bad?“ Will asked from the other side.

„That bad.“ Lucas confirmed.

„What did she do now?“ Mike prompted after a while, seeing that Lucas wasn’t gonna elaborate.

Lucas was silent for what seemed like forever, punching the buttons on his machine. Mike let him be, focusing on his own game. He almost missed it when his friend finally spoke up.
„It’s more what she didn’t do.“

His voice sounded angry, but hurt, too. Whatever it was, it seemed to be big this time.

„She didn’t tell me her father invited her to live with him in California.“

Mike’s movements halted for a second, almost resulting in him losing the game he was playing.

„I only found out when I overheard her mother ask her about it.“

Lucas sounded so hollow Mike was afraid to look at him. He kept playing to keep his hands busy.

This was not what he had been expecting. He’d been expecting it to be some typical relationship shit that came and went, but this, this was way worse. And something that affected the whole Party, really. Max was their friend.

The thought of her leaving made Mike’s guts twist in an ugly way; he didn’t even want to imagine how Lucas was feeling about it.

Mike lost the game and dared to turn to the others.

Lucas cursed and jostled the joystick furiously, but Will wasn’t playing anymore either; his fingers, although on the buttons, were still.

„You think she wants to go?“ Mike asked, trying not to sound as shaken as he was.

Lucas shrugged.

„I don’t know. We started yelling at each other before I got to ask.“ Lucas’s game let out a crashing noise, indicating he’d lost, and he hit the machine. „Shit.“ His shoulder sagged in defeat. „And I didn’t really give her a chance to tell.“

„Why?“

„Why?“ Lucas let out a mirthless laugh and swallowed hard before he continued. „What if she says she does want to go?“

Lucas didn’t wait for his answer and stomped away, and for once, Mike was at a loss as to what to say or do to make it better. And Will looked just as lost as he felt.

Suddenly Mike missed El so badly, he had half a mind to go outside to look for her. Only he had no idea where to even begin from, and anyway, El had promised to be back soon.

And then everything would be better.

El was absolutely freezing, having not dressed warm enough for this weather, but she wasn’t gonna complain; she could handle being a little cold if it helped Max.

They’d skateboarded around for half an hour and ended up sitting on a curb for another, Max cussing out Lucas with all of the pent up anger she had. And there was a lot of pent up anger.
According to Max, Lucas was a stupid stalker with privacy and trust issues, who always needed to be in control of everything and had stupid five year plans, freaking out over even smallest deviations from them, driving everybody around him nuts. He was way too stubborn and much too proud, and through it all so incredibly infuriating, Max wasn’t even sure how they had made it this far, because god knows she had no patience for all of his bullshit and really, wouldn’t it be wiser to just call it quits and save themselves all the trouble?

El got a detailed presentation of all the biggest fights they’d ever had and she kept her mouth shut, letting Max rant, hoping it would help her feel better later on.

It did.

At one point Max stopped, right in the middle of describing a huge argument she and Lucas had had back in freshman year, and when El looked to see why she had gone silent, she saw a telltale glisten in the corner of the other girls eye.

„I love him.“

The quiet but sure admission had thrown El off and she’d just stared for a couple of seconds, her heart melting, before wrapping an arm around Max’s shoulders. Max leaned in to her, confirming to El she had done the right thing.

„And... and going back to California, to my dad... It was a dream of mine for such a long time, but... I don’t think I can go. Not now. There’s Lucas, and the guys and you and Sara and... I can’t just leave it all, you know? And I didn’t want to tell Lucas about it, because he always overthinks things. If I’d go, he’d overthink, and if I didn’t, he’d overthink, and... Stupid stalker.“

El bit her lip to keep back the grin that threatened to overtake her face at the sweetness of it all.

„You two should talk.“ She offered.

Max gave a snort of laughter and pulled away.

„I know. And we will, as soon as that stupid jerk comes and apologizes for throwing a hissy fit over this.“ Max sounded all prickly and no-nonsense again, like usual, and El didn’t hold back her smile this time.

Max rolled her eyes at her.

„Come on, let’s get you back to the arcade before you catch cold. No need to have two of them mad at me tonight.“

She must’ve seen El’s brow furrow in confusion, for she elaborated.

„Mike’s gonna chew my head off if I don’t get you back there in perfect condition.“

The statement made El grin like a fool and she didn’t even try to hide it.

The warmth washed over her as the arcade door slammed closed and El forced herself to relax, her
body still shivering from the cold in her bones. Sara was already there to greet them, as if she’d known they were about to arrive.

Which, considering the circumstances, she probably had.

Sara tangled a set of car keys from her finger.

„You want to go and put the boards away?“ She asked Max.

„Yes, thanks!“ The redhead grabbed the set. „Was just about to go and hunt Will down.“

Max turned away and headed back out, leaving El alone with her sister. She raised her eyebrows at Sara, and as always, she understood the question without it being said out loud.

„Oh chill.“ Sara brushed her worry off. „It’s innocent enough. Max is better I see?“

„Yes. Do I even need to tell you what this was about?“

„Not really.“ Sara smirked, confirming El’s suspicions she was already in on the whole thing. „They’ll make up by tomorrow. And Max isn’t going anywhere.“

It was occasions like this that made El wonder, what it would be like to be in Sara’s head, to have her power. To know things. Sara had tried to explain it to her, years ago, but it was difficult to grasp; just like it was difficult for El to explain her own powers to Sara.

El wasn’t often curious about what the things that might come, but suddenly she wanted to ask.

„Will these two get married one day?“

Sara’s eyes softened, but otherwise her expression remained unreadable.

„Mike’s coming.“ She said instead of answering and El’s focus shifted.

She turned her head towards were Sara had motioned, and sure thing, Mike was almost there, his eyes fixated on her as if she could flicker out of existence if he so much as even blinked.

It never ceased to make her heart stutter, when he was looking at her like that.

„What took you so long?“ He engulfed her in his arms, like she had been gone for ages, not just an hour, and El gratefully pressed herself against his warmth. „Jesus, you’re freezing. Wait.“

Mike untangled himself from her and before she could protest, had removed his sweater and shoved it in her hands.

„Here, put this on.“

El just stood there for a moment, hugging the sweater, somehow overwhelmed by this small gesture.

Mike didn’t seem to notice, as he looked around, his gaze searching.

„Where’s Max?“

„Outside. Went to put the boards away.“

„Oh.“ His gaze returned to El, taking in the way she was still holding on to the sweater. „You’re supposed to put it on!“
El shook herself out of the daze and gave the sweater temporarily back to Mike, so she could shrug her jacket off.

„So what’d Max say?“

„That Lucas is a jerk.“ She answered, making Mike laugh.

El pulled the sweater on. It was huge on her and she needed to roll the sleeves back, but she immediately felt better. Mike’s scent and body heat still lingered on the soft wool, making her warm not only on the outside, but inside, too, and she didn’t even care if she looked ridiculous in it. Mike draped her jacket back over her shoulders and let his hands wrap around her again.

„What else did she say?“

It was only then that she noticed the thinly veiled agitation in his eyes, the crooked line of his brows, and it clicked; Lucas must’ve told him. Mike was worried. El raised her hand to smooth out the stray lock on Mike’s forehead.

„That she’s not leaving.“

Mike visibly relaxed, his shoulders losing the tension she hadn’t even known was there.

„Thank god.“ He murmured, the corners of his lips turning upwards again, and then, finally, he leaned in for a kiss, something that El had been waiting for for the last few minutes now.

His lips were warm and soft, and somehow it felt like home, being in his arms like that.

They broke apart when the front door opened, accompanied by a gust of cold wind; Max sauntered in and made a beeline to Will.

El watched as she handed him the car keys and then walked away, not even acknowledging Lucas who was playing on a machine right next to Will. She kind of felt bad for the boy.

„Is there anything we can do to help?“

Mike contemplated for a moment but then shook his head.

„Nah. They’ll talk when they’re ready. Come on, let’s go play.“

He gave her one more quick kiss before pulling her away, towards the Pacman, so she could try and break her old record. In the end she did, and this time she did it without his help, even though he’d offered it several times, until El had goodnaturedly told him to bugger off because he kept distracting her with small touches and kisses. She repaid the favor and snuck up on him when he was playing Dragon’s Lair, but it didn’t go exactly as she’d planned. Mike didn’t even get annoyed when he lost the game; he just caught her and kissed her until a passing employee told them he would kick them out if they didn’t stop and they sprang apart, their faces red.

The Party was in high spirits, with the exception of Lucas, and El was thoroughly enjoying herself. It was warm and bright inside the arcade, the place bustling with people again, considering it was weekend, and it painted such a stark contrast to the howling winds and empty darkness outside, El was glad to be on this side of the door, wrapped up in Mike’s sweater and surrounded by her friends.

She felt happy. And she wished everybody else would be happy, too.

And maybe that’s why when everybody except Lucas had gathered around the DigDug machine to
see if Dustin was finally going to top Max’s score, she decidedly made her way over to the game next to the one that Lucas was playing.

She inserted the quarter and got ready.

„Hey.“ She greeted the boy tentatively, gnawing on her lip, hoping he wasn’t gonna bite her head off.

„Hey.“

He didn’t sound annoyed with her, and El considered it a success. Only, she had no idea how to continue. She concentrated on the game before her instead; she hadn’t played it before.

„Is she alright?“ Lucas asked after a minute, making El sigh in relief.

„Yes.“ She confirmed, happy for a chance to speak, and perhaps help. „She’s just... angry, that you got angry.“

Lucas snorted. „Sounds like her.“

„She’s not gonna go, you know.“ El blurted out before she could rethink.

„Yeah I know. Will told me.“

It confused her. Her game ended and she turned to look at the boy.

„But you’re still angry?“

„Of course I’m still angry!“ Lucas slammed the buttons, his game picking up the pace. „She should’ve told me, I deserved to know! We’ve been dating for years and now suddenly she is shutting me out like this? Damn it!“

His game came to a halt, the character having lost a life, and he turned to El.

„Wouldn’t you be angry if Mike pulled a stunt like this on you?“

„Well, I... I don’t know.“ El mumbled, not sure what to say. „Isn’t it okay to keep some things to yourself occasionally?“

„Some things.“ Lucas huffed, his eyes squinting. „I’m not talking about what she ate for breakfast here. I’m talking about life changing stuff. But you girls always share the trivial stuff and then suddenly, when something really is important, you decide you should keep it to yourself.“

El was beginning to feel uncomfortable with this conversation; she wasn’t even sure anymore, if Lucas was still talking about him and Max.

„Like you and Sara, for example.“

Shit.

„Do you two have any idea how much Dustin and Mike worry about the two of you?“

El’s brain was in full alert now, trying desperately to come up with something that would stop Lucas’s rant, that had taken such an unexpected and undesired turn.

„You two never give us any answers about all of the mysterious shit that’s going on with you. Do
you really think Mike is stupid or something? He knows something’s up."

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She needed to stop this.

„But you’re not telling and he’s too chicken to ask, and so they just keep making up these wild conspiracies about some secret spy shit and-.“

El freaked out so badly she wasn’t capable of rational thoughts anymore; she just knew she had to stop him.

A small burst of her power was enough to shut down Lucas’s gaming machine with a sizzling pop; he jumped away from the thing with a startled shout. Just as he turned to look at El, Sara appeared far behind him at the end of the aisle, hurrying towards them with an alarmed expression on her face.

„Jane! Wait-.“ Sara’s warning was lost in a display of lightning outside that rivaled the neon lights inside and a loud crack of thunder.

And El lost it.

Her mouth opened in a short and frightened keen and, unable to reign her powers in, she sent out an electromagnetic pulse so strong, the lights in the arcade flashed hot white before winking out completely.

The place was smothered in darkness and for a moment, before people started to shout and hussle about, it was quiet enough for her to hear Sara’s voice.

„Shit.“

Then the skies flashed white again, bringing on another booming rumble, and El pressed her hands over her ears, sinking down along the wall she had stumbled against, wishing she was anywhere but there at that moment.

Another roll of thunder carried to her through the walls and she pressed the heels of her palms down even firmer, hoping to drown the whole world out.

She’d fucked up.

She’d really fucked up.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I owe you all an apology for such a long wait! Alas, I have been sick for the last couple of weeks and thanks to the high fever, was not able to write (or read, damn it, I am behind on all of the fics I follow) as much as I would've liked to.

I am not even gonna say a word about when I hope to update next - each time I do, the universe seems to take it as a challenge to prove me wrong lol!

But I will, very quietly, hoping it won't hear, promise that I have every intention of seeing this story through to the very end. It's my precious :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

„Yeah I’m on my way. Yeah. See you there. “

Jim hung up the phone, fumbling so badly, he almost pushed the whole thing off the table. Cursing, he let his head rest on his hands for a second, needing a moment to push down the surge of panic that threatened to break through his coherent thoughts and render him paralyzed.

One final calming breath, and then he pushed away from the table, grabbing his hat and keys on his way out of the office.

God damn it, this day was proving be the messiest one he had had in a long while. The girls had been doing so good in the school and with life in Hawkins in general, that he had slowly but surely started to let himself relax about the whole situation.

And now this.

Jesus Christ.

If the Lab was right and the unusual surge of power they’d seen on their radars was linked to the girls.... God damn it. But the address was the arcade’s, and that’s exactly where Sara and Jane were supposed to be tonight, and shit, Owens probably was right and it did have something to do with them.

He was barely out of the door when a sliver of lightning lit up the skies ahead. The loud booming thunder that followed almost immediately, indicating the storm was right above them, made him curse so badly he was glad there was no one in the hearing range.

Another spike of worry pierced his chest.

Jane.

His daughter was the toughest and bravest kid he had ever seen in his whole god damn life, never letting anything intimidate her and always taking everything with stubborn stride; but there was one thing that terrified her, and that was thunderstorms.
A bad feeling settled deep in his gut, that this fucking storm had something to do with whatever had happened.

He needed to hurry.

The Lab had sent out their own men, too, but it would take them at least twenty minutes. Lucky for him, the Palace was mere minutes away from the police station, if he stepped on it. He yanked the car door open and climbed in, trying to push the keys into the ignition with his shaking hands and almost dropped them in his haste. Somehow he managed to catch them at the last moment, and he started the process over, cursing his clumsy fingers, cursing the weather, cursing not having enough time to light a cigarette he so desperately needed.

He felt like a slug, as he pulled out of the parking lot, not even bothering to check if someone was coming, not bothering with the sirens; the town was almost abandoned, with the horrible winds and the late hour and all, and god damn it he didn’t have time for fancy stuff, as he raced through the empty streets. Once on the straight stretch of the main road, Jim pushed the pedal down as far as it would go.

Just a few more minutes.

Two damned phone calls from Sam Owens in one day, one more worrying than the other.

That damned Wheeler kid.

Sneaking around at the gates of the Lab. Jim hadn’t been able to get the paranoid speculations out of his head since he’d gotten that first phone call hours ago. Doc had called him as soon as they’d identified the car and the driver; and it didn’t take long, considering they had kept tabs on all of the kids the girls hung out with for months now.

He knew. He’d read the files and reports.

Jim clenched his teeth.

He didn’t look forward to the temper tantrums Sara and Jane would throw once they found out; and find out they would, if all of this was headed in the direction he was afraid it was. Or maybe they already knew; they weren’t stupid. They had to at least suspect there would be some surveillance and background checking involved.

So what the hell had the boy been doing there? Was it possible it was all just a damned coincidence?

Or had the girls told their friends something? Or maybe they’d just been sloppy and mentioned the Lab unawares? He’d planned to have this conversation with them tomorrow morning.

God damn it, he should’ve had it today. As soon as he had found out. Just in case.

The rain came pouring down hard and sudden, as if somebody had opened the floodgates high up in the sky, and Jim slowed the car down. He would be of no use in a ditch somewhere, waiting for a tow truck.

And what if the girls really needed help. God damn it, what if something really bad had happened? Jesus.

He never should’ve allowed the girls out like this. He should’ve kept the at home and hidden and safe, and-.
„Jesus Christ Jim what are you saying.“ He reprimanded himself out loud. „You can’t cage them up. They’re doing okay. They’re okay. They’re smart kids.“

It helped; he snapped out of his downward spiral of mindless worries and brought his focus back to the road again.

Just a couple of more blocks and he would be there.

His senses were beginning to play tricks on him and the seconds seemed to drag like hours, defying the laws of physics somehow, making him feel like he was in some sort of twisted nightmarish limbo.

But then, out of nowhere, he was suddenly there, the arcade in his line of sight, and the world snapped back into order.

God damn it.

The arcade and the whole damned street were wrapped in darkness, with not one single light on in a hundred foot radius.

This didn’t look good.

This didn’t look good at all.

„Everybody keep calm and-„ the sound of something heavy falling to the ground, followed by a grunt of pain cut the command short. „Fuck! Shit! Ow. Sorry! Everybody keep calm and stay in place! We’ll have some light in here in a second!“

Mike didn’t heed the warning and blindly stumbled forward, keeping his hands in front of him to avoid running into something. Or someone; there were plenty of people there and he wasn’t the only moving around, despite the owners request.

His eyes were beginning to adjust some, the temporary blindness caused by the suddenly too bright lights followed by a complete darkness slowly beginning to abide, and he picked up his pace, now able to discern the darker shadows indicating objects in the otherwise abstract blackness.

El.

He had recognized the frightened yell right away, the sound making his stomach plummet.

The outside flashed white, the lightning crawling over the skies in an ever expanding pattern, and for a moment Mike saw the aisle before him clearly; he used it to rush forward to where he thought he’d heard the scream from.

„Everybody stay calm!“ The arcade owner shouted again, trying to be heard over the people laughing and cursing and calling out to each other.

There was a click of a lighter and a flame flickered to life somewhere behind him; a moment later, the rays from a flashlight cut through the darkness.

„What happened?“ Somebody yelled over the ruckus. Now that there was some light again, the people settled down somewhat, making it easier to move around.

„Probably the damn lightning.“ The owner replied, annoyed. „Everybody stay calm okay, I will go
and check if it blew the fuse or something."

There was a second flashlight produced from somewhere, and in the low glow Mike could see Lucas and Sara not far in front of him, the latter looking around for something.

El wasn’t with them.

But then a second later Sara moved forward and crouched down, and following her line of sight, Mike finally saw her.

Pressed into a tight ball, her hands covering her ears and face hidden against her knees, and Mike’s heart fell at the sight.

He hurried forward, past Lucas, who was still standing there, looking a little awkward and confused, and lowered himself down next to the girls.

As if on cue another loud crack whipped across the skies, and El flinched, as if she’d been struck.

Sara was hovering over her, running a soothing hand over El’s arms and after a moment El released her tight grip on her ears and looked up. She lunged forward to hug her sister and Mike could hear her whispering something in an urgent voice, although he couldn’t make out the words. Sara’s gaze flickered towards him before she whispered something back, angling her head so that Mike didn’t hear anything or even see her lips moving.

Whatever it was, it was obviously private and he didn’t want to intrude, so he looked away and hung back until the girls had finished and pulled apart slightly, before leaning in closer and tentatively reaching a hand out to wrap it around El’s shoulders.

El was rigid for a moment but then, to his relief, the tension in her shoulders eased some and she leaned in just a tiniest bit, in that subtle manner of hers, letting him know it was okay.

„What happened?“ Mike asked.

The room flashed with light and El pressed her eyes closed, curling into herself once more, just before the rumble began.

„The lightning. Jane doesn’t like thunderstorms.“ Sara answered instead, wrinkling her nose.

Mike nodded and Sara seemed to relax a bit, making Mike furrow his brows. What had she been expecting? Maybe that he would scoff or make fun of it or something? He would never; he had enough fears of his own to ever question another person’s.

El pulled a deep, calming breath and Mike ran his hand along her back, wishing he was better prepared for this. Was he even helping at all? He felt so inadequate.

„I think it’s best if we go home.“ Sara cut through his musings. „Come on."

She pushed back up and looked around, before holding her hand out for El; Mike felt her sigh under his arm but she relented anyway and grabbed Sara’s hand, letting her sister drag her up. She extended her hand to him in return and when Mike stood up, El didn’t let go, lacing her fingers through his instead.

Sara was craning her neck and Mike figured she was looking for the others, so he helpfully piped in: „They’re up at the counter.“
Being tall had its perks.

Sara sent her a grateful smile and hurried away, and Mike was left alone with El and Lucas.

Somebody let out a loud burst of laughter and El flinched again, whipping her head towards where the noise had come from, her muscles tensing up.

As if she was waiting for an attack or something. And not for the first time, it made Mike question, what could be behind it all.

Lucas was still just standing there, hands in his pockets, his contemplative gaze stuck on El in a way that made Mike uncomfortable. Before he could call him out on it though somebody pushed past them and El shifted beside him, looking around, and for the first time since the lights went out her eyes darted to his.

And then to Lucas and away again so fast, he would’ve missed it if he’d blinked. The heightened flash of worry and fear in her wide eyes.

„Alright folks!“ The owner of the place was back. „Sorry to say this, but it seems that’s it for tonight!“

The announcement was met with loud groans and whining, and somebody demanded they get back the quarter they had just inserted into one of the machines.

„Hey, that was force majeure, alright? Force majeure. The arcade can’t take responsibility for a lightning strike!“

The owner and some man in a denim jacket, that looked like a truck driver, kept on arguing and Mike turned his attention back to El and Lucas, only to see the others had joined them in the meantime also.

And Max and Lucas where whispering something to each other, their heads close together and Lucas’s hand around the girl and well, at least one good thing obviously came out of this blackout; the two had forgotten they were supposed to be fighting.

The first of the people were beginning to leave and just as they were exiting the building, another loud boom rolled across the town and El startled again, hiding her face into his shoulder, her breaths coming shorter and shallower. Mike wrapped his free hand around her.

„It’s okay.“ He murmured to her lamely, not knowing what else to do. But El gripped his hand harder and pressed closer to him, so he must’ve been doing something right.

„I think we should get going now.“ Sara sounded too perky, trying to hide her impatience and nervousness behind her usual sunny disposition, and failing miserably. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes that kept darting around the place.

„You sure you wanna go home guys?“ Will asked looking from one to another. „It’s not even eight yet. We can figure out something else to do.“

„Yeah, we can always go to my place.“ Mike piped in, hopeful. He didn’t really want to take El home already, selfish as it was. „My parents won’t mind if we hang out in the basement for a while.“

El stiffened in his arms and pulled away slightly, to exchange a glance with Sara and damn it, the two were having some sort of agenda again, something they weren’t sharing with the rest of them, and it made Mike’s gut twist unpleasantly.
„Sorry, we really should be going home.“ Sara began, wringing her hands until Dustin took one of them in his. „It’s just that-.“

„Just that you can’t come with us because something happened and now you’re trying to avoid questions?“ Lucas asked, his voice somewhere between cold and curious. Max hissed beside him and elbowed him in the ribs, but it didn’t really help. The words were already out there, addressing the elephant in the room.

„Lucas. Stop it.“ The low warning came form Dustin, of all people.

Sara looked like a fish on a dry land, for once not having an answer ready to throw at them. She was saved by the door opening again, only this time someone was coming in instead of heading out.

„Dad!“

El flew out of Mike’s arms and towards the door. The police chief’s huge form seemed to fill the entire doorway as he stood there, letting the beam of his flashlight run all over the place.

Mike watched with a tinge of envy as El slammed into the man, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face into his chest like he was her lifeline. The usually rough looking chief pressed a kiss to her hair and ran his hand down her back in a soothing manner, and Mike could see El sag in relief even from this far.

And here he was, thinking he was in any way fit to protect El. That right there was someone who could really help and protect her, someone, she obviously trusted and believed in; and suddenly Mike felt so stupid for everything he’d said to El earlier that day.

Sara had used the opportunity to escape them also, and Dustin sent a dirty look in Lucas’s way before following suit. The others turned towards the door also but Mike caught Lucas’s arm to stop him.

„What was that about? What happened?“

Lucas gave him a hard look and then sighed.

„We’ll talk at your place okay?“

Mike let him go.

„Okay people, everybody out!“ The chief’s voice bellowed all over the place, drowning out smaller conversations. „The arcade’s closed!“

The owner of the arcade was with him now, looking glad for the intervention and the help, saying goodbye to the customers as they started trickling out of the place, running to their cars through the pouring rain.

Mike hadn’t even noticed it had started raining.

El and Sara were standing not far from the chief, and although the rest of them went to stand with them, the man’s presence acted like a shield against all of the further questions any of them might have had; even Lucas wasn’t crazy enough to start interrogating the sisters in their father’s presence.

„Yeah, somebody called in and I was nearby.“ Mike heard him say to the arcade owner once he was close enough. „The electrical company has already been informed too, so they’re on the way.“
The owner sounded relieved, explaining something about the bad wiring and useless lightning rods and Mike zoned out, turning his attention back to El. The girl was gazing at the floor again, hugging her midsection and looking all in all miserable.

The arcade emptied up until their gang was the only one left standing there, and it was only then that the chief seemed to notice them. He let his ever suspicious stare travel over their party, and was it just Mike’s imagination or did it linger on him? He gulped. The man looked away.

„You too, kids.“ He grunted. „Best you get out of here now.“

„Can we take Sara and Jane home?“ Dustin asked right away and Mike had to admire his guts.

The chief brushed him off.

„No it’s okay. I’ll take them once I’m done here.“

„But-.“

„I said I’ll take them.“ The chief said pointedly, but his gaze softened a bit as Dustin sighed. „I need to go by the house anyway. Now scram.“

He motioned towards to door and turned back to the owner, and they had no other choice but to say bye to the girls. Max hugged the girls and even though Lucas had been confrontational before, his goodbye was friendly and sincere. It didn’t surprise Mike; despite all of his no bullshit attitude, he was the truest friend Mike had ever had. Once you were a friend of Lucas’s, you had to really screw it up to lose his loyalty. Whatever had happened between him and El before, wasn’t that bad, apparently.

But then El was suddenly there, in front of him, her eyes looking all hungry and desperate as she let them roam over his face as if trying to memorize it, and it confused him. So it was El that initiated the kiss, cradling his face with her ever cold hands to bring him in for a kiss.

A kiss, that felt all kinds of heady and needy and oh god, he really didn’t want to let go, even if the girls father was standing not even five feet away. And yet, somewhere in his brain the alarms went off; it felt like a farewell. The thought frightened him and he pulled away.

El’s lips chased his, until she was standing on her tiptoes and couldn’t reach anymore. She pulled a breath that sounded suspiciously close to a sob and hugged him tight instead.

„El, what’s wrong?“ He whispered, but the girl just shook her head.

„Okay kids, that’s enough now.“ The police chief’s voice carried to them once more and Mike raised his head to see the man looking at them and yet not looking at them, but rather at the spot to somewhere on their right. „Time for you to go boys.“

Mike and Dustin were the only ones still inside; the others were waiting for them outside, huddled under the extended roof to keep out of the rain.

El let go of him and stepped back, her eyes on the floor again.

„Hey, we’ll see tomorrow, okay?“ Mike reassured El as he turned to leave. The girl’s gaze flickered to Sara and out the window, to where their friends were standing and then finally to him, but she stayed quiet and it chilled him to the bones. What the hell was going on here?

He didn’t get to find out, as the chief had had enough and he practically pushed him out the door.
„Good bye, Wheeler.“

The door lock clicked shut behind him.

And suddenly Mike was angry.

There was one more person who had some answers to give this evening. He strutted over to his friends, his stare stuck on Lucas.

„My place?“

Lucas nodded.

„Your place.“

Mike stepped into the cold rain and ran to his car. Dustin joined him, while Max pulled Lucas away towards Will’s; it was probably for the best, or he’d never be able to keep his questions in until they hit home.

El wanted to scream as she watched her friends drive away. She didn’t; she squatted down instead, running her hands through her already messy hair. What had she done now?

What had she done?

What would Lucas tell them?

What would they make of it?

She’d been so glad when dad had shown up just in time, but now she wasn’t so sure anymore. Maybe it would’ve been better to go with their friends?

But, damn it, then what?

She pushed herself back up and started pacing, fidgeting with her bracelets.

The lightning struck again and she startled, not able to help herself. But at least now she knew it was coming, so the surprise element was gone. It made it a bit more bearable.

Sara, who’d been staring out the window, came to stand beside her, and El felt her heart swell with gratitude she didn’t have to do all of this alone. Sara was always right there with her.

She checked their father was far enough before picking up a quiet conversation, and El could finally tell her the whole story, starting from her and Lucas’s stand off. Sara kept nodding and wringing her hands, and in the end she pulled a deep breath.

„Well. I can’t say this couldn’t have gone better. But I got the warning too late and you were too far away and damn it, the weather program said nothing about a possible thunderstorm tonight!“ Sara kept running her hands through her long locks, braiding them up and then shaking them loose again; a sure sign she was frustrated. „Otherwise we could’ve been better prepared.“

El grinned despite the dire situation. Sara always wanted to be prepared. But she couldn't deny; her being prepared had saved their asses more than once.
„But I think we’ve got plenty of cover. The lightning strike is enough of an explanation. And we can
tell dad and Doc that you just freaked out about the storm. Best to skip the Lucas part or the Lab will
be all over him.“

„Doc? The Lab?“

Sara looked at her like she was an idiot.

„Yes, of course.“ She deadpanned. „They’re probably on the way already.“

El sighed. That meant questioning and prodding and perhaps even a medical examination and if she
got especially unlucky, they’d have to go to the Lab tonight.

She really just wanted to go home.

And be miserable.

Because it was quite possible, she had just ruined everything. Everything. What if Lucas wasn’t
convinced by the lightning strike theory and suspected she and Sara had something to do with the
blackout? What if he voiced those suspicions to the others? To Max. To Mike.

What if Mike wanted nothing to do with her after that.

El felt like crying.

She swallowed it down. Dad would freak out or get angry or start asking questions. Or all of those
things, and she wanted none tonight.

It had been less than ten minutes after their friends had departed when the vans arrived. Vans, as in
plural; two of them, to be exact, and El wanted to roll her eyes at the over reaction. It wasn’t until
they had stopped and parked, one of them further away, that she realized the latter of them was the
one Doctor Owens liked to use; it was newer and bigger than the rest, and she could see the telltale
small satellite dish and taller antennas on it's roof.

Thank god dad had made their friends leave. But then again, he probably knew beforehand that the
Lab was coming.

„Alright girls.“ Speaking of the devil. „You two go wait outside or in the car okay? I’ll wrap this up
and then we can get going.“

They nodded to their dad and turned to leave, just as the Labs technicians walked in, dressed in
jumpsuits declaring them to be from Hawkins Power and Light. The men ignored her and Sara as
they slipped past, even though El was familiar with both of them.

Once outside Sara sighed and motioned towards the van parked further away. El could see Doctor
Owens in the front seat, looking at them expectantly.

„Well, let’s get this over with.“ Her sister sounded resigned. „Let’s keep our friends out of this
though, okay?“

El only nodded. She had no plans whatsoever to drag them into this mess.

They darted between the puddles as they quickly ran over to the bus. Belatedly, El cast a look
around her to check the perimeter, but the street and the parking lot were abandoned anyway. The
Doc stepped out and pulled the side door open for them and they obediently filed in before him.
The Doc sat down on a chair behind the radio system and motioned for them to take the cramped bench in the back. As expected, he then pulled out a tape recorder, his eyes sharp and focused.

„Before we begin. It was Jane, I presume?“ He asked, looking from one to another.

„Yes.“ El nodded.

"Are you okay or should we take you to the Lab for the medical examination?"

"I'm okay. Honestly. It was just an accident. I'm so sorry."

To her relief doctor Owens only nodded and pushed the button down on the tape recorder. He quickly muttered in the basic data like date and time before beginning with the interview in earnest.

Sara went first, as always, and El kept her attention on her story like she was trained to do. Only when Sara was finished did the Doc finally turn to her.

„Jane? Can you confirm? Anything to add?“

El nodded, but then remembered the tape recorder.

„Yes, I confirm.“

She quickly added her own part of the story, the beginning, mostly, decidedly leaving out everything concerning Lucas. And even though it wasn't the first time Sara and her had modified their story, El had expected to feel guilty about this.

To her surprise, she didn't.

The Doc fluently added the last bits of data to the recording and then pressed the thing shut.

„Alright girls, you’re good to go.“ The man said, tucking the tape recorder away. „Unless you'd want to come and spend the night at the Lab?“

„We’d rather go home, if that’s okay.“ El quickly declined the offer.

„Of course.“ The Doc smiled and nodded, looking all kind and fatherly, and El kind of felt bad for not being able to tell him the whole story. But they needed to protect their friends from this, and Doctor Owens was still a government official, no matter how nice he was.

„Tell your father to give me a call later, okay?"

The girls exchanged a wary look, but Doctor Owens either didn't notice or ignored it deliberately.

„You may go now.“ He all but ushered them out of the cramped space.

El began to pull the door open but then stopped, hesitating.

„Will the arcade be okay?“

Doctor Owens’s face softened.

„Yes. Don’t you worry about that. That’s what we are here for. We’ve got your back.“

El smiled despite herself.

Government or not, it was still nice to have people to fall back on.
Mike’s mind was going a hundred miles per second as he tried to figure out what had happened between Lucas and El at the arcade.

It had to be something with the two; Sara had been with the rest of them as far as he remembered, right up until she’d slipped away before the storm began. And it was only mere seconds later that the lightning had struck and caused the arcade to black out. But El was back at the arcade with her dad and Lucas was in Will’s car somewhere behind him, so he couldn’t ask them.

„So do you know what happened? What Lucas was talking about?“ He asked Dustin instead.

„No idea.‘‘ Dustin sounded thoughtful. „But you know Lucas.‘‘

Mike nodded, concentrating back on the road as some cars approached them on the opposite lane; somebody seriously needed to change the windshield wipers on this thing, because he was definitely having a hard time seeing anything with this weather. He was so focused on driving he it caught him completely off guard when Dustin suddenly burst out cussing.

„Son of a bitch! Turn the car around!“

„What?“

„Turn the car around Mike!“ Dustin yelled, his upper body twisted all the way towards the back of the car, his neck craned.

Mike cautiously checked the rear view mirror. Just in time to see Will’s car make a u-turn behind them, heading back the way they had just come from.

„Shit, shit, shit!‘‘ Dustin cursed. „Damn it!“

Mike pulled the car to the side of the road and stopped, not sure what was going on.

„No, don’t stop!‘‘ Dustin urged. „Go-go-go! We’ve got to catch up on them!“

„Alright-Alright!‘‘ Mike bellowed. „Stop freaking out!“

Dustin calmed down somewhat but kept muttering curses under his breath all the way back to the arcade; or, rather, almost all the way back. Mike made it to the last stretch just in time to see Will’s car turn to left a block or two before hitting the Palace’s parking lot.

„What are they doing?‘‘ Mike asked, confused.

Dustin’s curses got louder once again.

„Getting themselves and all the rest of us in trouble.‘‘ Dustin growled. „That’s what they’re doing. Come on, step on it man! We’ve got to catch them!“

They made it to their friends just in time to see Will, Max and Lucas arguing beside Will’s car. Mike made it to the last stretch just in time to see Will’s car turn to left a block or two before hitting the Palace’s parking lot.

„What are they doing?‘‘ Mike asked, confused.

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„Getting themselves and all the rest of us in trouble.‘‘ Dustin growled. „That’s what they’re doing. Come on, step on it man! We’ve got to catch them!“

They made it to their friends just in time to see Will, Max and Lucas arguing beside Will’s car. Mike killed the engine and jumped out, running over to where Dustin had now joined the dispute.

„Oh come on man! Let’s just go and see, alright?“

„I still don’t see why it’s weird, Lucas!‘‘ Will insisted. „Electric company sent out a team, so what?“
"Two teams? On a Saturday night, with barely what, twenty minutes of notice? We had to wait for them for three days when our wiring was shooting out sparks last summer!"

"Well, maybe this is a priority?"

"A video arcade?" Lucas deadpanned. "Not exactly a life or death situation, if you ask me."

"Guys!" Dustin said in his placating manner. "We were supposed to go to Mike’s, remember? So let’s get going, alright?"

"No." Mike finally cut in. "First I want to know what the hell is going on here."

The guys all started talking at once and only quieted when Max raised her voice and whisper shouted for them all to shut up.

"Lucas thinks the vans are from that Hawkins Laboratory, okay?" The redhead quickly explained. "The one you guys suspected Jane and Sara have something to do with?"

Mike blanched.

"What vans?"

"The vans that passed us not five minutes ago?"

Oh.

Oh.

"And you want to sneak back and see if anything suspicious is happening."

Lucas and Max nodded and Dustin groaned in protest; only Will seemed neutral, ready to go with whatever the majority decided.

Mike had made a decision even before he knew he had.

"Let’s go."

Dustin let out a string of curses, but when they all sneaked away in the drizzle the pouring rain had now diminished to, he followed.

The parking lot of the arcade boasted two new vehicles; one of the vans had parked beside the police truck, and the other was further away. It was still dark, but the vans and the truck had their headlights on and Mike could see the flashlights moving around inside the building; there was enough light for him to make out the writing on the side of the vans.

Hawkins Power and Light.

"See?" Dustin whispered over the silence. "Nothing out of the ordinary here. Just the electrical company doing it’s job!"

"Well you can always leave if you don’t want to be here!" Lucas hit back. Dustin huffed but didn’t move, opting to stay with the rest of them.

"And what exactly are we expecting to see?" Dustin asked again, after a few minutes had passed and nothing had happened.
„Something. Anything“ Lucas whispered. „Anything, that would give us a clue about what’s going on with these two.“

Will sighed and pulled back into his hiding place.

„Is this really something we should be doing? Spying on them?“

„Ha! Exactly my point.“

„Oh shut up Dustin. We all know you’re whipped.“

The small quip from Lucas resulted in a longer argument and Mike tuned them out, keeping his attention on the parking lot in front of him.

„Guys, let’s just go, alright?“ Dustin tried again after a minute. „There’s obviously nothing going on here!“

Mike was beginning to feel the same way, but then something did happen.

The side door to the van parked further away slid open, and the unmistakable forms of two girls climbed out, followed by a man in a suit. The three exchanged a couple of words before the girls walked away, towards the police truck. The man with them dragged the door shut and climbed into the passenger seat.

Mike was so still he wasn’t even sure he was breathing anymore.

It was one thing to have crazy suspicions and speculations, but it was quite another to suddenly have something solid to base them upon.

The door had been open for mere seconds, and the van was parked far enough and still, he was pretty sure most of the vans didn't have a computer and an intricate looking radio system installed in them; this was no ordinary vehicle.

The van’s engine roared to life, the sound startling in the sudden quiet that surrounded them, and sped away to where it had come from earlier.

The Party was so silent Mike could make out the single raindrops hitting the pavement.

They watched in continuous silence, as the arcade door opened and the police chief came into view; he made his way over to his truck, and in a matter of seconds, the Hoppers were gone, too.

That’s when Lucas finally spoke up, his voice all business, not smug, like Mike would have expected it to be.

„And now we can go to Mike’s place. And talk.“
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait y’all, but this chapter just kept defying me! I mean, I was so sure I was almost done with it three days back now, and ended up rewriting huge chunks of it after that. Thank you for sticking with me and my story :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

El wasn’t surprised, really, that dad only lasted until they’d pulled out of the parking lot.

„Talk.“ His voice was neutral, but El could sense the effort it took him to keep it that way. Her stomach twisted with anxiety; explaining all of this to Owens had been a walk in the park compared to coming clean to dad.

„I accidentally crashed the arcade’s electrical system.“

„How does one accidentally fry a damn substation, you wanna tell me that?“

„I... I was playing a game and there was an intense moment and then the lightning struck, startling me, and...“ El’s voice faded off, as she was trying to figure out how to continue.

Dad shot her a look from the rear view mirror and she cringed. Shit. He knew she was hiding something. It wasn’t easy going against a policeman who had years of practice; she had to give him something to make the sequence look natural.

„And I might have been using my powers a bit.“ She confessed. „To play. My hands weren’t quick enough."

The chief punched the steering wheel and cursed.

„God damn it Jane! All this so you could play a game? A damned game?! Is this all just one big game for you?!“ His voice kept raising in volume until his bellows filled the whole car and El subconsciously stretched her hand out to Sara; a habit of hers she had formed back when she first went to live with the Hoppers and Sara had been the only one she trusted. Sara gave her fingers a comforting squeeze.

„Now this is exactly why we have the rules in place! No using your powers outside of the Laboratory! And what do you do, hm? You go to a god damned public place, and use your powers to play a game! What will it be next time? Will you start levitating stuff for fun in front of your whole damn school, maybe? So you could be cool?“

El opened her mouth to argue that she would never be that stupid, but Sara shook her head to warn her not to.

„Do you have any idea what a mess you’ve caused? You were damn lucky that the Lab’s radars picked it up and we arrived before anybody had time to call the real electrician! Damned lucky there was a thunderstorm this could all be blamed on!“
El so badly wanted to point out, that if it wasn’t for the lightning, none of this wouldn’t have even happened in the first place, but Sara was right. It was best she kept her mouth shut for now and let dad rant. Besides, she deserved all of the scolding; it really had been incredibly stupid of her.

She never should have resorted to using her powers to solve the situation with Lucas. Only it was easier said than done. Her powers were such an integral part of her, using them came naturally, like breathing; especially in a case of crisis, when she had no idea what else to do.

An armed man was easy; she’d been taught how to deal with it even without her powers. But a confrontation with a friend that she desperately wanted to avoid? How does one deal with that? It’s not like she could’ve just knocked Lucas out cold. And she had never been too good with words. El was more than sure that if it had been Sara in her place, she would have come out of that situation without a scratch. But her? She crashed and burned, thank you very much.

Sara gave her hand a tug, bringing her back to the current situation.

Dad was looking at her through the mirror again, expectant.

„Sorry, what?“

Dad clenched his jaw.

„I said did anybody suspect something?“

„No."

„You sure?“

„Yes."

„What about your friends?“

„They weren’t even there when it happened."

Dad sent her a long look.

„You weren’t with your friends."

„No. They were all at the Dig Dug machine, it’s not even in the same aisle." She gnawed on her lip. „Except Lucas, he was playing on the machine next to mine."

„Lucas.“ Dad squinted his eyes for a moment. „The one who hangs out with Max?“

„Yes."

„And he didn’t notice anything?“

„No."

„You sure?“

„Yes."

„And none of your other friends suspect anything either?“

El frowned and exchanged a glance with Sara. She knew dad was skeptical in nature, but there was
definitely something more going on here.

„Why do you ask?“ Sara asked, worry evident in her voice. „Is there something we should know?“

The chief was silent for a long while, lost in his own thoughts. When he finally did speak, it was not what El had been expecting.

„Michael Wheeler was seen at the Lab gates today.“

El stilled, and through their interlinked hands, could feel Sara tense up in surprise too.

„And what was he doing there?“ Sara inquired, her voice carefully neutral.

Dad sighed.

„I was hoping you could tell me that. Is there any reason why he should be interested in that place?“

„Not that we know of.“ Sara answered him; El was yet to find her tongue.

„Okay.“ Dad nodded. „Jane?“

El just shook her head, her mind racing.

„Maybe he just went for a drive?“ Sara offered.

Dad didn’t answer and the stretching silence slowly filled El with panic. All of this was too much. Way, way too much. All the times she and Sara had slipped and acted out of the ordinary, topped off by today’s fiasco; Lucas’s questions and accusations at the arcade; and now Mike lurking around the Lab.

It was all falling apart.

It was falling apart, and she had no idea what to do.

„I need you two to tell me how much your friends know. What have you told them?“

„Nothing!“ Sara lashed out almost immediately. „We’ve told them nothing and they know nothing so just leave them out of this, okay?“

„It’s not that simple Sara!“

Sara lost it.

„Simple?! Yes, sure it’s not *simple*, dad! Do you have *any* idea how hard it’s been to always keep them in the dark? To find all of these explanations and reasons and feeding them all of those stupid lies! Quite frankly, I don’t even see why it has to be such a big deal but you and Doc have insisted and we have-.“

„It’s for your own good god damn it! I thought you were mature enough to understand that all of this is done to protect you two from-.“

„From what dad?! A bunch of teenagers? They’re our *friends*! They’re not the enemy here!“

„You have no way of knowing that! One wrong word in a wrong place and... damn it! How do you know they won’t become one? Or just lead the real enemy to you one day?“
„How do I know? How do I know you would never do anything to harm me? How do I know El would never turn on me?! It’s a simple thing called trust, dad!”

El startled as their dad let out a manic bout of laughter.

„Trust?” He mocked, his shouting replaced by the much quieter, emotionless tone that indicated he had entered the white hot fury zone. „You’ve known these people for a couple of months. You know nothing about them.“

„I know plenty.“ Sara wasn’t intimidated. „I know we can trust them. I’ve seen it.“

„You’ve seen it.“ Dad’s tone had gone so cold it made El flinch. „And what about you El, hm? You trust that bunch of ragtags too? Want to go and babble all of your secrets to them? Powers and all?“

„No!“ The answer was instinctive, involuntary, embedded into her by years and years of mistrust and mistreatment; El wished she could take it back as soon as it was out and Sara cast her a look full of hurt and betrayal.

„I mean, I do trust them, but...“ She fumbled for words to express the tangle of emotions tugging at her heart – the fear of rejection, the guilt, the ray of hope and relief at the thought of being able to trust them with all of her deepest, darkest secrets – but couldn’t find the right ones.

„Thought so.“ Dad sounded bitter. „You two are leaving for your mother’s tomorrow.“

El and Sara looked at each other, eyes wide. They had made plans to spend the Thanksgiving with their mom, but they weren’t supposed to go so soon.

„Why not Wednesday afternoon like it was planned?“ Sara had the nerve to ask.

„Because I want you two out of here until I figure out what to do.“

„Won’t we get any say in the matter?“

„Not when you insist on being stupid.“

„You can’t just-.“

„Yes I can! I’m still your father, god damn it, and you two are minors!“

They had finally arrived at their house and dad pulled up to the curb to let them off.

„You two stay in the house and out of trouble for the rest of the evening, you got it?“ He growled. „And do not try my patience on this or I swear, I will have Owens lock you two up in the Lab for the night! Just... give me a break for one night, okay?“

The girls knew better than to try and reason with him when he was in this state, so they climbed out of the car, which took off almost immediately after they closed the doors after them. Sara looked at the truck speeding away, her face void of emotions, and El wished she would know what was going on in her sisters head. But all she knew was that her own head was such a scramble tonight, she didn’t even know her own thoughts.

„El... Mike at the Lab gates? Any idea about that?“

El’s heart fell again. The concept of Mike somehow having found out about the Lab and its consequences were something she was not ready to tackle just yet.
„No. I really don’t know why he’d be there. Is it possible it was just a coincidence and he was simply out for a drive and ended up there? It is a dead end road.“

„It is possible.“ Sara nodded and sighed. „And it’s not like we can ask him. We shouldn’t even know he was there. Unless...“

Sara gnawed on her lip, a telltale sign she was racking her brain for solutions.

„Do you think you could check the house for bugs?“ Sara finally asked in a low voice, her eyes snapping to El.

„Bugs?“

„Bugs.“

„Why would I...“ And then it dawned. Bugs. „Oh.“

Sara nodded, seeing she had finally understood. „What dad said about the radars? And the way they showed up so quickly today? And the information about Mike? They’ve been keeping an eye on us. I wanna know how much. So give it a try?“

„Okay.“

El pressed her eyes closed and leaned against a wall for support, just in case. She’d never tried to look for a specific device before, but she stretched out her mind and gave it her best. If the thing had any energy field, she should be able to sense it. At least she knew what she was looking for; they’d gone over all sorts of surveillance technology last year.

The house seemed to be clear, but to her surprise, she did find something.

„The car.“ She frowned. „There’s a tracker on our car.“

„Those jerks.“ Sara huffed angrily. „And the house?“

El opened her eyes and shook her head. „Nothing in the house.“

„Good.“ Sara pulled the door open and they entered the house. „We can take this inside then."

„I knew it was all too good to be true. All this freedom they gave us.“ Sara ranted on, pacing in the living room. „But it’s not freedom at all, is it? They have just let out our leash a bit. Those assholes. Why couldn’t they just tell us? Haven’t we proved we can be trusted? I will not have this!“

El didn’t know what to say. Was she annoyed they were kept under surveillance? Yes. Was she caught off guard? Not really, to be honest. Was she glad they had kept an eye out today and showed up in time to clean up her mess? Hell yes.

„Do you think dad knows?“

Sara snorted.

„I bet he does. Hell, he might have even suggested it. You saw him today.“ Sara’s voice lost some of it’s edge. „He’s always so worried. But. That does not give him the right. He’s got to let us have our own lives, too.“

„Even if it means we mess up?“ El asked quietly.
“Yes.” Sara deadpanned. „Even if we mess up. Still our lives. And it’s not like he doesn’t mess up from time to time too, you know? I know he means the best, but... Shit. What if he panics? What if he panics and he puts us on that plane tomorrow and... and, we never get to come back? And that’s it? That’s the last time we see Hawkins? The last time I see Dustin for a very long time?”

Sara’s voice cracked and she crumbled, finally stopping her pacing as she slumped down onto the couch, hiding her face into her hands. Her sister’s breakdown had escalated so quickly, El was caught off guard.

She hurried over and sat down beside her, wrapping her arms around Sara’s shoulders.

„Sara, this is not going to happen.“ She mustered up as much confidence as she could and tried to convey it all into her words.

„No, the point is, it can!“ Sara shook her head. „It’s there, this possible outcome. Dad and us leaving Hawkins for good. It’s been there ever since October, I’ve seen it. But it’s never been this clear before. This thing today has triggered it even further.“

El really wanted to reassure her sister, but the coldness that seeped into her heart at hearing the words was too suffocating. The guilt that surged through her too paralyzing.

Today was her fault.

If they were torn away from their friends, it would be her fault.

The sensation of loss she had been trying to suppress ever since the arcade broke through it’s confines and flooded her mind. Mike. What if she lost Mike over this. Because of her one stupid mistake, that might start an avalanche of events she couldn't stop. The thought squeezed her windpipe shut, making her gasp for air and jump up from the couch to get the blood moving. So it wouldn’t feel so much like she was dying at the thought of not seeing Mike again.

„I can’t let it happen, El.“

For once El understood Sara’s feelings perfectly. Understood the worried, yet determined look on her face.

„No. We can’t let it happen.“ The flash of hope in Sara’s eyes sparked her own. „So what are our options?“

The mood in the Wheeler basement was unusually somber for a Saturday night.

Mike wasn’t able to sit still and opted to pace around instead. Lucas, Max and Will were seated around the table, whispering something among themselves that Mike wasn’t able to catch. Dustin had headed straight for the bathroom and was yet to come back; in a silent consensus, everybody was waiting for him to return before they began.

„How come this is the first time I’m hearing about this?“ Will’s voice had gotten loud enough to carry through the whole basement.
„About what?“ Mike jumped in, grabbing himself a chair.

„That you saw their car on that road near my place on Wednesday!“

Oh. That. And just like that, Mike’s mind was on El and that stupid van again.

„Sorry man, it kind of didn’t come up.“ Lucas apologized to Will.

„Max knows!“

„I needed her insight on this!“

„Okay guys, once again, leave me out of-.“ Max began, but Mike cut her off, his mind too troubled.

„Lucas.“ His friends attention snapped to him. „Did something happen between you and El today? At the arcade.“

It had been what he’d meant to ask ever since he’d said good bye to El, but then they’d gotten sidetracked.

Lucas squared his jaw before answering, so Mike could tell it was something Lucas knew he wouldn’t like.

Fuck.

„I just called her out on her bullshit.“

„You did what?“

„About how they never tell us anything.“ Lucas continued, ignoring his incredulous question. „And how they lie all the time. That they think we’re stupid or something.“

„What the hell Lucas!“ Mike jumped up from his seat, his hands balling to fists on their own accord. Lucas mirrored his actions. „You had no right to do that!“

„Pipe down Mike!“ Will grabbed his arm and forced Mike to look at him. „Do you want your parents to hear?“

Somewhere beneath the haze of anger Mike knew Will was just being reasonable, but it wasn’t really helping at this point.

Lucas was watching him, all defiant and no remorse and the wish to wipe that look off his face only got stronger and stronger. Max took a small step, now standing almost in front of Lucas; as if she was reading Mike’s mind and had every intention to stop him if he was to pounce on her boyfriend.

The situation was interrupted by the bathroom door opening as Dustin finally emerged. He looked like he’d been keeping his head under the tap, with half of his locks dripping wet.

„You fucking idiots.“ Dustin scoffed as he strolled over to the table. „Sit down.“

Nobody moved.

„I said sit down!“

Max pushed Lucas back onto the chair he had jumped up from a minute earlier, and Mike retreated to his own seat. Max and Will, the middlemen, were the last to settle down.
Mike ran a hair through his hair. Shit. He was not taking this well. It’s not like this was Lucas’s fault. Not all of it, at least. But why the fuck did Lucas just have to go and start picking on El like that? No wonder she had seemed so apprehensive later on and wanted to flee.

And still, the reasons were far beyond Lucas and deep down he knew that.

„I’m sorry.“ He apologized to his friend. „I’m just... I don’t know.“

He did know.

He missed her.

It had only been an hour since he’d seen her, and already he missed her. It was nuts. But something about the way she’d said goodbye and the fact that the last time he’d seen her, coming out of that van, she wasn’t even aware he was there, made him feel like she was slipping away from his reality. And it didn’t help that Lucas, possibly the reason why she was not there at the moment, had now made up with Max and Mike watched with envy as the girl ran her hand over Lucas’s arm to calm him. God, he wished El was by his side right now; even the simplest touch would do, just to reassure him she was still with him.

Maybe El and Sara wouldn’t have left if Lucas hadn’t freaked them out.

Or maybe they would have. And he had no idea yet how the van and Department of Energy fit into the picture, or why they were even showed up at the arcade like that. Each time he tried to think his thoughts drifted back to El and fuck, he just wanted her there.

„What exactly did you say to Jane?“ Dustin asked Lucas, bringing Mike back to the conversation at hand.

Lucas hesitated for a moment. „I told her we think they’re secret spies or something.“

„Son of a bitch.“ Dustin cursed and Mike ran his hands over his face. No shit she’d taken off. Lucas and his damned bluntness.

„What did she say?“

„Nothing, actually.“ Lucas frowned. „The lightning struck right as I was telling her this.“

„I still can’t believe you did it you dumb ass.“ Max’s harsh words were contradicted by her soft tone.

Lucas sighed, his shoulders slumping under the heavy gazes the others were casting him, looking somewhat ashamed from the first time this evening. „Look, I didn’t mean to cause trouble, okay? I just don’t see why all this bullshit is necessary. I mean, can’t they just tell us? Friends should tell each other this stuff.“

Mike didn’t even know where to start. To his surprise, Dustin did. And he began with a colorful string of curses, that effectively got the attention of everybody in the room, before taking a couple of deep breaths and diving into the topic.

„Okay. I think there’s one point all of you are missing here. Have any of you for one moment stopped to consider, that maybe all of this is real?“

„Of course it’s real.“ Max answered carefully, as if it was a trick question. „We just saw them exit that van, didn’t we? And all of this... previous stuff.“
„Yes, so you’ve seen the van. And yet here you all sit, treating it like it’s some sort of child’s play. You’re not taking this seriously. And I think it’s about time we did."

The room was so quiet Mike could hear the TV program from upstairs; something about the way Dustin phrased it was unnerving.

Since nobody offered any input, Dustin continued himself.

„What if them not telling us everything isn’t a matter of choice."

The cogs in Mike’s brain finally started turning and he could see where Dustin was going with this.

„Classified.” He blurted out. „It might be classified."

Lucas’s eyebrows shot up. „Isn’t this a bit far fetched?"

„I don’t know, Lucas, is it?” Dustin retorted. „That’s what I mean when I say you’re not taking this seriously! You were the one who told Will to turn the car around tonight just because you saw a couple of vans passing by. Now why was that?"

„Okay, fair enough.” Lucas caved. „They looked suspicious. The whole damned thing was suspicious. The blackout and the chief showing up randomly. Him basically throwing us out and Sara and Jane opting to stay. I mean, why couldn’t they come with us? Plus I remembered Mike saying that laboratory near Will’s place was something power related."

„Department of Energy.” Mike muttered.

„Whoa, wait a minute!” Max cut in. „The United States Department of Energy? Lucas, you never told me that!"

„I forgot the exact wording!”

„I see someone knows what we’re talking about here.” Dustin sounded relieved.

„Okay, what’s so great about some energy department?“ Lucas looked from Max to Dustin and then to Mike. „And I thought you said it’s some kind of military base or something."

„Definitely something to do with military.” Will spoke up. „I’ve seen plenty of military vehicles on that road."

„Okay, guys, how can you not know that?” Max raised her voice to be heard over the noise. „It’s, like, not quite military, but it’s related. We’re talking about the facility that is responsible for nuclear weapons here."

„Exactly.” Dustin nodded to Max. „Don’t be fooled by the name, people. This isn’t just some domestic power company, although they do that, too, among other things. But, basically, what we’re talking about here, is not some bogus conspiracy theory, but a legitimate government laboratory with who knows what going on inside."

„Why didn’t you tell us that on Wednesday?” Mike demanded.

Dustin sighed. „Because I didn’t know, either. I did some background checking on Thursday."

„Shit.” Mike ran a hand through his hair. „I drove all the way out there today. Just to see the place."

„For fuck’s sake Mike!” Dustin groaned. „So you suspect your girlfriend might be involved in this
super secret stuff with a secret lab and you go over there? Son of a bitch! What if someone saw you?“

Mike’s face heated up. „The guard at the gate did see me.“ Dustin cursed so Mike amended. „From afar. I didn’t drive all the way up to the guard point.“

Shit. That had been a really idiotic move on his part. Dustin was right. For a bunch of people who claimed to take it seriously, they sure did act like it wasn’t actually real.

„These Department of Energy labs,“ Max continued to explain further. „There are more of them, all over the country. And they dabble in all sorts of matters, not only energy or weapons. Healthcare, space flight, computers. These are science labs and research facilities, with all sorts of inventions and experiments going on, some of it public, some behind closed doors. The point is; it is entirely possible there’s some classified stuff happening over there.“

„How do you know all this?“ Will asked, sounding a bit in awe.

Max shrugged. „The name kept popping up in computing history. I checked it out. All of your nerd tendencies have rubbed off on me I guess.“

The attempt at a joke was successful, making all of them smile and huff in amusement, breaking some of the tension in the air.

„But what would two sixteen year old girls have to do with a laboratory like that?“ Will asked the room in general.

„Whatever it is, I think that’s the part that is classified.“ Dustin answered after a beat. „Because, to be honest, I really believe if they could tell us, we would already know everything. They would have told us. It’s not like they’re trying to make themselves interesting or something.“

Max scoffed. „Definitely not! It’s not like they would even need to. They are awesome even without any mysterious shit going on.“

The fierceness with which Max defended them suddenly reminded Mike, that he wasn’t the only one who had someone he cared for at stake here. Whatever this mess was, it affected them all, one way or another. For a thousandth time this evening his chest tightened up as he thought of El and how she was not there. She should have been there, every inch of his body screamed this at him.

„What I wanna know, is what the hell really happened at the arcade tonight.“

Lucas’s question pulled Mike out of his bottomless pit of yearning and brought his attention back to his friends again.

„The lightning struck the place?“ Mike offered, confused why Lucas was asking this.

Lucas sent him a long lingering look that made Mike’s stomach twist uncomfortably yet again; there was something else Lucas hadn’t told them yet.

„What did happen then?“ He demanded, impatient.

„Like I already told you, Jane and I were talking. And yeah, okay, I was being a bit of an asshole and I might have upset her. Now, that’s where it gets interesting. The game I was playing, was the first one that got hit, just as I was going off about that stuff.“

„What do you mean?“
„I mean my game was fried even before the whole place went dark. And it happened right as I was telling her about the secret spy shit. One moment I’m talking and then suddenly I’m electrocuted. And then,“ He turned his gaze to Dustin. „Your girlfriend shows up, calling out to Jane like a second before the thunder cracked and Jane started screaming. And then the whole place went dark.“

„What are you saying?“ Dustin demanded, taking words right out of Mike’s mouth. „That they had something to do with it?“

„I’m not saying anything.“ Lucas defended himself. „I’m just telling it as it was. And then the next thing, their dad shows up in a matter of minutes and empties the place. And then the vans, of course. Even if one of them was there for the repairs, the other one was clearly something else and there only for Jane and Sara.“

Lucas didn’t voice the question of how all of this was related, but they were all obviously thinking it anyway. Mike’s brain, the part that wasn’t occupied with worrying about El, was already working on overload.

„Okay, we need to stop this.“ Dustin looked every inch as tired as Mike felt. „We bitch about them not trusting us with their shit, and then we do what? Go behind their backs. This isn’t right. What if we have already caused them problems?“

Mike felt his gut twist at the last question. The last thing he wanted was to cause trouble for El. And still he was glad Lucas had told them, hungry for every bit of information that could possibly concern El. Him and his damned curiosity.

The conversation never really picked up after that, and soon after, Max declared she wanted to get going. Mike stopped Dustin before he left, grasping for a last chance.

„Do you think we could maybe go by their house?“

Dustin’s face perked up for a moment but then it slowly darkened again and he sighed.

„No, I don’t think it’s a good idea. They wanted to go home earlier. We should let them be for tonight.“

Somehow Mike had known Dustin would say that, but still he couldn’t shake the disappointment off. Dustin patted his shoulder before leaving up the stairs.

„Don’t worry, man. We’ll see them tomorrow.“

It didn't cheer Mike up one bit.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

A shout out to the wonderful Lborealis, who has been such an inspiration to me and helped me get over my writers block so I could finally get this chapter finished. Thank you so much!
And if any of you for some reason have not yet happened across her works, by all means, go check them out, they're absolutely amazing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dr. Owens’s office was bathed in a soft sunlight, which reflected back from thousands of dust particles in the air, swirling around in lazy patterns without a purpose. The smell of fresh baked pastries and coffee filled the whole room, and the soft melody of a classical music piece only added to the sense of serenity and relaxation.

It was a perfect backdrop for a really nice Sunday morning.

And clashed horribly with the way Jim was feeling, as he gulped down his coffee in one go, forgoing the platter of danish’s altogether.

He’d been up since six, and all he really wanted, now that he’d sent Sara and Jane off on their way to Diane’s, was to go back home, climb to bed and sleep for three days straight. Maybe with a couple of coffee and cigarette breaks in between.

Those god damn daughters of his. He had half expected them to rebel and start arguing or out right refuse to leave today, but they didn’t. They’d been well behaved and cooperative all through the morning and hell, if that didn’t make him worry even more, that they had something up their sleeves. This had been too easy.

Yesterday’s argument with the girls still rang in his ears and made his head and heart ache, and he might as well use the opportunity and give his best to spoil Owens’s good night sleep too.

If that was even possible, of course, he thought to himself, as he watched the man in question sink his teeth into the soft pastry before taking a sip on his coffee, calm as always.

Well, he might as well get to it.

„What happens when someone in Hawkins finds out about what the girls do here?“

„Are you asking in general or is this about Sara’s and Jane’s friends?“

Damn Owens. Like he needed to ask.

„Okay, let’s say it’s about these friends of theirs.“

Owens gave him a sideways look.
„Have they found out?“

„You were the one who called me about the Wheeler kid being seen here yesterday.“ Jim grunted, tired of this game. „So you tell me. Is it possible they know?“

Owens set his coffee cup down, his expression contemplative.

„What do you think?“

„Jesus Christ what is this? A therapy session or something? Instead of answering my questions with questions how about you give me some real answers!“

„I’m not trying to be difficult here, Jim.“ Owens said in a placating manner. „I just don’t have enough information to give you any answers here. You know more about these youngsters than I do.“

As much as he wanted to, Jim couldn’t argue with that, so he reined in his irritation.

„Sara is... very invested in this bunch. At first I thought it’s not that serious. They’re only sixteen, for gods sake. Don’t friends and boyfriends just come and go at this age?“ He sighed. „But now, I’m not so sure anymore. Might be these kids will stick around for a while.“

„And Jane?“

„Jane is more reserved. You know how she is. I don’t think she herself knows how she feels about things half the time. But god help us when she makes up her mind. She’ll be worse than Sara with how stubborn she is.“

Once again Sam nodded, and damn it, If he’d be sitting on a recliner instead of this uncomfortable visitors chair, this would be exactly like a psychiatrists meeting.

„What happens if these kids figure it all out? Or, if the girls spill something to them?“

This was what he was really after here. He didn’t doubt for a second that there was some damned protocol or something in place for an occasion like this and he needed to know what it was. In case he needed to protect his daughters.

Or those nosy friends of theirs.

Infuriating punks or no, these kids mattered to the girls. So they automatically mattered to him, too.

Owens clasped his hands together in front of him on the table and stared at Jim over the brim of his reading glasses.

„What do you think is going to happen, Chief?“

Jim didn’t bite.

„We need to make sure they won’t talk, of course.“ Owens stated nonchalantly, and Jim froze at the blunt frankness.

„Jesus Christ Sam, how can you-.“

His rant was cut off as Owens held a hand up to him and pulled a drawer open with the other. After a moment of shuffling some items around, he tugged out a slim folder and handed it over to him wordlessly. The corner of Owen’s mouth twitched upwards and Jim frowned as he grabbed the thing
and opened it.

Oh.

„It’s called an NDA, Jim. They just need to sign it.“

The ease with which Owens always seemed to be prepared for everything was beyond annoying, and yet, Jim couldn’t be angry at the man. Hell, he was even grateful, although he’d never admit it out loud, because Owens was smug enough without it.

„A disclosure. And that’s it? That’s how easy this is?“

„Well, I don’t know about easy. It’s a binding document for life, and failing to comply with it has it’s consequences, of course. But in the grand scheme of things, these kids aren’t the first people who would need to sign it, and I doubt they will be the last. But,“ The man paused for emphasis. „With all that said, I would prefer to keep the number of people who know about this to a minimum. Especially about the girls abilities. Them being tied to this facility isn’t that big of a deal, we can spin all sorts of stories to explain that, if necessary. But the powers... That’s were it gets complicated.“

An understatement of the century.

„Even though there’s a good chance most people would brush this information off as nonsense anyway, there is always a risk. Now, I can make everybody keep their mouths shut, except Jane and Sara. Not if I want to do this the right way. In the end it’s their powers. Their life. If they choose to tell someone on a personal level... I have very little say in this matter, if any at all. But you, you’re their father. How about you talk to the girls about it? Try to make them see reason.“

Jim’s laugh started slowly, from the smallest flicker of amusement at the pit of his stomach, building up into a full blown low chuckles that made his eyes water.

„Yeah and in the meantime, why don’t I just stop by the moon and bring you back a rock.“ His laughter died down. „Why do you think I’m here, Sam? Asking for your advice? Sending them off to Diane for a week? I have no idea what I’m doing lately. All of this is growing over my head.“

Sam smiled, not unkindly.

„It’s called growing up, Jim. They’re growing up. Happens to most kids, you know.“

Jim sighed and gathered his hat from the table.

„Yeah. All fun and games until it’s your kids.“ He added as he pushed up from the chair. He needed to get to the station. „I’ll see you later, Doc.“

He was almost out of the door when his manners got the best of him. „And... You know. Thanks, I guess. For this.“

„Anytime, Chief. Anytime.“

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Mike knew something was wrong, when he finally got out of bed, blissfully late and well rested, and his mother told him that Jane had called. He knew it with even more certainty, when he called her back, and nobody answered. And when he had rushed over to El’s place, hijacking his moms car
without asking first, no matter the consequences, and nobody answered the door, his gut sank into the pit of his stomach and stayed there. The last traces of hope, that maybe he was just being paranoid, disappeared completely once Dustin’s door cracked open, and Mike could see his friend’s gloomy face.

„What happened now?“ He demanded, already dreading the answer. „Where are they?“

„Jane didn’t call?“

„Would I be here if I’d gotten it?“ Shit, his voice was beginning to rise. Mike toned it down. „I was still sleeping. My mom didn’t wake me.“

Shit. His luck was absolute shit. He would’ve killed for a chance to sleep in on most days, but today? Shit. Why did it have to be today?

Dustin’s gaze was full of pity.

„They left. To visit their mom.“

„Fuck!“ Mike wanted to punch something. „Why today? El said they won’t leave until Wednesday!“

Dustin sighed and stepped out of the house, pulling the door shut behind him.

„The official reason? Something about their flight being overbooked so they were offered an earlier one. “

Mike stilled at his words, cold shivers creeping up his spine.

„Official reason.“ He deadpanned. „So you think it’s just a cover?“

Dustin didn’t answer, only raised his eyebrows and Mike swore.

„I am going to kill Lucas! I told him this was gonna fuck shit up!“

„As much as I share the sentiment, and trust me, I do, I don’t think that’s gonna help us here. And besides, it might not even be connected to what Lucas did. For all we know they might just be stuck with whatever business they have going on.“

Mike ran a hand through his hair, frustrated and angry with himself for not being up earlier. Angry at his mom. At Lucas. Shit, even at El; why hadn’t she demanded his mom wake him up when she called?

His anger was gone the next second, replaced by a longing so tense, it felt like a metal rod piercing through his heart.

„Do you know when they’ll be back?“

Dustin sighed heavily and shook his head, making Mike’s chest filled with trepidation.

„Sara wasn’t sure. In a week, maybe. “

Mike slumped against the wall behind him, his limbs suddenly weak from the numbness that slinked up his legs and arms like oil, until it reached his chest and covered his heart with it’s inky, choking mass.

Great.
Just fucking great.

He never should’ve listened to Dustin last night.

Then he would’ve seen El once more before she left.

Now he had to wait for a a whole week to have her in his arms again.

Or more.

El slowly pulled back into his own mind and opened her eyes. Her vision of Mike, sitting behind a
desk, deep in thought, the open book lying in front of him all but forgotten, was already fading.
Instead, she came face to face with the floral tapestry of the room she and Sara shared whenever they
were visiting their mother.

The ache in her chest was almost palpable, making her struggle to pull a breath.

She missed him.

She missed him so much.

At first she’d thought, naively, that getting to see him in the void would lessen her longing, but it
didn’t; it only added to it. And still she did it, because not seeing him at all was even worse,
somehow.

But it wasn’t enough, not by a long shot; she wanted to touch him.

To feel him touch her.

She hadn’t even realized how much she had gotten used to having his arms wrapped around her on
almost daily basis, until now, that she was deprived of it. Or how much she’d come to depend on his
reassuring presence, kind words and reassuring smiles.

It had been four days. Four days and three phone calls, that, although cramped and tightlipped, since
both of them were trapped in their respective houses full of family members and no privacy to say
what they really wanted to, had made her heart beat in her chest again, at least for the duration of
them.

He’d asked her, when she would be coming back, and she couldn’t even answer.

Their father had yet to tell them.

And as Sara had said, for the best possible outcome, they needed to wait him out. He’d come around,
she’d said. Calm down and find his footing again. But they had to give him time and space to do
that; Jim Hopper didn’t respond well to pushing.

El’s sighed in the empty room, as her mind drifted back to the conversation they’d had Saturday
night, about what to do with this mess they were in. How to prevent them being ripped out of
Hawkins High and Hawkins in general. Because, as Sara had so dramatically put it and El low key
agreed; they might as well rip out their hearts while they were at it.
Sara’s solution didn’t really come as a surprise to El; she said they needed to tell them.

Tell their friends everything and ask them to keep this secret with them. Once the Party was in on this, there would be no more awkward questions or dodgy answers, and maybe they would even be able to help her and Sara to avoid being found out by someone else in the future. And then not dad, nor the Lab would have any real reason to drag them away from Hawkins anymore. Away from their friends. From their boyfriends.

Sara was so sure of the positive outcome, she had been eager to do it that very same evening, but El had panicked and backtracked, pleading for more time.

She hadn’t been ready.

Then again, after four days of constant shuffling the pros and cons and every other silly little thought that popped up in her head considering this, she was almost sure of one thing; she was never going to be ready. It simply wasn’t something one could ever even be ready for.

She just had to take a leap. A gigantic, terrifying, possibly life ruining leap.

A leap of faith.

After all, wasn’t that what it came down to? How much she had faith in her friends. In Mike.

It had taken a long and thorough discussion with Sara, where she had poured out all of her fears and doubts and insecurities, for her to reach that conclusion. That it wasn’t about her or what she could do. She was who she was, and nothing would ever change that. Didn’t need to change that.

There was nothing wrong with her. She was just... different.

The real question, and, ultimately, the root of her fears, was did she think her friends would accept her for what she was? Would they still care about her just the same?

She had been reduced to tears by the overwhelming wave of emotions that washed over her when she realized she did believe in them. She knew them. She trusted them.

So she and Sara had come to a decision and made a pact.

Once they got back, they would tell them.

Tell them everything.

Starting with their boyfriends.

Because if they were gonna tell, El wanted Mike to be the first to know.

Mike’s week was dragging along at a snails pace, his days filled with missing El and going through his routines on an autopilot, his heart hardly in anything he did.

Monday.

Tuesday.
It did get a little better on Wednesday evening, with Nancy coming home from college for the first time in months, opting to spend the Thanksgiving with her family. And even though they had a healthy amount of sibling rivalry and teasing between them, Mike had learned to appreciate his older sister and her presence over the time. Not that he’d ever admit it, but he kind of hoped she would move back closer to home once she was done with the college, so they’d see her more.

But even that wasn’t enough to distract him from how much he missed El.

The few brief phone calls they’d had were the highlights of his week. Only a couple of months ago he had been able to function quite normally without her, but now, his life felt kind of empty when she was away. Like half of what he should be was missing. He missed talking to her and hearing her laugh. He missed looking at her. Even just simply being in the same room as her. He missed her dry humor and blunt statements that could render the whole Party speechless for a moment or two. Missed the way she fiddled with her bracelets until he slid his hand into hers and tangled their fingers, and she would focus on him instead. The way her beautiful hazel eyes lit up whenever he caught her gaze. The small smile that would grace her soft lips.

Her lips.

That he really wanted to be kissing right now. He wanted to slip his hands around her waist, brushing his fingers against her soft skin in the process, to hug her to him tightly and press his face into her hair so he could breathe in her scent and feel her solid warmth against him.

The thoughts had his stomach do somersaults and back flips, made his throat go dry and caused him to lose the last of his appetite. His breath got caught from mere images running through his mind, and Mike let the sensation flood over him.

He hadn’t realized he was in so deep.

His hands clammed up with sweat as he cast aside the book he’d unsuccessfully been trying to read for days now and he ran them through his hair as he mindlessly stared at the ceiling, his breathing deep and shallow at the same time.

God.

He was in love with her, wasn’t he?

He was in love with her.

Their dad cracked on Saturday morning.

It was just after breakfast when the phone call came, and Sara’s triumphant smile mirrored the way El felt, her heart flaring with joy and hope.

They would be leaving in the afternoon.

And even though it was hard to part from their mother and baby brother, after getting to spend the week with them and easily falling back into their old living pattern, El’s heart yearned to be in
Hawkins once again, more and more so with each passing day.

The conflicting emotions left her feeling confused and raw, making her eyes tear up at the smallest things; like when her brother crawled into her lap and drooled all over her jeans, cooing at her happily, or when her mother passed by and absentmindedly stroked her hair in the process.

Or when she packed her bag and came across Mike’s sweater. The one he had given her in the arcade; their goodbyes that evening had been so rushed, she’d completely forgotten to give it back, so she had taken it with her on a whim.

It still smelled a bit like him, even after a week.

El pressed the soft item of clothing against her cheek for a moment, swallowing down the sudden nervousness, as her stomach erupted in butterflies at the thought of seeing him again, for real this time.

Tomorrow. She would see him tomorrow.

And despite being scared to death by what she and Sara were planning to do, El still couldn’t wait.

„Okay El, this is it.“

Sara was playing with a lock of her hair, her gaze flickering from Dustin’s house to El and back to the house again. She was yet to make a move to get out of the car though. El was weirdly glad to see her sister finally freaking out a little; El herself was so out of it, she had barely slept during the night.

She was more than grateful that their dad had left for work early today and they didn’t need to have breakfast with him, for she was sure she would have broken down under the pressure at some point and accidentally blurted out all of their intentions to him.

And that would have ended in a catastrophe.

For if El was sure of anything, it was that their dad was gonna be furious with them, if he ever found out about that they were planning to tell. Or if he ever would find out, someday in the future, that they had told.

It kind of broke something inside of El when she thought about how the tables had turned.

They were about to lie to their dad and trust their friends, and it had been the other way for so long, it almost felt unnatural. But Sara was right; they needed to keep this from dad, or who knows what he or the Lab would do; to what lengths he would go, when he thought he needed to protect them.

Sara grabbed her hand, bringing her out of her reverie, and gave it a tight squeeze. Was it to offer support to El or to comfort herself, it was hard to tell; probably both. She looked like she would have stalled a little bit longer, but then the front door of the house opened and Dustin walked out, and Sara’s hesitancy was gone just like that, her face overtaken by a wide smile.

El watched with a smile of her own as Dustin engulfed her sister in a bear hug, and the two clung to each other like they hadn’t seen each other, well, for a week at least. It was so sweet.

Until they started kissing, that is.
„And that’s my cue.“ El muttered under her breath, tearing her eyes away from the couple and taking off.

Seeing Dustin and Sara reunite had made her own chest ache; he wanted to see Mike so badly.

And still, once she was there, in front of his house, she too was unable to make herself move any further. She killed the engine and slumped back against the seat.

Jesus. Was she really about to do what she was planning to do?

Could she do it? Or were she and Sara mad to even have thought about it?

Well, there was only one way to find out.

El pulled a couple of deep, calming breaths and forced herself into motion, climbed out of the car and walked all the way up to the front door, hoping that Mike was home.

Dreading, that he was indeed home.

The doorbell seemed to ring so loud it startled her a little, and for a brief moment she wondered, if it wasn’t too late to still reconsider and flee. But then Mike’s face swam into the forefront of her mind, and her resolve to go through with this was back.

She’d been missing him for the whole week. No way she was turning back now.

The house was quiet and El was just beginning to worry, raising her hand to give the bell another ring when she finally heard the footsteps thumping down the stairs and hurrying forward. The door in front of her flew open and her heart soared.

Mike.

El had about a two seconds to take in his mussed up hair and his bottomless dark eyes, wide and hopeful; the way these said eyes flashed with happiness before they turned so soft it made her knees go weak, as his gaze locked onto her and stayed there, like she was the only thing that mattered.

„El."

She watched, fascinated, as the corners of his mouth curled up as he got closer and closer, until there was no space left between them, and his lips were finally on hers.

Mike couldn’t believe his luck had finally turned.

She was there. El was there.

Real. Solid, not just a voice on a phone. Pressed up against him like he had dreamed of so many times during this past week, her hands wound around his neck, pulling him in even closer as they kissed each other with equal fervor.

The kiss was rushed and sloppy, with Mike pouring all of his longing and... shit – love – into it. The thought was so overwhelming he needed to pull back, suddenly short for air and feeling dizzy. He ended the kiss and rested his forehead on hers for a moment, his heart melting as she let out a
breathless sigh. He swallowed hard, before retreating a little more, so he could just look at her. It had been a week since he’d gotten to look at her. And she was so beautiful, her eyes shining brightly and her mouth stretched into that closed lipped smile that he loved so much, because it made her dimples stand out the most.

His hands twisted into her jacket in an unconscious attempt to keep her against him as his eyes roamed all over her face and hair and as much as he could see the rest of her. How was it possible she seemed even prettier each time he saw her?

„Hi Mike.“ El’s voice was so quiet she was almost whispering, but god, he liked it so much when she said his name.

„Hey.“ He answered lamely.

He wanted to say so much, but for once, words seemed to escape him and he just stood there like a dumb ass, clutching onto her for dear life. But like always, El didn’t seem to mind or think him a sorry ass loser; she just pressed her face against his shoulder and Mike used the opportunity to bury his nose in her hair, breathing in the familiar scent of her.

She smelled wonderful.

He could’ve stood there forever, completely content with just being able to hold her, but was reminded of the crisp weather when El shivered. He reluctantly untangled his arms from around her, but didn’t break the contact completely, grabbing one of her hands into his.

„Come on, let’s get inside.“

He pulled her along, over the threshold and into the warmth of his home, closing the door firmly behind them, shutting out the rest of the world.

El came to a stop as soon as he had, and cast a hesitant look around, as if looking for something. It took him a moment.

„Oh. They’re not home. My parents and Holly. They went to drop Nancy off at the airport.“

El relaxed somewhat, confirming he’d been right. But then her stance tensed up again, although in a different manner; one that left his fingertips tingling with the subtle electricity that all of a sudden seemed to fill the air between them, urging him to take a step forward, pulling him in like gravity.

Mike was suddenly very aware of the fact that there was no one else in the whole damn house but them.

They were alone. At his home. Just him and El. The girl he was in love with.

How the hell was he supposed to survive this? He could already feel himself breaking under pressure, his mind battling between just keeping on kissing her or confessing his feelings, which were probably plainly visible anyway; Mike was pretty sure he had been staring at El with a sappy expression on his face for long enough now for her to read it from his eyes.

Not that he necessarily minded.

Shit. He was making this so awkward.

„Um...“ He had to say something. „Do you mind if we stay in? I could show you around. Or did you
want to go somewhere? Because we can do that, too, I don’t have any plans or anyth-.“

El cut him off by stepping closer and capturing his lips with hers once more and well, Mike wasn’t gonna complain. Even if his skyrocketing blood pressure was threatening to knock him out any minute now. Fortunately, or, unfortunately, depending on the point of view, El pulled away after only a few seconds.

Her cheeks were flushed, he noticed.

„We can stay here.“ She answered casually. „I’d love to see around.“

Mike’s heart gave a jolt at hearing El use the word love, and the tips of his ears burned. Shit, he was gonna be weird about it for some time now, wasn’t he? El didn’t seem to notice though, as she shimmied out of her jacket to hang it up and toed off her sneakers, and even these simple everyday actions were so mesmerizing to watch, because it was El doing them.

He could take the weird.

As long as El was with him, he could tackle anything.

El was secretly glad Mike was home all alone.

She was nervous enough about what she was about to do, so she was grateful for not having the pressure of meeting Mike’s family for the first time added to it.

And after a week of being separated, she was kind of glad to be able to keep Mike all to himself for now. Even if being alone with him in an empty house made her breath hitch and imagination run wild, making it hard to focus.

It didn’t help that she could almost physically feel Mike’s eyes on her, watching her every move, making her self aware in a way that made her heartbeat stumble all over itself.

But she did want to focus.

There was something so intimate about seeing another person’s home. And this was Mike’s home. A place he spent his days and nights at, living his everyday life. It was a part of him she had not yet seen if she didn’t count the one brief sneaky visit she’d had months ago, when they weren’t even dating yet.

And she was curious.

The place looked homey and well lived in, full of pictures and memorabilia and all sorts of nick-knacks, accumulated through the years the family had spent there. It was in stark contrast with El’s own home at the moment, the place still too new; they hadn’t even quite unpacked everything yet, despite having been there for months now. But Mike’s home, it was a mirror of all the people living there.

Mike was not as talkative as usual throughout the tour, mostly opting to watch her as she tried to take everything in, stopping from time to time to take a closer look at something. It didn’t bother her. She was more than comfortable with silence. And Mike wasn’t being distant; quite the contrary, he
stayed glued to her side, finding ways to keep the physical contact between them, making her feel all warm and safe and impossibly on edge at the same time.

When they got to the living room El was immediately drawn to the fireplace, its mantle adorned with countless of framed pictures of the family. She smiled as she ran her finger over one where Mike was just a little kid. He was the cutest kid she’d ever seen, with the exception of her own baby brother.

Mike wrapped her arms around her from behind and rested his chin on her shoulder and El leaned back, moving on to other pictures.

„Is this Nancy?“ She asked, looking at a beautiful young woman smiling back at her. Mike hummed an affirmative, nuzzling into her neck.

„She’s pretty.“

Mike shrugged.

„I guess.“

The reluctant confirmation made El chuckle; it died on her lips as Mike’s own brushed over her neck, leaving her all breathless.

She gulped past the lump clogging her airways and concentrated on the pictures in front of her again. The one next to Nancy’s portrait had most of the family on it: Mike’s mom, dad, him and his older sister. Considering Mike and Nancy were just kids there, Holly hadn’t probably been born yet. But it was the dynamics of the picture that captivated her; Mike, sitting with a party hat on behind a cake sporting five candles on it, trying to swat laughing Nancy’s hands away; the proud father in the background, and the mother, who looked like she was torn between scolding her kids for their antics or pulling them in for a hug.

All in all, it was a happy picture. Mike had a happy childhood, with loving parents.

„You all look so happy here.“ She couldn’t hold back her comment, nodding towards the picture.

„Yeah. My childhood didn’t suck too much.“ El stilled a bit at that and Mike, of course, noticed, put two and two together and started rambling. „I mean, it was happy by most standards. A stable home and two parents and the whole shebang. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-.“

„Mike.“ She stopped him. „It’s okay.“

And all of the sudden, the lump in her throat was there for a completely different reason. As if sensing this, Mike tightened his embrace on her.

„Can I ask you something?“ He sounded hesitant, but curious, too, and El obliged by nodding.

„Where did you live? Before the Hopper’s adopted you?“

The pictures of her past from... before, swam in front of her eyes, bringing on a wave of emotions that threatened to drown her on the spot. She was glad Mike was holding her; it kept her from falling apart right then and there. Kept her standing.

She had shared snippets of her childhood with him before, but it had always been from the times she was already with the Hopper’s. For obvious reasons, of course, but also because she didn’t like to think about her life before even herself, preferring to suppress the dark memories.
And even though she had come here today with every intention to tell Mike about her secrets, she hadn’t really considered telling him about this.

„It was...“ She struggled to find the words, „A bad place.‟

Mike pressed a kiss to her temple and didn’t pry any further, but the sigh that went through his body that was pressed against hers felt choked with emotion. She turned around in his arms, only to find Mike’s beautiful eyes closed and his expression sad. And El didn’t want him to be sad. Not because of her. Not because of anything, really. So she hugged him closer and distracted him how she knew best; by kissing him until he forgot why he was feeling down.

And even though it was meant to comfort Mike, El lost herself into his touch just as much, and it took them a while to come back to the world around them. But eventually they did, their breaths coming short, their emotions too winded up, their bodies taut and relaxed into each other at the same time. As much as El didn’t really want to stop, she had come there with a purpose. She needed to get to it.

El pulled in a deep breath, trying her best not to let Mike’s hot gaze distract her again.

„Mike.‟ She stopped him from leaning in again by pulling back, „We need to talk.‟

Mike stopped so abruptly, it was almost comical, his face alarmed as his eyes turned wary. If El wasn’t all bundle of nerves she would’ve laughed wholeheartedly at the sight. Yeah, maybe not the best phrasing. People never associated that sentence with anything good.

Not that what she was about to tell was undeniably good. Oh god, what if this went wrong and he freaked out?

El forced herself to breathe.

It was going to be fine.

She pushed her anxiety down as best as she could and sent Mike a reassuring smile.

„I mean, I want to tell you something.‟ She corrected. Mike’s worried expression morphed to one of relief and this time El did laugh. „Can we sit down somewhere?‟ She looked around in the big and open room; somehow it didn’t feel like a suitable place for spilling her secrets. God, she was so worked up. Was she really gonna do this?

She was.

„Your room maybe?“

„Yeah, sure.‟

Mike gave her a final small peck before withdrawing completely, leading the way to the stairs.

They were almost halfway up when the shrill sound of the phone echoed through the empty house, making them both jump a little as they came to an abrupt stop.

Mike hesitated.

„It’s probably nothing important.‟

They stood there, waiting, but when the ringing carried on and on, Mike finally sighed and hurried back down. El followed him, rounding the corner just as Mike picked up the phone.
„Wheeler’s residence.“

El came to a stop a little distance away.

„Oh, hi.“ Mike looked up and towards her, surprise on his face. „Yeah, she’s right here. Hang on.“

He lowered the handset and extended it towards El.

„It’s Sara.“

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and for all the feedback, I am endlessly grateful for it!
El’s stomach constricted uncomfortably as she took the offered phone.

Sara calling meant something was up, that much she was sure of.

„Hello?“ She tried to not look too nervous as she subtly angled herself away from Mike, just a tiniest bit, in case there might be something that he shouldn’t over hear. Worried that there was something he shouldn’t over hear.

Her heart swelled when Mike, always so easily picking up every little mood change in her, backed away without even asking, whispering he would be waiting for her in the living room.

How could anybody be so perfect?

„Jane.“ Sara’s strained voice pulled her attention back to the phone call, erasing the small smile from her face.

„What’s wrong?“

A beat of silence.

„I need you to come and pick me up.“

A myriad of scary thoughts flashed through El’s mind, one worse than the other.

Was Sara okay? Had something gone wrong with her telling Dustin?

„Did something happen?“ El required, trying to keep the volume down. „Did Dustin-“

„El.“ Sara interrupted her, sounding very off, and El desperately wished she could see her sister, so she could understand the situation better. „Just come and get me, okay? We’re at Benny’s.“

„Can’t this wait? I was just about to-“

„No. Now.“

El’s insides twisted to knots.
„Sara, come on! Just tell me what’s-“

„Now, El!“

„No, Sara-“

The line went dead and El wanted to throw the damn phone across the room and scream. Of course she didn’t and simply let out a frustrated growl instead, but even that was enough to bring Mike back from the other room. He was in front of her in three long strides, his face alarmed as he gently grabbed her shoulders.

„What’s wrong?“

El looked at the boy in front of her, his bottomless dark eyes wide with concern, his face pale and with less and less freckles, courtesy of the winter months and lack of sun, his full lips, and damn it, she didn’t want to leave!

She wanted to stay right there, in this wonderful sort of bubble he always managed to create, where she felt safe and at home and... and cared for. She wanted to go and see his room and learn even more about him and in return, tell him about herself.

She wanted to stay right there and go upstairs and see his room and tell him and... Damn it.

It wasn’t fair. They had been apart for a whole week and had barely just been able to say hello! She needed more.

„El. What’s wrong?“ Mike asked again and El realized she’d been staring without answering his question.

„It’s...“ She so badly wanted to say it was nothing, to just carry on with her plans, but hesitated. This was Sara. Sara didn’t raise a fuss easily and if she said she needed her, El had to go.

Her shoulders slumped in defeat.

„I have to go. I’m sorry.“

She hated seeing the flash hurt and disappointment on Mike’s face. Hated the way she felt her own heart concave at the sight. But then Mike’s features smoothed over and he slid his arms around her, sending her a small encouraging smile.

„Don’t worry about it. “ His smile faded slowly. „Although I wish you didn’t have to go. “

El sighed and hugged him closer, gripping on to him so tightly she was sure it must’ve been too much; but Mike showed no signs of discomfort and only returned the embrace.

„Me too. “ Her voice was muffled by his sweater. „But maybe I’ll...“ El stopped and sighed once more.

She had wanted to say that maybe she will call later and they can get together again, but decided not to get Mike’s hopes up in vain; she had no idea what the reason behind Sara’s erratic behavior was and thus, could not really tell if she was free later or not. For Sara to interrupt her today of all days... It had to be something major.

Even with Mike’s warmth still surrounding her, El suddenly felt cold all over.
El pulled the heavy glass door of the Lab open with more force than necessary.

Sara was being unnecessarily difficult and El would have been annoyed as hell if she wasn’t so worried.

She let Sara in first, her eyes acutely assessing every little detail about her sister as she passed her in the doorway.

Sara’s face was all pale and drawn tight, as much as El could see at least, and her eyes kept darting around in alert in one moment, only to go completely unfocused the next; whatever the matter was, it was weighing on her heavily.

And the way she kept her hands still. Like she was afraid to fidget and give herself away so badly, she was consciously forcing herself to keep it at bay.

Her hands. Hands, that despite her best efforts to keep them still, were shaking. Just the slightest bit, but it was there.

El pressed her lips together in frustration.

For whatever reason, Sara was refusing to tell her what was going on. Well, not out right refusing, but she wasn’t exactly telling, either. And, damn it, considering that El had been forced to leave Mike’s place so out of the blue and at the most inconvenient time, she damn well felt like she deserved some answers!

She had been freaking out the whole drive to Benny’s, her mind conjuring up all sorts of ways things might have gone wrong. Different scenarios had flashed through her mind, and she had damn well been ready to march in there and kick Dustin’s ass, if needed; but when she finally got there, it turned out to be completely unnecessary. Sara and Dustin had been waiting for her outside, cuddling like usual, with nothing indicating any trouble between the two.

Whatever the problem was, it obviously didn’t concern Dustin.

And the car ride over to the Lab had only thrown her out of the loop even more. Sara was so distant and flippant, she had given El only bits and pieces that weren’t nearly enough to form a coherent picture.

Sara must’ve had seen something, of that much El was sure, because as soon as she’d slammed the car door closed, she demanded El take her straight to the Lab. But what could it have been? She had tried to pry, but Sara remained stubbornly quiet, brushing El’s questions off and asking her to keep quiet, so she wouldn’t lose her thread on whatever it was she had seen.

El let the heavy door drop closed behind her with a loud clang and resumed her pace beside Sara, their footsteps on the painted concrete floor echoing around in the empty space; the Lab seemed more abandoned today, with no people milling around the ground floor like it usually was. Soon enough they hit the maze of artificially lit hallways, leaving behind the last bits of daylight, and once again El felt as if they were entering a whole different world.

And maybe they were.

„How do you want to do this?“ She asked Sara, keeping her voice all business.
Sara didn’t even have to think.

„The room.“

The quiet room. Sara’s equivalent to El’s tank, basically. And the one place, just like with El, Sara didn’t like to visit unless she felt she absolutely needed to. El had tried it once, to see what it was like; she wasn’t exactly sure if she hated it more than her tank, but it was definitely up there with it.

There was something so wrong about the world around you going so quiet your own insides seemed to roar in comparison. Even in her void, in that endless pitch black space, there were still sounds.

They rounded the corner and came to a shorter hallway that ended with an elevator.

„Is it about one of the cases that are still open?“ El asked, trying to get to the bottom of this once more.

„El, please.“ Sara begged, punching the button for the tenth floor, where Owens’s office was located. „I need to concentrate.“

El pushed down all the complaints and snarky remarks that fought to get past her lips, her training demanding she should not let her personal matters interfere when there was an urgent situation; she would pester Sara all about it later, once they were done here.

And still, she couldn’t shake the sense of foreboding off.

When the elevator doors slid open Dr. Owens was already there, standing in wait, ready to spring into action.

„Jane, Sara, what brings you here? You’re not scheduled until tomorrow.“

„I need to use the room.“ Sara didn’t even take time to exchange greetings. „Is it possible?“

„Of course. I’ll make the arrangements.“

Owens was about to approach an intercom panel on the wall nearby, but Sara stopped him.

„In private.“

El’s eyebrows shot up, her eyes snapping to Sara; but her sister avoided eye contact with her.

If Doc was surprised, he hid it well.

„Of course.“ Was all that he said before he turned on his heel, leading them deeper into the building, towards another elevator – this one bigger, more rustic and with thicker double doors – that would take them where they needed to go.

El’s mind raced in sync with her erratic heartbeat.

Private.

It was personal then.

And by the way Sara was acting, it couldn’t have been anything good.

The question was, whom had it been about? Mom? Dad? Their baby brother? She ruled Dustin out; Sara wouldn’t have been able to act so normal around the guy if it had been about him. Any other
member of the Party? El’s stomach sank. It was entirely possible.

What if this was about Mike.

Or Sara herself?

She was beginning to get dizzy for all the wrong reasons, her trepidation slowly growing into panic and causing her body to react by imploding on itself.

Her train of thought came to a halt as they reached their destination and her attention was pulled elsewhere.

Owens didn’t use his key card this time and punched a row of numbers into the keypad beside the door instead. El’s lips curled into a small smile; it was kind of funny seeing Owens sneak around in his own workplace, like a naughty trespasser. The red dot on the pad changed to green and the door in front of them clicked open, accompanied by obnoxious beeping sound that echoed down the corridor, much too loud in the empty space. The lights switched on automatically and Doc ushered them inside, pulling the door shut after them.

Although El had been in this particular room before, it seemed so different today. It took her a moment to realize why; she’d never before seen it without all the scientist inside and with all of the machinery turned off. Her eyes traveled across the place, until they landed on thick square of glass in the back wall.

Beyond the relatively small observation window loomed the quiet room, looking for all intents and purposes as if something from the sci-fi movies the boys loved so much, giving off an otherworldly vibe with its sterile color palette and jagged sound killing walls.

Although the truth was eerily to fiction in this case. El sighed heavily, the stress of the situation beginning to exhaust her.

She wished Sara would tell her what was wrong right away.

Doc had walked over to one of the computers sat on the long desk in the middle of the room and switched it on.

„I would still like to monitor your vitals, if it’s okay?“ He asked after a while and turned to Sara for an answer.

„You won’t need any external help?“

„No. I would’ve done that myself today anyway. Wallace took a week off. Among others.“ Owens quieted for a moment as he ran his fingers over the keys, before straightening up again. „Quite a few used the chance for a vacation actually, since you two were away and it was Thanksgiving.“

Sara nodded absent mindedly in response, shrugged herself out of her pastel pink wool coat and folded it neatly over a back of a chair.

„Won’t it leave any data into the computer?“ She asked as an afterthought.

„I’ll clean it up afterwards.“

„Okay. Thank you.“

„No problem.“
El was itching to demand to know what the hell was going on, just so she could stop her imagination from running amok and torturing her with the worst possibilities out there. A part of her had hoped that Owens would ask and then maybe Sara would tell; but of course he didn’t, his self control be damned because he had to wonder, and El’s curiosity was left unsatisfied.

She sighed heavily, consciously letting the deep breath run through her to calm some of the turmoil. There was nothing to be done but to wait. So El settled herself down on a comfortable office chair, watching, more out of habit than interest, as Owens and Sara went through the routine preparations, the process taking longer than usual without the help from the scientists normally involved.

The familiarity and predictability of the next five minutes lulled El into a comfortable numbness and her impatience ebbed away, replaced by a pinpoint focus on the moment in the near future when Sara would be exiting the small room in front of them.

And finally tell her what the hell was going on.

It was well past his bedtime – well, the official one his mom still tried to impose on him with various results, depending on how tired he was – when he thought he heard a soft click! against his window.

On any other night he might’ve not even noticed it, but he’d been on the edge ever since El left his place in the afternoon.

He couldn’t help it. It bugged him.

It had been easy to be understanding and supportive when El was there, her soft brown eyes wide with worry and all he’d wanted was to just let her know it was all okay; but the moment she stepped outside and he watched her pull away in her grey Volkswagen, racing down the road at what had to be over the speed limit, all of his anxiousness washed over him and knocked him right off his feet like a flood.

Where was she going? Had something bad happened? Would she come back later?

Would she still be there tomorrow?

And, shit, he knew he was being paranoid and clingy and borderline obsessed, but he couldn’t help it. There were too many variables he had no knowledge of, no control over, and Mike was awful at not being on top of things. Always had been. It was no coincidence he had ended up being kind of a leader of their small group and the one to write the campaigns for their D&D sessions; he just felt safer and not so lost when he had at least some information and a degree of control in a situation.

But with El, he always seemed to be kind of out of the game and the sensation was definitely way out of his comfort zone.

It didn’t help that he hadn’t gotten hold of Dustin either, so he could pester him for any tidbits about what the hell had happened.

He’d been this close to having El up in his room, and he he wasn’t gonna lie; he had bloody dreamed about it for the past few months; even just thinking about him made his breaths come quicker.
So at the state he was in, the slight sound of a pebble hitting the glass was enough to have him jump right up from the bed he had been lounging on, too wound up to fall asleep, and race over to the window.

Hoping, against all logic, that it might be El.

Only this time he wasn’t disappointed.

He almost missed her; she was dressed in dark clothes, with a black baseball cap, and if she hadn’t been looking up, her face a light spot in the shadows, she would’ve totally melted in with the night.

Mike fumbled with the window, his fingers suddenly too clumsy and useless, and hit his head against the frame as he hastily leaned forward to speak to her, almost afraid she’d disappear if he didn’t hurry.

„El?“ He whisper shouted, as he rubbed at the spot on his forehead. „What are you doing here?“

El didn’t answer and gestured towards his house instead; it took Mike a moment to understand she was motioning towards the basement. He took off right away, hitting his head against the window frame again.

„Ow. Shit. Son of a bitch.“ He kept muttering under his breath as he quietly opened his room door and peeked outside. Most of the lights were off, and with only a soft sound of a TV coming from downstairs, Mike was sure only his father was still up. Or, rather, he was probably asleep too; just in his lazy boy in front of the TV, not in bed.

When he made it to the basement El was already there, standing awkwardly by the door, having let herself in.

„I’m sorry.“ She grimaced, her eyes half hidden under the visor of her cap. „I know it’s late.“

Mike couldn’t help his goofy smile. Like El would ever need to worry about it being too late. She could bother him any time she wanted to and he’d be nothing but happy.

He walked over and turned her cap over, so he could see her face.

El looked tired and wary, making Mike wish he could just scoop her up in his arms, carry her to bed and tuck her in so she could sleep. And then curl himself around her and hug her tightly. The images of him being able to hold her through the night flashed through his mind, unbidden, making throat clog up.

Mike swallowed and wished his pajama pants had pockets so he could stuff his hands somewhere. Being alone in the half lit basement, silent in the dead of the night, felt strangely intimate all of a sudden.

He’d had every intention to hug her or kiss her hello, but both his own intensity and something in El’s composure stopped him. There was this weird vulnerability about her, as she stood there, looking uncertain and playing with the too long sleeves of her sweatshirt.

She looked like she would disappear into thin air or fall into thousand pieces if he tried to touch her.

„I don’t care if it’s late.“ He really didn’t. Not one bit. „What’s up?“

El’s eyes scanned him for a moment and her face softened as she let her guard down. Mike hated that she was guarded with him in the first place; as if she expected he might turn against her somehow or
Which was totally absurd, of course, but he respected her sentiments. After all, he had barely any idea where El had come from, besides that her childhood had not been as sheltered as his had been. And one day, he was more than sure, she would learn to trust him. He just needed to give her some time and space. And show her she could trust him.

Speaking of which.

„You wanted to talk.“ He blurted out before El could answer his previous question.

Because Mike had wanted to talk to her too, actually. Needed to talk to her.

Needed to come clean about all of his doubts and spying and the conclusions they had come to with the Party about her and her sister; he was done with going behind her back. El deserved to know and he wanted to just be honest and open with her.

And if he had any luck at all, El’s understanding and trusting side would win out and she would not run away from him. He had already waited too long in the afternoon, chicken shit like he was, afraid that El might freak out, and then Sara had called her away before he could gather his courage and bring the subject up.

„Yes.“ El looked away from him and around the basement. „Is it okay if we talk here? I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble.“

„No, don’t worry about that.“ Mike brushed it off. „Mom and Holly are already in bed and my father’s asleep in his chair. It’ll be fine.“

She nodded, but still looked hesitant, as if she didn’t know what to do next, and Mike swallowed again. Whatever had happened in the meantime, for some reason El was being kind of distant and closed off, so very different from how she had been just hours ago. Even her eyes, which usually spoke volumes, didn’t offer him any real clues tonight.

But she had taken the time and effort to come all this way so late in the evening, so it had to be important.

„Come on, let’s sit.“ Mike took her hand and guided her towards the table in the middle of the room; he’d briefly considered the sofa, but if they really wanted to talk, it maybe wasn’t the best idea. When they took the seats opposite each other, him still holding on to her hand, running his thumb over her knuckles; he really didn’t want to let go and hoped El wouldn’t pull hers away.

Any contact was better than nothing.

El’s lips curled into a small smile and instead of pulling away, she grabbed his hand in both of hers and started fiddling with it.

It was entrancing to watch and Mike wasn’t sure how long they both stayed silent. El was the one who broke it after a while.

„So Dustin told Sara that you guys have figured out our connection to the Hawkins Laboratory.“

And now Mike regretted he hadn’t been the first to speak.

Shit.
He had wanted to be the one to come clean to El, and now she had heard it from somewhere else.

Shit, shit, shit.

He ran his free hand through his hair.

„Yeah.“ He sighed, the motion making him feel much more tired than he’d been just a few seconds ago. „I’m sorry. “

„What for?“

El’s voice was all soft and not the tiniest bit accusing and it made Mike feel even more guilty.

„For being a nosy jerk. For not telling you that we suspected stuff. That we-.“

„Mike. “ She cut him off, giving his hand a squeeze. „Don’t. If anything, I’m the one who should be apologizing.“

Mike was about to protest but El cut him off again, her gaze locked on his.

„I mean it. All of this sneaking around and the weird stuff about me and Sara... It’s just... Complicated. It’s...“ El halted, her brows furrowing slightly, as if she was looking for the words to express herself with. „It hasn’t been fair. To you. To Dustin. Max... To any of you, really, Lucas and Will included. It’s just that it’s kind of a new situation to us,. Having new people in our lives and... What we do in that lab, it’s not exactly... Public information, you know? So we just...“

El lost her trail of thought and pulled her hands away to run them over her cap, clearly frustrated and all Mike wanted to do was to wrap his arms around her. He didn’t do that, but he did lean forward and caught her hands in his again, and placed them back onto the table between them, intertwining their fingers together.

„It’s okay El. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. Or if you can’t or whatever.“

„No.“ The firmness in her voice caught Mike in surprise. „I want to tell you. That’s what I was here today for, actually. Earlier. “

„So when you said you needed to talk...“

„Yes.“

A surge of happiness ran through Mike’s chest at that admission; El wanted to tell him. She trusted him enough to open up to him. For some reason this was so important, he felt like he was floating from how lightheaded it made him feel.

El’s gaze was unfocused and unseeing, her mind probably stuck on her own thoughts.

„Last Saturday, Lucas said that you all suspected we were secret spies for the government or something. “ She finally continued. „It is kind of true. “

Even though Mike had had these suspicions, it was weird to hear her say it out loud and the excitement bubbled in his stomach, banishing his sleepiness. He was finally getting some answers and he was so ready for this.

„They have this program, you see. A sort of experiment, if you will. A study, about the pros and cons of starting with the agent training from a younger age. “
„How young?“ Mike’s question was a mix of alarm and awe.

El’s eyes snapped to him, interested in his reaction.

„We started when we were nine.“

Mike let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, puffing like a train engine.

„You mean they are experimenting on kids? How did you get involved? Did your parents agree to this? Did they make you—“

„Mike.“ El’s tone was sharp and sure and she squeezed his hands. „They are not experimenting on us. It is nothing like that. It is strictly voluntary and completely consensual. Sara and I wanted to do it."

„And your parents just let you join this?“

„After some convincing.“ El sounded amused but Mike was horrified.

„Convincing?“

El actually laughed out loud this time, but muffled it quickly.

„On our part, Mike! Nobody twisted anybody’s arm! If you don’t count two very stubborn nine year olds pestering their parents about giving this a try. It started when Sara and I were at the... hospital. There was this doctor there, a nice man. And he was also involved with the local Laboratory and it’s science experiments. When we finally got out of the hospital, we were both at least a year behind in school and needed a more personal approach to continue with our education. And this doctor, he offered this program to us. It was a mutually beneficial solution."

It was still difficult for Mike to wrap his head around this.

„So when you two said you were home schooled...“

„Yeah. It’s more like government schooled, with a twist. We had classes in the Laboratory. The usual stuff and... more.“

Mike snorted.

„Like karate and how to take down a two hundred pound asshole with a knife?“

„Something like that.“ El grinned and it was infectious, making Mike’s face stretch into a smile too.

„But you’re here now?“

El shrugged.

„We decided we wanted to give high school a shot."

Now it was Mike’s turn to burst out laughing, although he tried to keep his chuckles down. He wasn’t even sure if he was laughing because it was funny or if he was relieved or, shit, maybe he was simply hysterical at this point. So his girlfriend was, in fact, a damned secret agent or something like it. It was too surreal. Stuff like that just didn’t happen.

El smiled in that cute way of hers, showing off her dimples and Mike’s laughter died down as his gaze got stuck on her lips, his funny mood replaced with something softer and more tender. He was
so drawn to her, he didn’t even register he was leaning in.

But then El’s expression changed to a serious one again and she turned her face away, leaving him hanging awkwardly half way.

„This information, it’s not exactly top secret? I mean, nobody will be coming after you for knowing or anything. But it is classified.“ El’s eyes snatched back to his and for a moment she looked almost scared; but it was gone the next second before Mike could analyze it. „Especially the part what we are doing there.“

Mike nodded, more to himself than to El.

„Okay. So that’s why you two never boast about any of your freaking amazing skills most teenagers would kill for?“

El grimaced, wrinkling her nose, but her lips stretched into a grin and it made Mike irrationally happy to see her smile again.

„It’s not really as cool as it sounds.“

„Oh come on, are you kidding me?“ Mike rolled his eyes. „I still remember how you two incapacitated those mouth breathers James and Troy.“

„Yeah, well, it does come in handy every now and then.“ El gave in that much. „But it comes with a price. Like having to lie to people. Keeping things from your friends. And spending a shitload of time in that place. The responsibility for your actions. Mike... we have been trained to know how to hurt people. It’s not all fun and games. It can be dangerous. I can be danger-.“

„Whoa, stop right there!“ Mike flew out of his seat and ended up kneeling before El, both of her hands still clutched in his. „You are not dangerous just because you know how to defend yourself! I have never seen you or Sara do anything malicious. Literally never. But I have seen you two saving my life.“

„But that could change one day, Mike. Maybe I will hurt someone in the future. I have the power to.“

„I don’t care.“ Mike was becoming far too heated, he knew, but he couldn’t help himself; for some reason El was acting weird and he refused to go along with this. He really didn’t care. Mostly, because deep down, he was absolutely sure El would never hurt someone on purpose just because. He got up from the floor and pulled El along, so he could finally wrap his arms around her and pull her against him. She didn’t fight the embrace, but didn’t reciprocate either. „I know you, El. You are not a bad person. And you are not a liar. You did what you had to do. And you are telling me now.“

El bit her lip and looked down.

„Yes.“ She swallowed, before getting the next words out. „I thought it would be fair for you to know what’s going on. So you can reconsider.“

Mike was lost, partly, because his head was beginning to spin from their close proximity and partly, because her words made no sense to him. One of his arms was still holding El, but the other had made it’s way to her hair, wrapping one of her locks around it’s fingers.

„Reconsider?“ He murmured. „Reconsider what?“

„You know.“ She raised her eyes to his and Mike really wanted to kiss her now. „Us. “
It was like a splash of cold water, waking him from his content stupor. His arm tightened instinctively around the girl as he tried to pull in a deep breath and failed, his emotions overwhelming him easily.

Was she kidding? Did she really think something like this would make him reconsider if he wanted to be with her?

He opened his mouth to retort, but choked.

*I love you.*

He wished he could say it out loud but the words were stuck in his throat.

So he did what he had wanted to for a while now, and crashed his lips down on hers instead. To his surprise and delight, El responded with equal passion.

And it was messy, their noses bumping and teeth clinking together as they deepened it almost instantly, El basically toppling over from the force Mike leaned over her with; it was short and intense and the best damn kiss Mike had ever had.

He pulled away, breathless, and caught her face between her hands so he could look her in the eye.

„El, don’t even think that way, okay? Whatever is going on in that lab... This will never be an issue, okay?“

El’s eyes, big and filled with emotion, searched his for some kind of clue and Mike hoped he could convey all the things he wasn’t able to form into coherent sentences.

„You promise?“ She finally whispered, her voice just a little broken.

Mike sighed in relief and hugged her closer, resting his cheek on her head.

„I promise.“

El already knew that Sara would be there even before she had climbed in through her window.

Not because of her powers, but because she knew her sister.

What she wasn’t expecting though, were the tears streaking down her cheeks that she wasn’t even trying to hide.

El had been ready to confront an angry Sara, but this was so much more disheartening.

She froze on her spot next to the window, disoriented, needing a minute to adjust.

„You went there to break up with him.“

The simple statement broke the spell and El moved to sit on her bed next to Sara.

„Yes.“

„But you didn’t.“
El swallowed.

„No."

A fresh wave of tears poured from Sara’s eyes, but the accompanying crooked smile told El they were more tears of relief, than sadness. El wrapped her arm around Sara’s shoulders and waited until she was able to talk again.

„You did the right thing, El. It would’ve only made things worse, I swear."

El still wasn’t convinced, but it didn’t really matter; she couldn’t break up with Mike. She just couldn’t. Even if it was immensely selfish of her.

„I also didn’t tell him about the powers. For now. Like you asked."

Sara sighed.

„Thank you. I know it sucks but I really, really think it is best for now. We just need to get this thing sorted first and then you have a green light again."

El chuckled, but it was a sad sound.

„I wish I could be as sure as you."

Sara turned to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her slightly as she spoke.

„Trust me, El, we will get through this, okay? Nothing is set in stone, we have a chance to intercept it! Prevent it! I am sure I will have some more clues, I will try so hard, I promise, and once I have something solid to go on you can explore it further and we can get to the bottom of this before anything happens!"

El let Sara’s optimism seep into her, soaking it in like a sponge, until she felt some resemblance of hope that her sister might be right.

That the vision she’d had of El being dragged away, barely conscious, was not going to come true.

And still... If there was any chance that at any point things could get ugly and someone else would be in danger because of her... The guilt swallowed her again.

She should just leave Hawkins now, just in case.

But she couldn’t. She couldn’t leave Hawkins. And her friends.

And Mike.

El pulled a deep breath.

„Sara."

„Yes?"

„Promise me something?"

„Anything."

„If something does happen...“ El could see the way Sara squared her jaw, stubborn to admit that it
could. „If something does happen and any of our friends should be in possible danger... I can’t have them in danger because of this. Because of me.“

El’s voice broke and she paused to swallow past the lump in her throat before continuing.

„Promise me you will look after them first.“

Sara’s eyes flashed with desperation and then welled up with tears again, but there was no hesitation. Sara knew very well how much this meant to her.

„I promise.“Our

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, comments and kudos mean the world to me!
El climbed out of the police cruiser’s back seat and slammed the door closed with a little more force than usual, not even saying good bye as she stomped away.

„I can’t believe you sicced them on me like that.“ She growled in the general direction of her sister, who tried to keep up with her brisk pace.

„I didn’t sic them on you.“ Sara argued, sounding like a parent who’s patience had been worn thin but who was still trying to reason. „They’re just worried."

El sent a stinky eye towards the chief’s huge truck that was still pulled over at the curb, the man himself watching them like a hawk from behind the wheel. Seeing El staring, he motioned his head towards the school, indicating for them to get going.

„This is not worried.„ El grumbled under her breath. „This is nuts."

„You sneaked out last night! What did you expect?“

El sighed and fell in step next to Sara. „It’s not like I went alone or was in any danger. I had agent Reese drive me."

To which the young man had agreed to only after El had threatened him she was gonna go with or without him and really, when it came down to it, he had no way of stopping her anyway; El sincerely hoped she hadn’t caused too much trouble for the young man with her schenanigans.

„You say it like it should make things better somehow and I assure you, it doesn’t. He is a federal agent, not your chauffeur.“ Sara’s reprimanding tone sounded so much like their mother’s that El felt like she was twelve again, trying to sneak a cookie before dinner.

But she wasn’t twelve anymore.

And this was not about a cookie, but about her freedom.

„You would’ve stopped me."

Sara scoffed.

„Of course."

El gritted her teeth and decided not to aggravate herself by arguing any further.

The consequences of what Sara had seen yesterday were beginning to seriously annoy her.

When Sara had finally exited the room and demanded Owens to call their dad and tell him to get there immediately, El had thought it was surely something to do with the chief. But no; once all the four of them were seated in Doc’s office and Sara finally opened up about the issue, it was El it was about.

In retrospect, she should have suspected; why the hell would Sara have included Dr. Owens into
their father’s business anyway? And the way Sara had been so evasive and avoided her gaze all through the ordeal; really, she should have known, all the signs were right there.

And still it caught her by surprise, taking her a minute or two to digest, before the reality of what Sara was saying sank in.

*She* was the one in danger.

And yes, she had laughed out loud, because this couldn’t possibly have been right.

The others didn’t laugh though; Sara’s hands clutching the arms of the chair so strongly her knuckles were white, her lips pressed together into a thin line; her dad, running both of his hands through his thinning hair before he jumped up and started pacing. Owens, always the calm one, pulling open one of his endless drawers, and then the next one, and then the next one, and then the next one, before pulling out a thin binder; and, damn it, the man *always* knew where everything was in his office. Him actually looking for something was the biggest sign of distress that El had ever seen him display.

The three of them – with El watching on dejectedly, feeling as if she was having an out of body experience, where she kind of was there, but not really – had spent the next hour carefully going over the brief vision Sara had seen and coming up with a further plan of action.

And by what El had seen thus far, she really hated their plans.

It meant agents sitting outside of their home through the night.

It meant she, and Sara by association, where not allowed out on their own and had to hand over the car keys. And El sincerely hoped it was temporary, until dad got his shit together, stopped over reacting and making stupid decisions that in no way helped with the situation.

She’d thought about it a lot last night, once the initial shock had worn off, and looking at the actual facts they had... Well, they didn’t even know for sure if she was in danger, or what kind, or when; it might’ve been just a glitch. So in the light of the new morning, all of these precautions seemed way out of whack to her.

Speaking of.

El stopped dead in her tracks, as the all too familiar white van pulled into the office parking lot further down the road.

It better not mean what she thought it did.

„You have got to be shitting me. What are they doing here?“

Sara followed her gaze and sighed exasperatedly.

„Seriously, Jane, weren’t you listening at all yesterday? They’re probably here to place the surveillance cameras.“

„The cameras?“ El’s blank face must’ve told Sara that yes, she really had not listened to much that was talked about yesterday.

„Oh my god El, you’re killing me here.“ Sara cast a sweeping look around, to see if there was anybody close enough to over hear them, before continuing in a more hushed tone. „Yes, the cameras, remember? To all the exits and one into the main hallway, just in case.“
„But... But...“ El sputtered, lost for words. „This is crazy! I understand that our house is under watch but this? The school?“

„Is it? Crazy?“ Sara hissed. „We spend half or our time in school, and they can't just send agents to shadow you during the classes, can they? They need to have eyes in here if they want to keep track of you!“

El could feel her initial irritation flare up again.

„Keep track of me? They don’t need to keep track of me! This whole thing is absolutely ridiculous! I can take care of myself!“

Sara pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration, looking so much like their dad at that moment that El would have laughed if she wasn’t in such a bad mood.

„Jane, we went through this! Even you have vulnerabilities! Everybody does! What if they knock you out first and then it doesn’t matter how much training you’ve done or-.“ Sara choked on her words. „Or what you can do.“ She finished meaningfully.

El opened her mouth to argue that somebody would need to get close enough to knock her out first, but Sara’s face suddenly lit up like the Christmas lights now adorning most of Hawkins, and she halted.

There was only one reason for this change in her, and that meant they were done with the topic for now, for they were about to be joined by others.

„Do you think they saw the van?“ Sara asked quietly, barely moving her lips.

El looked over her sister’s shoulder; the van was out of sight, thank god.

„No.“

„Good. If we’re lucky they won’t and we won’t have to lie again.“ Sara sounded relieved as she raised her hand to give a wave.

El finally turned around and sure enough, the rest of the gang were heading towards them, with Max leading the pack, walking so quickly she was almost running. The next moment she was there and engulfed both of them in a bear hug at the same time.

„Oh my god guys I missed you so much you have no idea!“ She breathed into the group huddle, squeezing them tightly before letting go. „You two have got some serious explaining to do! Dustin told us that-.“

„Hey! Maxine!“ Dustin cut her off with a hiss, having caught up to them. „What did I just tell you? Not in public, okay?“

Sara laughed loudly as Max rolled her eyes and flipped Dustin off, giving him some snarky reply, no doubt, but El wasn’t really paying attention anymore.

Because Mike was there, looking all sleepy and soft and so very huggable, with his hair sticking out every which way from under his beanie and lips quirked into a small smile, and El felt her own mouth curl up at the corners too as her heartbeat sped up.

Maybe everything wasn’t so screwed after all.
“Hey.”

Even his voice sounded all groggy and El melted just a little bit more.

Morning Mike was definitely one of her favorites.

She didn’t even answer him, but simply closed the last remaining space still separating them and wrapped her arms around his mid section, burrowing her face into the front of his jacket, letting his warmth and the fresh scent of soap wash over her. Mike chuckled lightly, the chest under her cheek heaving with the motion of it and reciprocated the hug, and El pulled in a deep content breath.

If she squeezed her eyes shut really tight, she could almost make herself believe they were lying in a feather soft bed somewhere, slumbering in that wonderful state of not quite asleep and not exactly awake yet. Just the two of them. With no worries whatsoever and all the time in the world at their disposal.

She could have stayed like that forever.

But then Mike’s hold loosened, his posture tensing up a bit, and El was brought back to the reality; that didn’t mean she had to let go, though, so she stubbornly held on tight.

„Um, El?“ Mike sounded alarmed. „Your dad is looking at us like he’s going to pull a gun on me any minute now.“

Shit.

El jumped back, startled, and swiveled her head towards where their dad had parked earlier and sure enough, he was still there. Sending daggers their way and revving the engine, as if he was about to take part in a race, not dropping his kids off to school.

„Shit.“ El mumbled intelligently.

Lucky for her, Sara was a bit more eloquent.

„Don’t worry, Mike, it’s not you.“ She explained as she turned towards the school building, tugging Dustin with her. „We need to get inside, or he can’t leave. He’s weird like that, sorry.“

Mike looked relieved, but they all hurried off, not wanting to risk any further wrath of the chief. Except for Max, who for some reason had never been afraid of him, and even now sent him a joyful wave and yelled a „Good morning, Chief!“ from the top of her lungs, making several heads turn their way.

El just wanted to sink to the ground. It was bad enough dad had driven them to school, she didn’t need everybody’s attention pulled to it.

She picked up her pace as they all raced towards the doors, Mike easily keeping up with his long legs.

„What happened to your car?“ He asked conversationally, as he held open the door for her.

„Huh?“ El furrowed her brows. „Nothing.“

Now Mike looked confused.

„Why is your father driving you then?“
Oh.

„Oh.“ El cringed at her disability to form words this morning. She couldn’t keep answering with one syllable words. But, once again, the whole story was not an option either, so El settled for the half truth. „No, it’s just... Well, I got caught last night when I sneaked out to see you, so we lost our car privileges.“

„I’m sorry.“ Mike winced and wrinkled his freckled nose in compassion and it was the cutest thing ever, making El smile despite her otherwise not so great morning. El stopped and drew him aside, so they wouldn’t cause a traffic jam while she stole a quick kiss, now that they were out of her dad’s view.

„Don’t be.“ El reassured him once she pulled away. „It was totally worth it.“

Mike’s face stretched into a dazed, sappy smile, his expression all pure happiness, and El’s heartbeat stumbled, her chest flaring with emotions she wasn’t even sure she could name.

The realization began with just the barest of hints, small and insignificant like the first drop of rain, but then grew and grew until it washed over her like a tsunami; this boy in front of her was totally worth any and all of the trouble life could ever throw at her.

And by some miracle, he seemed to feel the same way.

„What about flying an airplane?“

Mike snorted; Will was really letting his imagination fly now.

All seven of them were seated around the farthest table in the library, situated against the backwall, with at least a fifteen foot radius perimeter free of any other tables or shelves and as far away from the prim looking librarian sitting behind her desk at the front of the room as possible.

With no other people in sight and the fluffy, sound killing carpets, this was the best place in school for them to hold a private conversation.

And so this is where Max had towed them to, right after making them all wolf down their lunches so fast Mike was only now beginning to feel the effects of it, his stomach finally getting the signals that it had, in fact, been fed.

But nobody really complained, except for Dustin, and even that was brief, since they were all just dying of curiosity. Even Mike, to be honest; yes, El had told him the gist of it yesterday, but there was still so much he didn’t know and hadn’t been sure he could even ask, so every chance to find out more about the mysterious part of El’s life was definitely welcome.

To his surprise Sara hesitantly shrugged.

„Kind of?“

Seeing the baffled faces, she elaborated.

„I mean, in theory. We’ve studied it and had a chance to try it out on a simulator and all, but we haven’t flown a real plane.“
“This is so sick.” Max was leaning forward so much she was basically lying on top of the table, her hands folded under her chin, eyes alight with fascination and childish curiosity. “Where the fuck can I sign up for this shit?”

Sara let out an incredulous laugh.

“It’s really not all that fancy you know. I mean, have you seen our schedules?”

“Who cares?” Max shot back. “It’s not like there’s anything else to do in this hellhole here. And no, I have not seen your schedules, because someone is only now telling us about all of this.”

El’s hand underneath his shifted slightly and Mike’s attention was instantly drawn away from the conversation and onto the girl sitting beside him. There was something about her today that made him wish they could just hole up somewhere and cuddle. Her soft brown locks were pulled into a messy pony tail and by what he could tell she wasn’t wearing any make up; Mike was fascinated with her golden brown eyelashes and the way they turned slightly lighter at the ends, catching and reflecting the cold winter sunlight pouring in through the windows. The long sleeved T-shirt with a small flower pattern and the denim overalls she had on today made him think of cozy Saturday nights and carefree summer evenings.

If he hadn’t witnessed it himself, he would have never believed that this soft, beautiful girl next to him was actually a bad ass in disguise. And Mike wasn’t sure if she was even more awesome because of it, or if it was awesome just because it was her.

As if sensing he was looking at her, El turned her head to face him, her expression quizzical, the corner of her cherry lips lifting up under his gaze and Mike just stared, not even trying to pretend that he wasn’t. El was beautiful. And she was his girlfriend; he was officially allowed to stare.

He was still staring as her mouth as it opened to say something, but then it clamped shut again and El turned back towards the rest of the gang, stilling in that subtle manner of hers that told him she was on the fence about something, and Mike refocused on the conversation.

The table was all silent in expectation and El and Sara were exchanging that look again, the one that Mike was sure held a whole conversation on it’s own that the rest of them didn’t have an access to, and for a moment it felt like old times. The times were they’d lie or not say anything at all and Mike wished he’d heard the question.

But then Sara’s face relaxed and she shrugged.

“It wasn’t really about us, they do actually deal with electrical emergencies. At least with the kinds they want to investigate and for some reason, this one caught the labs attention. We don’t really know much about that. But our... supervisor, I guess, knew we were there that night, too, so he used the opportunity to have a drill.“

“A drill.” Lucas squinted his eyes. “What kind of drill?”

Mike wanted to groan; he should’ve known Lucas would never let that arcade thing go until he got all of his answers.

“On how well we can describe the scene and what happened. On how to properly give reports.“ Sara wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Tedious and boring as hell, if you ask me.“

“Wait, why would this supervisor of yours know you were there that night?“ Max cut in before Lucas could continue.
El sighed, her eyes downcast and staring at the scratched table top, and Mike instinctively squeezed her hand in comfort.

„Like Sara said, it’s not all that fancy.“ El’s gaze flickered to him for a moment before she looked away and down again. „All of this, it comes with certain ties.“

There was something sobering about the admission and the table full of teenagers quieted once more. Well, almost; Max was hardly ever intimidated by serious topics, and this time wasn’t any different. She squared her chin and plowed right on.

„So do they always know where you are? What you’re doing? Are you like, tagged or something?“

„No.“ El’s head snapped up, all the previous softness suddenly replaced with cold firmness. „No. It’s not like we’re their property. We just agreed to work with them on this project.”

There was something strange about the fierceness she answered with, but the fleeting thought disappeared as soon as it had appeared and Mike had no wish to dwell on it.

„So you’re basically working for the government?“ Lucas more stated than asked, his face still skeptical, and Mike had half a mind to tell him to chill, but Max’s gushing cut right through his thoughts.

„Oh my god please tell me you’re not getting paid for all of this awesomeness! That would be so unfair!“

Sara and El took one look at each other and started laughing, and Mike found it hard not to laugh along.

It seemed like ages ago. The last time they’d all sat together like this, relaxed and with no drama, just enjoying themselves. And to be honest – he hadn’t been able to tell the difference before, but now that he had seen it, it was hard to deny it – he was sure he had never really seen the Hopper sisters so carefree among them before. The way Sara had always seemed so poised and proper, and El, with her guards up, trying to keep a distance; they were so different today.

Like they were finally letting the rest of them in.

Mike hadn’t even noticed that he had stopped playing with El’s hand and had intertwined their fingers together instead. He didn’t remember lifting their hands up, so he could press a kiss to the back of her hand. And he barely even registered Max’s scoffing or Will’s lifted eyebrow or Dustin’s comment about him being so corny.

What he did notice the way El’s breathing caught for a moment and it made his heart soar to be the one who affected her that way.

Seriously, couldn’t they just ditch school for the rest of the day and go and hole up somewhere? He wouldn’t even care about the repercussions. But then he remembered the pile of homework and assignments El had shoved into her locker before, and sighed. It would be selfish of him to even propose this; El probably couldn’t afford to miss any more classes after their absence the week before.

Besides; El pulling him up and away from their teasing friends and deeper into the maze of bookshelves where they could get some privacy so she could rise on her tiptoes, wrap her arms around his neck and crash her lips against his, was just as perfect.
„Sara you have got to stop this!“

„No, El, it’s okay. Really. I’m okay. “

„Okay? How are you okay? You look half dead!“

„Would you stop yelling please?“ Sara begged in a tired voice, massaging her temples. „You’re giving me a headache."

El wanted to retort, to shout even louder, so it would bounce back from the smooth tiled walls of the locker room. To argue, that it was the excessive time Sara had spent trying to use her powers that was giving her a headache, not El.

Except, that it actually was her. She was the reason why Sara had been overusing her abilities. Why she looked like she hadn’t slept properly for a whole week. El’s heart sank; she probably hadn’t. The change had come gradually during the week, with each day finding Sara more and more sober and drawn into herself, until it was almost impossible to associate her with the bubbly presence El was so used to.

Her skin looked pale and paper thin, making the purple under her eyes and the bruise blooming on her jawline, where El had gotten a hit in during their practice, stand out in an almost grotesque way. They had ended the practice early, due to Sara not feeling up to bar.

Shame and guilt washed over El like a wave, taking with it the last traces of irritation.

This was all her fault.

„I’m sorry.“ She slumped onto the bench beside her sister. „I didn’t mean to yell. I’m just worried.“

Sara sent her a tired smile, tugging her ponytail loose.

„You really don’t need to be, I’m fine. It’s you we need to worry about right now.“

El pressed her lips together and kept her thoughts on the matter to herself. It was no use trying to reason with Sara when she was being like that; it would only exhaust her even more and that was the last thing El wanted.

No, she would need to talk to dad or to the Doc maybe, and see if they could get through to Sara and make her see some sense. There was really no need for her to keep overextending herself like this trying to see something more about El supposedly – and the more time passed the harder it became for El to believe it to be honest – being in danger.

It was just too much of a contrast with how she had been feeling these past days.

El didn’t feel like she was in danger.

She felt happy.

In fact, if it wasn't for the excessive chaperoning she had had to endure all week and Sara's gradually worsening state, it would have been an absolute blast.

Telling their friends about the Lab had changed something. While El had thought they had been
close before, the group seemed even more tight knit now that she and Sara could be relatively open about what they were up to on their free time. And even though there was still stuff they could not tell, it was a different sort of secrecy, with a mutual understanding.

Now their friends knew they kept some secrets. And knew why they did it, so it was kind of like they were all in on this big conspiracy now. And it felt so wonderful.

And then there was Mike.

Mike.

Just thinking about his name was enough to get El all light and warm inside, like a warm summer day or a cozy winter evening with candles and blankets and hot chocolate. Gone were the contemplating looks and furrowed brows and El loved to see him so trouble free. He was just all open and caring and she regretted beyond words that she hadn’t been able to tell him about her powers too, like she had planned.

Because, in all honesty, she was now more sure than ever that Mike wouldn’t even blink an eye at the revelation. Hell, he’d probably get all excited, the lovable nerd that he was. Wasn’t Yoda like one of his favorite characters? She was sure she’d seen an action figure of him in his basement the other day.

She wanted to tell him. Wanted to so badly. To get that last barrier out of the way, so she could be completely honest once and for all.

And not just with him, but with all of their friends.

Max would probably just gush over how awesome it is and envy them even more, and although El disagreed – Max herself was so cool that it just didn’t make sense for her to be envious of anybody – the thought still brought a smile to her face.

Lucas, on the other hand, would probably freak out and it would take some time for him to get back on board again; that’s just the way he rolled. Suspicious by nature, but also resilient.

Will had already shown her a doodle he had made in school of her and Sara as super agents and said they’d make great comic book characters, and El had no doubt that he would gladly add a few more special traits to them.

And then there was Dustin.

El actually laughed out loud.

She had to make sure she was there when the poor boy finally found out that the girl he was dating could predict the future. Good luck ever trying to surprise her! Or bullshit his way through something and hoping Sara wouldn’t know.

„What’s so funny?“

Sara’s amused question dragged El out of her wishful thoughts and her laughter faded into a wide smile. Her sister was watching her, one corner of her mouth up in a smirk, but her eyes were lacking their usual sparkle and El sighed wistfully.

If only she could get Sara out of her funk. As El was feeling better and better, Sara kept getting quieter and more distracted. And not just her; Dustin, too. Weather it was because Sara was so troubled or for some other reason, El wasn’t sure, but it was seriously unsettling to see both or them
so uncharacteristically glum.

Especially since everything else was all good.

El just wished she could make them see that.

„Nothing much, just...“ Suddenly El remembered where they were and she toned her voice down into a hush; you never knew, even walls could have ears in the Lab. „...imagining how they’ll react once we can tell them everything. I so want to tell them."

Sara’s eyes softened as the smile finally reached them and turned genuine.

„I know. And I’m sorry, I promise it’ll be soon."

El bit her lip, contemplating. She waited until they got to the showers, and Sara had turned on the shower, so the sound of a splashing water would eliminate any chance of anybody overhearing anything.

„The vision. Has it changed? Anything new?“

Sara’s face turned even more grey, if it was possible. She slowly shook her head.

„Still the same. All I have is you being dragged between two men towards the headlights of a truck. Or a van, possibly."

El nodded.

„But since it hasn’t changed, doesn’t it mean that telling the others about my powers would not be any kind of catalyst in this?“

„I don’t know, El.“ Sara sighed, looking miserable, and El regretted bringing the subject up. „...I really don’t know. But I honestly don’t think this is the right time to tell. It’s just... I don’t even know. Just give me time to get to the bottom of this okay? Please."

Sara turned away from her and grabbed the shampoo, effectively ending the conversation and El once again, El complied, concentrating on her own shower instead; the stream of hot water felt incredible on her tired muscles. But the shower did nothing to distract her from her thoughts.

She was beginning to get really worried.

Not for herself, but for what was going on with Sara.

Her sister had been repeating that very same plea like a broken record for the past week now. For El to just wait, until she looked into it, and yet, she hadn’t told El anything new about it since last Sunday, when she’d first had the vision. And she knew Sara had been trying every single day to see more.

How plausible was it that she had nothing else by now? No locations, no faces, no little snippets that could be researched and turned into clues. Only that one scene. Usually, when that happened, Sara would end the investigation, because it showed that the possibility of the occurrence was very low and it wasn’t progressing.

But not this time.

The shower beside her turned off; Sara was done. El saw from the corner of her eye as her sister wrapped herself up in a towel and hurried back to the locker rooms, without ever even glancing her
way. And that was another thing she had noticed lately; it was almost as if Sara was kind of avoiding her. Avoiding talking to her, or looking at her, and that scared El more than the stupid possible danger itself.

Something was definitely off about all of this.

Sara wasn't telling her something.

But what could it be?

And, more importantly, why?

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